

Democratizing Nature Through State Park Development

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ABSTRACT: During the Depression, the National Park Service forged a plan to create a healthier and happier citizenry by developing a nationwide system of state parks. The goal was to “cure the ills of society” by constructing a park within fifty to one hundred miles of every man, woman and child. Between 1933 and 1942, workers for the Civilian Conservation Corps built 800 state parks within the United States. The Park Service oversaw this process and produced master plans for park design that were replicated across the country. These plans typically required damming streams to construct a lake or swimming pond as the central element, and packaging nature for mass consumption. The construction of lakes and other scenery on such a large scale where none existed before was a first for the Park Service.

State parks have become a familiar part of the American landscape. Systems of such parks provide recreational opportunities and often protect unique natural landscapes or sites of historical significance. More than seven hundred million people have typically visited these facilities across the country each year—roughly twice the number who went to national parks.¹ Although state parks have in some ways existed under the shadow of national parks, most Americans have spent more time at these “lesser” recreational areas. In some cases, generations have grown up making pilgrimages to their favorite lake on summer weekends, which in all likelihood was developed as a state park. This paper focuses on the years of the Great Depression, when a fortunate merger of President Roosevelt’s New Deal economic programs and the dreams of a few promoters gave birth to a system of state parks nationwide. Between 1933 and 1942, workers for the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) built eight hundred state parks within the United States, and the National Park Service encouraged park-system planning in all forty-eight states.²

Beyond the unprecedented volume of park development, the CCC program was significant in several ways. First, the large-scale construction of lakes and other scenery where none had existed before marked the entry of federal park planners into the process of significant landscape modification. Before this, the Park Service had concentrated almost solely on the preservation of scenic grandeur in about two dozen parks, almost all located in eleven western states.³ Second, one of the primary principles of the plan was to place recreational parks within the reach of every citizen, or in other words, to democratize nature. Although not intended to be elitist, the early western national parks were out of reach. Unless citizens were fortunate enough to live nearby, most Americans in the 1930s could not afford to visit them. In contrast, state parks were designed to be accessible to the masses.⁴ Third, the planners who controlled not only what shape the parks would take, but also which types of activities (hiking, riding, swimming) were appropriate there, were very few in number.⁵ Therefore, a small group of people had tremendous power to mold many of the feelings and beliefs about nature that we think of as typically American. This “ideal” model of nature they designed and constructed is one we need to understand better.

The Park Service planners that oversaw this process produced master plans for design that could be replicated across the country.⁶ These plans, or templates, utilized a lake or swimming pond as their central element, and thereby “packaged” nature in a specific way for mass consumption. Such scenery usually had to be literally constructed because most of the early state parks were established on inexpensive or donated land that had marginal scenic value. While the construction of lakes was relatively straightforward in humid Virginia, applying this concept in the arid West was a whole different matter. This and similar differences pose the central focus of this article. How did federal planners apply their basic design model across the diverse cultural and physical landscape of the United States?

Five states arguably saw the greatest impact from the work of the CCC, and this fact helped me to logically narrow the scope of this research. Those states were Virginia, South Carolina, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. Each of these places, which were without any state parks in 1932, developed an entire system of parks by participating in the CCC program. I chose three of the five for case studies. I began with Virginia, where state planners constructed some of the first CCC parks in the nation. The second choice was Oklahoma, where parks were constructed in both humid, wooded areas in the east and in arid areas in the northwest. Finally, New Mexico offered a physical and cultural landscape very different from the other possibilities.

Geographers certainly have looked at the development of parks before, although not in great numbers and most focused on national parks.⁷ The research value of parks received special attention in 2007 when *Historical Geography* devoted an issue to American parks and protected areas, edited by geographers Lary Dilsaver and Terence Young. Traditionally, research on parks has been dominated by historians. Most recently, Neil Maher explored the role of CCC conservation work in developing broad-based support for the developing post-World War II environmentalism. Ney Landrum devoted a chapter to the role of the CCC in his study of the state-park movement.⁸ Conrad Wirth, the planner responsible for all of the CCC state-park development, covered this topic while outlining his career as a landscape architect and later director of the Park Service, and John Paige looked specifically at the impact of the CCC on the Park Service in an administrative history.⁹

