Focus on . . .

The national parks: a once and future frontier

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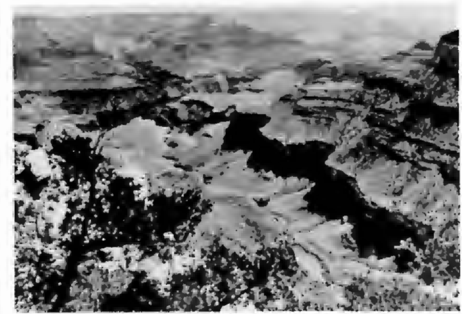
In John Steinbeck's story, *The Red Pony*, the grandfather, on a ranch in California at the turn of the century, endlessly recounts stories about the greatest experience of his life — leading a wagon train across the plains and mountains to the Far West. But repetition of the stories irritates his son-in-law, whose sarcastic remarks the old man finally overhears. Dejected, his feelings hurt, he retreats to the porch of the ranch house where he laments to his grandson that the crossing is over, the frontier has closed: "Then we came down to the sea, and it was done. . . . There's no place to go. There's the ocean to stop you. There's a line of old men along the shore hating the ocean because it stopped them." He adds that the "Westering has died out of the people. Westering isn't a hunger anymore. It's all done."

The National Park Service, having just marked its seventieth anniversary (on August 25th), endures frustrations reminiscent of the grandfather's in Steinbeck's story. The traditional frontier of the National Park Service has closed. The large, unspoiled natural areas such as those upon which the National Park System was founded and for which it remains most well-known today are either already in the System or are set aside in some other way, and unlikely to become national parks. The overall growth of the System has slowed to a kind of filling-in process such as with small historical units, additions to existing parks, and cooperative park arrangements involving state and local governments and

private individuals. Occasionally, hard-won and perhaps partially developed natural areas may enter the System. Barring any extensive shuffling of wilderness lands among federal agencies, however, it is unlikely that the Park Service will ever again experience regular additions of large, generally uncompromised parks as in the past, or the simultaneous inclusion of vast primitive areas such as the new Alaska parks. Congressional confirmation of the Alaska parks marked the closing of the National Park Service's traditional frontier — a long period of continual expansion in unspoiled natural areas, 1872-1980.

The Park Service's extended frontier involvement suggests a parallel with historian Frederick Jackson Turner's theories. Turner believed that the national frontier experience, in particular the continual contact with available, open land on the western edge of settlement, was the dominant influence in American history and in shaping the nation's institutions and its optimistic, democratic character. For the Park Service, a century of expansion in large, generally undeveloped natural areas mostly in the West pro-



vided an ongoing frontier which affected the agency's history and development and its self- and public perception.

From the beginning national parks were part of frontier history and romantic western lore. The National Park System had its roots in the nation's frontier experience and was an end-product of the era of westward expansion. Congress set aside Yellowstone National Park in 1872 when that area was part of an open frontier still two decades away from being declared closed. In effect, Congress carved this huge primitive park out of a living frontier. And now, with officially designated wilderness units, Yellowstone and other parks preserve remnants of the wild landscapes of the frontier that gave birth to the National Park System.

The majority of the System's older and more famous parks are in the West — Yellowstone, Yosemite, Grand Canyon, among others. Although the National Park Service has many sites in the East, it was in the West where the Park Service acquired its original and most enduring image, as keeper of dramatic frontier landscapes — the western canyons and high mountains, geographical symbols of the idea of America's greatness, of its size and power. Despite the Park Service's extensive involvement in historical, urban and recreational parks, and numerous external programs, its image remains closely tied to the great natural parks — and thus is still predominantly a Western, big-sky image. Right or wrong, the public persists in this perception — a perception cherished by many Park Service employees.

This perception is reflected in the fact that management of the large natural parks has traditionally spawned the Park Service's top leadership cadres. Also, conflicts over environmental issues involving the natural parks have been the most consistently controversial and newsworthy of Park Service public concerns.

Optima dies . . . prima fugit — the best days are the first to flee. An agency much a part of the American frontier tradition comes to the end of expansion in the very areas upon which its own frontier tradition and image were built. And the grandfathers lament the passing, regretting that the westering has died out. Now, groups of veteran Park Service employees and supporters recount stories of olden times, the golden days of expansion and growth — the frontier days of the National Park System. At times perhaps, like the grandfather in Steinbeck's story, they get their feelings hurt too.

Today, with the closing of its traditional frontier, and with limited growth generally, the Park Service faces internal adjustments. Once a safety valve of opportunity existed while new parks created new jobs and helped prevent career stagnation within the Park Service. Many professionals moved 10 or even 20 times in one career. But no longer can ambitious Park Service employees hope to move out and up every 2 or 3 years. The slowing down of the System's expansion (as well as two-career families and other personal and monetary considerations) has severely affected mobility and career opportunity.

In addition to a closing frontier the Park Service has experienced a decline in freedom of action. Gradually in recent decades it has lost the ability to operate in a semi-independent, frontier mode — once essential in many isolated parks. Powerful special interest groups watch every move, while encrustations of policies, standards and regulations tether the urge to take prompt decisive action. Elaborate planning processes have usurped the park superintendents' ability to make key decisions aided by only a few deputies and a small posse from the regional office or Washington.

Yet, as the National Park Service enters the last three decades of its first century, its westering *instincts* in fact have not died out. The non-traditional parks constitute an evolving frontier for the Park Service: such efforts as national trail and river systems and especially the development of cohesive parks for millions of urban Americans through cooperative arrangements like Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area or Lowell National Historical Park. Already, as a challenge to park management the metroplex rivals wilderness ecosystems.

A far more complex agency than originally conceived, the Park Service has a wide diversity of programs and responsibilities. Nevertheless, the large natural parks remain its primary source of strength and national identity, and they have endowed the Park Service with a frontier state of mind which may endure as long as the parks themselves last. The superb natural landscapes which the National Park Service has both the responsibility and privilege to manage are a continuing source of optimism for the Park Service and the entire nation. While conflicts and problems abound, the parks abide.

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