

THE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM OF THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

By DORR G. YEAGER
Assistant Chief, Museum Division

Several years ago a guide stood with a party of tourists on the rim of the Grand Canyon. The guide was chewing tobacco and the tourists were overawed by the great chasm that opened before them. Finally one of them turned to the guide and asked how the canyon came to be. The guide shifted his quid to the other side of his mouth and drawled: "Well, I'll tell you. I was here at the time so I ought to know. There was a couple of Scotchmen walkin' over this country one day. All of a sudden one of 'em dropped down to the ground and started clawin' around. His partner asked him what he'd lost an' when he found that it was a quarter he got down on his hands and knees and started to dig. Before they got through they'd dug the canyon."

Of course the group laughed at the story, but the man who earnestly wanted to know about the canyon had learned nothing. In Yellowstone National Park early visitors met with such startling statements as that the boiling springs freeze over in the winter time, the geysers are shut off at night to conserve the water supply, and the cause of certain warm areas in the Yellowstone river is the friction of the water running over the rocks.

The philosophy of the old time guide, wrangler, and stagecoach driver in our national parks was to make the public laugh no matter how far he deviated from the truth. A far fetched yarn was always good for a laugh and a laugh was often good for a handsome tip at the end of the day. True the tourists were kept amused and in good spirits and after returning home they long remembered the picturesque character who had shown them Yellowstone; but in most cases their trip was a blank from an educational standpoint. They did not know what caused the delicate coloring of the hot springs, they knew nothing of a geyser except that it was a stream of hot water spouting upward, and their knowledge of other park phenomena was equally meager. How much better it would have been had the guide followed his absurd statements with an accurate interpretation.

It was not long before the traveling public became weary of this method of seeing the areas that had been established for them. They were no longer

satisfied to go and look and return home. They had traveled thousands of miles to see the parks and they wanted to understand, to a degree at least, what they were seeing. The National Park Service, in the endeavor to satisfy this desire, embarked upon a program which was to expand even beyond the fondest hopes of those pioneer educational workers who laid the groundwork for the interpretative program in the national parks.

The work was far from simple in the early days. The old time ranger in particular found it hard to reconcile himself to the new regime, and even some of the administrative officials moved with extreme caution. Since those days, however, the need for such a program has been proved by the response of the tourists. Now many of the park superintendents insist that their rangers be selected from the naturalist Civil Service Register, for they have come to realize that intelligent answers on questions of geology, botany, and history are just as important as a knowledge of diamond hitches and fire trails.

Most of the national parks have established educational departments, headed by a park naturalist assisted by as many permanent employees as can be justified to the Bureau of the Budget. During the winter months this staff, whose duties of public contact are considerably lessened, concentrate on revamping museums, building up study collections, and research problems, of which there is an abundance in the areas.

The test of the educational departments comes, of course, during the summer season when the parks swarm with visitors. Throughout this season the permanent staff is augmented by temporary ranger naturalists, carefully selected from the hundreds of applications that are received each year. These men, with a thorough grounding in the sciences, are generally college professors, high school teachers, or graduate students, and upon them falls the responsibility of interpreting the national parks to the visitors.

The educational program is many fold in its activities. Evening lectures are given at as many points within a park as the personnel permits. Either around the fire in the public campgrounds or in the lobbies of hotels and lodges the naturalist talks to the guests in a friendly, instructive manner, explaining the "whys" of the park phenomena. Trips afield are taken each day—sometimes in search of flowers, sometimes birds, while in such areas as Yellowstone and Mesa Verde, with objects of definite interest such as geysers and cliff dwellings, a variety of trips are offered. Overnight trips into the hills are not uncommon and the high country trip in Yosemite which occupies from five to seven days is becoming more and more popular. The field trips are, of course, considered highly important, for through them, the naturalists are able to show first hand, objects which can only be discussed during the evening lectures.

Generally speaking, the museum is the nucleus from which radiates and around which revolves the educational work. Here it is that the visitor comes for his information; here he is permitted to browse at his leisure; and from here many of the field trips begin. Gradually the museums in the national parks and monuments are taking shape. Money for such projects is slow to materialize; and the recent programs such as Public Works, C.C.C., and W.P.A. have assisted immeasurably.

The ranger naturalists constitute the faculty of the world's largest summer school. Whether the visitor's interest lies in the field of geology, ornithology, entomology, botany, zoology, or related subjects, he is always sure to find an outlet for his interest in some part of this great school of nature. The aim of the educational work is not alone to teach. I have always felt that if we succeed in stimulating an interest in the out-of-doors—an interest which the visitor will take home with him—an interest which will encourage him to go farther and seek out further truths, the work is worth while.

No attempt should be made to herd the park visitors into the educational fold. Those who wish to take advantage of the opportunities which are

offered are welcome; those who prefer other forms of diversion are free to seek out their own interests. The number of educational contacts during the 1938 season speaks for the success of the program. During that period, in the western areas, 4,348,861 such contacts were made. To be sure a

large number of these are "repeaters." The same person may visit a museum, attend a lecture, and accompany a naturalist afield, but even so, the number of visitors taking advantage of the opportunities offered is little short of staggering.

Certain it is that because of this

new service Americans are returning home with a broader conception of the national parks and with a better knowledge of the wonders that lie within their boundaries.

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