The federal plan for democratizing nature

Park Service planners had been encouraging states to develop parks since the agency's beginning in 1916, and in 1921 they organized the National Conference on State Parks in Des Moines, Iowa.¹⁰ The establishment of the CCC on March 31, 1933, provided a rare opportunity for funding and labor to develop a network of state parks across the United States and federal officials moved quickly to take advantage of the program. By July 1 of that year 270,000 men occupied 1,331 work camps across the country. Despite the rush, the Park Service plan evolved into a well-choreographed program that was responsible for unprecedented gains in recreational development. By constructing eight hundred state parks, hundreds of city and county parks, and establishing state planning agencies to encourage continued development in the following decades, the program modified a significant portion of the landscape and shaped how many Americans interacted with nature. Some park scholars suggest that the CCC program pushed state-park development ahead by as much as fifty years.¹¹

The design of the new state parks was based on the agency's experiences with early national parks, as well as on existing state-park programs, such as those in New York, California and Indiana. However, in a major shift in national policy, one of the most important guidelines of the federal model was the placement of the new parks within reach of ordinary citizens, including low-income families. Federal planners reported that forty-two percent of the U. S. population

could spend little, if anything, for recreation travel. The consensus of these existing programs was that parks should be located within fifty to one hundred miles of every state resident if possible.¹²

This policy of accessibility was important for two reasons. First, it represented a shift from conservation of very selective scenery and natural areas toward the democratization of nature. This idea is related to what Park Service landscape architect Ethan Carr has called “human resource conservation.”¹³ Second, this criterion, by mandating parks in areas that were not considered scenic, required the intensive construction of lakes and other scenery, such as forest groves. Federal planners made this point clearly. The existence of lakes, trees, and wildlife at a proposed site was ideal, “however, be topography interesting or monotonous, water abundant or scarce, vegetation abundant or sparse, or climate salubrious or enervating, day-by-day recreational requirements are going to have to be met with the best that can be obtained near at hand.”¹⁴

The essence of the Park Service’s ideal state park was captured in a drawing published in *A Study of the Park and Recreation Problem of the United States* in 1941 by the Interior Department. An aerial perspective, it is labeled “Sketch of a Park,” and is described as a general development plan (Figure 1). The centerpiece is a large artificial lake surrounded by a wide valley with forested slopes. The park has only one entryway and a limited amount of roads to take visitors to points of interest. Cabins and camping areas are spread along the shorelines, and a bathhouse is centered on a wide beach. Other park structures, such as a museum, administration office and fire-control area, are clustered, which leaves the bulk of the park available as a “natural area” accessible by trails.

The idea of constructing artificial lakes as the centerpiece of a new park arguably had more impact on the landscape than any other criterion in the master plan. Between 1933 and 1943 the CCC built 195 dams in state parks and other recreation areas.¹⁵ Even if other scenic qualities were



Figure 1. The federal government’s model of an ideal park, published in *A Study of the Park and Recreation Problem in the United States*. Washington, D.C.: Department of the Interior. 1941.

available, water for recreation was thought to be critical. Swimming, after all, was the perfect activity for making nature available to everyone, and fit nicely with the goal of democratizing nature. As Yi-Fu Tuan has noted, because the sport minimizes the physical and social differences among humans and requires no expensive equipment it is a good "litmus for the strength of a country's democratic sentiment."¹⁶ Recreation surveys completed by the Interior Department also illustrated the growing enthusiasm for additional water recreation.¹⁷

Yet not all planners were comfortable with the idea of dams in parks. Perhaps still reeling from the public outcry after the damming of Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park, federal planners were notably cautious. They demanded that dams be "rigidly avoided" within national parks and monuments, but grudgingly agreed that "modifying natural conditions" was justified in "lesser parks," where there was a shortage of "facilities for water recreation."¹⁸ Noted landscape architect Frank Waugh expressed similar sentiments:

So strong is the delight of human beings in water that the landscape architect is under strong temptation to supply artificial ponds where nature has failed to make them. But this temptation should be examined with great caution before one gives way to it . . . the artificial pond is likely to look unpleasantly artificial when it is done, and in that result all the contiguous landscape loses the illusion of naturalness.¹⁹

Landscape architects had earlier fought outright the damming of streams in Yosemite and Yellowstone National Parks.²⁰ But by the late 1920s and 1930s, possibly giving in to the rising tide of recreational park development, they shifted their stance from steadfast opposition to improving the design of dams being proposed. "The new lake should be made as nearly like the natural prototype as is humanly possible," argued Waugh.²¹ Park Service publications soon offered advice and examples on how to naturalize the look of impoundments.

The same efforts were made to naturalize other human structures within parks. In many CCC parks, every structure from expansive lodges to lowly generator houses and bathrooms were designed in a naturalistic style borrowed from early Park Service landscape architects, which came to be known as "government rustic":

Successfully handled, it is a style which, through the use of native materials in proper scale, and through the avoidance of severely straight lines and oversophistication, gives the feeling of having been executed by pioneer craftsmen with limited hand tools. It thus achieves sympathy with natural surroundings and with the past.²²

The size and shape of the logs, timbers and rocks had to be scaled properly to match the surrounding terrain. In mountainous and forested areas, for example, the native materials had to be overscaled to match the imposing terrain.²³

The challenge of Park Service planners was to coordinate all the work being done in the state parks so they met the above goals for park development. Thomas Vint, director of the Park Service Branch of Plans and Designs, pushed the agency's vision of proper design by publishing and distributing a variety of documents. He used examples of outstanding park designs to create a pattern book of rustic designs. Works commended included the park museum buildings Herbert Maier had designed for Bear Mountain, Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, and Yosemite, and also suitable examples of trailside shelters, footbridges, culverts, and amphitheaters. The pattern book was distributed widely and helped standardize the government rustic style among Park Service architects and planners.²⁴

The role of Park Service planners regularly went beyond architecture narrowly defined. It included all aspects of park development, including roads, the selection of natural areas, and the zoning of different types of land use. By 1934 a composite of these ideas was being referred to as a "master plan," and was implemented to a considerable degree at nearly every state and national park. By the later CCC days, Park Service master planning became formalized enough to offer a program called "Plans on a Shelf." The idea here was to provide complete project plans for a state park to be used as soon as funds might become available.²⁵

Virginia park development

With its early and rapid development of an entire system of state parks, Virginia became the first success story of the CCC program and helped to better define Park Service master planning. The nation's very first work crew of the program was assigned to Virginia, and in 1936 officials there opened six state parks to the public—all on the same day. Because of Virginia's location close to Washington, DC, the new parks were visited by Roosevelt and other high-ranking government officials. Media newsreels of these events also helped to place Virginia and the parks program in the national spotlight.²⁶

There were three key reasons for the success of Virginia's state-park program. First, state officials already had experience working with the federal government through the establishment of Shenandoah National Park. This involvement required the state to acquire all the private land needed for the new park. It was an easy transition to then continue acquiring land for a system of state parks. Second, its close distance to Washington, DC, gave this state a political advantage over distant places in competing for CCC projects. And finally, the development of parks had broad statewide support. The Virginia press was guardedly optimistic about the CCC program in general, but throughout its history, newspapers gave the program's efforts to develop parks favorable publicity.²⁷

Because Virginia's parks were built so early within the years of the CCC program, they played a significant role in shaping park development across the country. The generic park design published in *A Study of the Park and Recreation Problem of the United States*, for example, is very similar to that of Douthat State Park in Virginia. In 1934 the regional offices of the Park Service's Branch of Planning and State Cooperation moved from Washington, DC, to Richmond. The federal planners within this Richmond office often worked closely with Virginia planners, sometimes even at the same drafting board.²⁸

The six Virginia CCC parks were designed as a group and shared the same overall guidelines. These parks were Douthat, Fairy Stone, Hungry Mother, Seashore (now called First Landing), Staunton River, and Westmoreland. In each park a central water feature was the primary organizing element in the overall design. Three of Virginia's first parks were located on the ocean or a river, and the remaining three were centered on an artificial lake. The lakes constructed at Virginia CCC parks were viewed positively at the time as a way of improving nature. Wilbur Hall, the chairman of Virginia's parks commission, saw no distinction between the constructed dams and the existing woodland scenery. Hall said the parks were for people to "get back to Nature untouched by modern civilization."²⁹ Clearly, landscapes with artificial bodies of water that emulated nature, were still considered "untouched."

Rather than viewed as necessary but unsightly aspects of the parks, the dams were often promoted much like natural scenic features. When the dam was built at Douthat State Park, engineers created a series of rock-faced spillways that came to symbolize the park itself. One promotional writer declared that Douthat was famous for its "waterfalls."³⁰ Another writer described the transformation that had taken place at Douthat in the following language:

In thirty-four months impassable thickets have given way to roads and bridges. A mountain stream has been converted into a silver lake. Here hillsides have become a riot of blossoms. Mother Nature has been aided in her beautification methods by landscape architects and the thought and brawn of skilled men . . . the sweat of their bodies mingled with the rushing waters of Wilson Creek to form the picturesque cascades.³¹

Promotional photographs published in 1936 captured happy park visitors at picnic tables with the spillways filling the frame as a backdrop, much the way we might photograph a natural waterfall or other “natural” scene (Figure 2). Charcoal drawings of the spillway by a local artist are still available at the Douthat gift shop.



Figure 2. Although an obvious human construction, the spillway at Douthat State Park in Virginia was promoted as if it were a “natural” scenic feature. (Photograph from the files of the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation)

Virginia officials fully embraced the idea of democratizing nature. After the six CCC parks were developed, these in combination with Shenandoah National Park and another federal area placed virtually the entire population of the state within fifty miles of a public recreation site. W. E. Carson, chairman of the Virginia State Commission on Conservation and Development, stressed the importance of understanding the “spirit and purpose” behind the establishment of Virginia’s state park system:

But most of all, they will provide recreation, pleasure and vacation delights for the person of moderate means who is unable to afford a vacation for himself and family in the more expensive resorts. The state parks were established for his benefit, his pleasure and his welfare.³²

“The working man is entitled to more than a bare existence,” Governor George Peery declared during the opening ceremonies of the park system in 1936. “And so it is the duty of government, either state or national, to help bring to him some of the pleasures the world has to offer.”³³

Unfortunately, the liberation of the lower classes did not include African Americans. The park system was closed to African Americans in Virginia at the time it was developed. A segregated area at Fairy Stone was initially considered for use by African Americans, however, the entire system remained white-only until 1950 when the state established Prince Edward Lake State Park for Negroes.³⁴ Segregation in parks was common practice throughout the South at the time. In South Carolina, which had sixteen parks developed by the CCC, state officials closed all parks for three years rather than allow equal access.³⁵

Oklahoma park development

Oklahoma was six years behind Virginia in planning for parks, and so was not prepared when the CCC first began in 1933. Once a parks commission was created in 1935, however, and the necessary lands were acquired, statewide support grew quickly and federal planners went to work. By the time the program ended in 1942, work crews had constructed seven parks. In semiarid western Oklahoma, the state developed Boiling Springs, Roman Nose, Quartz Mountain, and Lake Murray state parks, and in the humid east, planners established Osage Hills, Robbers Cave and Beavers Bend.³⁶

The Oklahoma experience stands out in three significant ways. First, the two-year delay in joining the CCC program allowed park designers there to avoid mistakes made elsewhere. As a result, Oklahoma parks clearly represent the fully formed Park Service model, including its emphasis on the democratization of nature and artificial lakes. Second, Oklahoma’s parks include some of the finest examples of the government rustic style of architecture in the country. Finally, the variety of landscapes within the state, ranging from humid, forested areas in the east to semiarid regions in the west, challenged planners who tried to shoehorn the model across the entire state. Oklahoma park sites, because of this, were more heavily modified than in the forests of Virginia.

Unlike Virginia, which hired a landscape architect to begin planning its system of parks, Oklahoma relied totally on the expertise of federal planners. However, Oklahoma officials did assert some independence by defining their own goals for parks, which were not mere carbon copies from other states or federal design books. One such goal was the need to conserve wildlife habitat, which was unlike anything found in Virginia or New Mexico. Wildlife was protected in all of the original CCC state parks and large areas were identified as sanctuaries in the master plans of all but Quartz Mountain State Park.³⁷

The democratization of nature was also a key component of the Oklahoma system. Federal planners concluded that most state residents could not afford to travel to resorts in Colorado, New Mexico, Missouri, or the Gulf states. Because of this, they carefully selected sites that would blanket the state and put almost every area within seventy-five to one hundred miles of a park. Although Oklahomans had a higher standard of living than many southern states, they still trailed residents of the north. Approximately one-third of Oklahoma farmers made as little as \$300 a year. To compensate for low-income levels, user fees at parks were determined by the ability of the poorest inhabitants to pay.³⁸

Similar to Virginia, the parks in Oklahoma were not intended for all residents equally. Racial segregation was a common practice in the state in the 1930s, and most city parks were limited to whites only. This particular issue was a sore point for Roscoe Dunjee, editor of *The Black Dispatch* newspaper. Dunjee repeatedly berated the Oklahoma City Council and State Park Commission about the lack of recreational opportunities for African Americans. He noted that nearly half a million dollars had been spent by the city and federal government on recreation facilities in 1935, yet no areas were available to the state's twenty thousand African American residents.³⁹ State officials eventually were pressured to open state parks to African Americans, but only in certain areas at Roman Nose and Lake Murray. Since these two parks were in counties with little African American population, however, this policy had little practical impact.⁴⁰

A body of water, the central tenet of federal-park planning, was well represented in Oklahoma. Each of the state's parks was constructed in parallel with an artificial lake (or in one case an improved river section) ranging in size from seven-acre Shaul Lake at Boiling Springs, to 5,728-acre Lake Murray. Visitor surveys in 1938 validated this emphasis on water recreation. The average Oklahoma park visitor lived within twenty-five miles of his or her park, and went there for one-day outings to do water sports.⁴¹

Although virtually all of the nation's CCC parks were constructed of native materials in the government rustic style where possible, they cannot compare in style or quality to the extraordinary cabins, bathhouses, and other structures in Oklahoma (Figure 3). The most characteristic feature of these structures is the use of large stones that angle up from the ground, giving a building the appearance of having literally sprouted. Building sites were also chosen near existing rock outcrops, which further enhanced the natural look. The main reason for this exceptional quality is the influence of Maier, the Park Service designer who earlier had helped to shape the evolving rustic designs characteristic of national parks. Timing also played a role in the quality of these structures. The first two years of the rapidly thrown-together CCC program had produced many parks, but not all were of exceptional quality. By 1935 some hard lessons had been learned.⁴²

Oklahoma straddles the 100th meridian, that notable line of aridity through the Great Plains where annual precipitation generally drops below twenty inches, and forest gives way to prairie. This dry climate posed a serious challenge to federal planners. Could, for example, the ideal model of a blue lake tucked into a wooded valley be created without becoming a brown mud hole on the plains? Part of the solution, it turned out, was to select park sites at existing springs where a steady water supply was assured and where at least some trees already grew. With water taken care of, the next step was to transform the prairie into a forest by planting thousands of trees.

The only park not heavily reforested was Robbers Cave, which was developed in an area where the existing forest remained. The other parks, especially those in the west, saw significant reforestation work.⁴³ Lake Murray State Park, developed near the town of Ardmore and the Texas border, is a good example of such efforts. Local residents described the proposed park site as



Figure 3. Oklahoma has some of the finest examples of the government rustic style of architecture. This is a picnic shelter at Robbers Cave State Park. (Photograph by the author, July, 2001)

“extremely worthless land unfit for agricultural purposes.” Yet this did not stop park development. A tree nursery was established soon after work began to develop the park, and in 1938 alone more than seventeen thousand trees were transplanted.⁴⁴

As was the case in Virginia, despite all the hands-on “beautification” of scenery, heavy tree plantings, and construction of lakes, these new landscapes remained “natural.” This was especially true when it involved the creation of a lake. At Robbers Cave State Park, Lake Carlton (Figure 4) opened to the public in 1938 after five years of construction and filling.⁴⁵ The *Latimer County News-Democrat* gave the following description of Robbers Cave, which illustrates the essence of the federal model:

Perhaps the biggest attraction of the park is the lake itself which is nestled so conveniently between imposing, scenic hills and huge masses of towering rocks, their simple grandeur mirrored in the waters below. Despite its easy accessibility, the park still retains its atmosphere of untamed nature, with picturesque paths twisting their way through the foliage. For the accommodation of the bathers, a miniature beach was spaced out and covered with sand, where the swimmers may bask or bury themselves.⁴⁶



Figure 4. Although Carlton Lake had to be constructed as the centerpiece of Robbers Cave State Park in Oklahoma, the park was still described as “untamed nature.” The lake remains a popular destination spot. (Photograph by the author, July 2001)

New Mexico park development

If Virginia was the success story of CCC park development, where the federal model worked smoothly, and Oklahoma was where aridity began imposing limits on the concept, then New Mexico was where the plan skidded to a halt. With only about 423,000 people in 1930 (one-fifth the population of Oklahoma), more than nine million acres of federal lands, and an arid landscape offering few scenic qualities not already included in federal possession, planners there faced several challenges not encountered in states to the east. These challenges included westerners with a distrust of planning and the federal government, racial tensions between Anglos, Hispanics and Native Americans, and a state legislature that was unsupportive of parks. Through this process planners discovered their existing template for park development had to be greatly modified.⁴⁷

The imprint of federal land ownership was already firmly established in New Mexico when the CCC began. The state was home to Carlsbad Caverns National Park, which encompassed more than forty-nine thousand acres, eight national monuments, and much national forest land. With thirty-three percent of the state already under government control through such means, the idea that more parks were needed must have been a tough sell to some New Mexicans. Generally, with the exception of the places with large populations and growing urban areas such as California, Oregon, Texas, and Colorado, the western states built few CCC parks.⁴⁸

The difficulties of developing parks in arid New Mexico became apparent almost immediately. To begin, New Mexico was unable to fill all of its CCC camps from its own sparse population. Then, when young men were imported from other states, they were often inexperienced in working in such heat. Because of such conditions, New Mexico camps had unusually high desertion rates.⁴⁹ The racial makeup of the state, a mix of Native Americans, Hispanics and Anglos, also created unique conflicts and challenges. According to historian Maria Montoya, New Mexico's CCC enrollees of Spanish or Mexican descent were considered mentally and physically inferior to the Anglo enrollees from Texas and Oklahoma. Because of these perceptions, Anglos were typically brought in for the more skilled jobs and leadership positions. Much of the problem with Hispanic enrollees was due to language barriers. All of the recruiting literature was printed in English, and only one of thirty county officials responsible for recruiting CCC workers in 1939 spoke Spanish.⁵⁰

Besides the complex racial dynamics of the camps, another and arguably greater force in limiting CCC-park work in New Mexico was a lack of legislative support. The state legislature there had a history of not supporting recreational activities even before the program began, and several park proposals submitted to the legislature were rebuffed.⁵¹ Even after the federal government began supplying the labor and materials for the parks, this pattern continued. The state legislature repeatedly balked at using state money to purchase land or to fund park operations adequately.⁵²

With all of the above hurdles, New Mexico was able to develop only three parks during the 1930s—half the number of Virginia or Oklahoma. CCC crews developed Bottomless Lakes State Park surrounding a chain of seven natural lakes twelve miles east of Roswell, and Hyde Memorial State Park, centered around a ski lodge in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains about eight miles northeast of Santa Fe. Both parks remain very popular today. However, it was the third park that demonstrates how the federal model stumbled in arid New Mexico. This was a park that few people in the state today know ever existed.

Eastern New Mexico State Park was to be an oasis for recreation in the Dust Bowl country between Portales and Clovis along the state's border with Texas. State Parks commissioner Glenn Macy embraced the goal of democratizing nature when he proposed the park. "If we are going to have a system of state parks we must have several of them on the east side of the state where recreational facilities are few," he told one federal official.⁵³ Governor A. W. Hockenhull made a similar argument to Robert Fechner, director of the CCC. He requested a camp "out on the plains where the people have no parks or recreational grounds."⁵⁴

The problem, of course, was that the ideal park landscape envisioned by Park Service planners, a shady grove of trees surrounding a lake, had little resemblance to the windswept prairie of eastern New Mexico. Yet planners seemed confident that technology could master nature and even change the climate of the plains to meet their needs. And initially it appeared that they had indeed mastered the arid landscape with the construction of the new state park. A ten-acre lake materialized, along with a large bathhouse constructed of adobe in the Southwestern architectural style. The lake bottom sloped gently to a sandy beach next to the bathhouse. Once filled, the lake was stocked with game fish and within two years Roosevelt County boasted of a "good supply of 18-inch fighting bass," and several thousand crappie.⁵⁵ Water for the lake came from a well with a gasoline pump that produced a flow of 1,700 gallons per minute. By the summer of 1935 the pump had been working well and the lake was already being used by hundreds of swimmers.⁵⁶

To create the required forest cover, CCC workers planted twelve hundred trees during the winter of 1934-35. Almost all were reported thriving during the following summer. All were native to New Mexico, but many were new to Roosevelt County. They included American elm,

cottonwood, native locust, cedar, pine, juniper, pinon and blue spruce. The young trees were irrigated by a system of canals, which were reinforced by flagstone, and designed to take on a "natural appearance" within a few years.⁵⁷ During the summer of 1935 attendance grew each weekend to a peak of one thousand visitors on one day in August. Lifeguards from the CCC camp watched over swimmers, who were charged fifteen cents a day.⁵⁸

The park ultimately failed, however, because of a combination of bureaucratic and climatic problems and today is abandoned. The exact cause of this park's death is difficult to determine with certainty, partly because there are no records of its existence at the New Mexico Division of State Parks. A search of local histories in the Portales library turned up only one passing mention in Works Progress Administration papers. In the brief mentions of the park in other publications, its failure has been blamed on a porous lake bottom. Whereas a porous bottom may well have added to the problems at the swimming lake, as well as the inevitable loss to evaporation, newspaper accounts and other sources suggest a more likely human cause. The park failed because of a lack of support by the state legislature.⁵⁹

Compared to artificial lakes constructed elsewhere by damming streams, the Eastern New Mexico lake required regular additions of water from wells. Long-term maintenance and fuel for the pump were expensive and not provided by state government.⁶⁰ So long as the CCC camp remained, the park was successful. Workers kept the pump going and made sure the irrigation system was supplying water to the new trees. Once the camp disbanded, however, the responsibility of maintaining the park was left to the communities of Portales and Clovis, which could not afford the additional expenses.⁶¹ The park limped along without adequate support until 1941, when ironically, too much water doomed the project. A forty-one-inch rain, almost three times the annual average, caved in the roof of the adobe bathhouse and severely eroded the walls (Figure 5). This structure was never repaired.⁶²

The New Mexico experience offers important insight into the limits of the Park Service plan to democratize nature. With high-plains landscapes devoid of trees and scenic vistas, and mountain sites more suited to skiing than swimming, the seemingly reliable CCC model had practically no chance of working in New Mexico. Add to this the lack of statewide support for recreational development and it is a wonder that any parks were constructed at all. Despite the early failures and lack of support for parks, the federal model still helped to shape the New Mexico landscape in the decades that followed. State officials continued to slowly build a system of parks and followed the model of using a water feature as the central element, especially taking advantage of existing large reservoirs.

Effectiveness of the program

The nationwide development of state parks during the New Deal clearly changed a significant portion of the American landscape. These recreational systems continue to provide enjoyment for millions of people annually. For many families, who live a great distance from national parks or other public lands, their entire relationship with nature may have formed during weekend trips to a nearby state park. Going to the lake has become a part of American tradition.

The birth of parks dedicated to recreation also represented an important shift in the role of the federal government. Before the New Deal, the mission of the Park Service was to preserve only the most majestic scenery, which more often than not, was in the western states. In contrast, the CCC program brought nature to the people, and by doing so, democratized this process. Federal planners were faithful to the goal of putting entire states within reach of a park, even when this required heavily modifying the landscape – another major departure for the Park Service.

The decision to construct dams within parks met with early resistance from federal planners who still chafed at the negative public opinion caused by the dam in Yosemite. However,



Figure 5. Crumbling walls are all that remain of the adobe bathhouse at the failed Eastern New Mexico State Park. (Photograph by the author, July 2001)

this opposition faded as the model of a state recreation park was better defined. Gradually it was seen as appropriate to modify the landscape in these lesser parks if natural lakes were not at hand, and landscape architects turned their attention toward designing dams that looked more natural.

As the park development model moved into the western states, aridity and cultural changes required it to become even more flexible. Oklahoma parks are the best example of this. Park structures all followed the rustic style, but were not blindly projected onto the landscape. The designs mirrored regional cultures. In the four western parks, buildings were constructed mostly of rock and emulated Southwestern culture. In the wooded eastern region, the buildings were mostly log, reflecting the cabins built by early settlers in the area.

The adaptability of the model was tested most severely in New Mexico. There, planners were unable to construct “ideal” nature consisting of a wooded lake. It was technically possible to do so, of course, as was demonstrated for a few years at the park in the eastern plains, but the federal model ultimately failed because it was a bad fit culturally in the arid West. New Mexico lawmakers probably felt there was already too much public land, or at the very least, did not see the need for additional lands being set aside for recreation.

Quite simply, the model that worked so well in Virginia, which had very little public lands, was not needed in the rural, dry, and public-lands-rich West. Western states with low populations, such as New Mexico, Nevada, Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana, used the CCC crews

effectively to do forest work and complete projects in existing national parks. But the concept of additional organized recreation areas went against the grain of western individualism, and was sometimes even considered a bit of a joke.

Each of the case-study states continued to build impressive systems of parks after the 1930s, often taking advantage of reservoirs constructed for irrigation, flood control or power generation. Future parks were not as elegant as CCC parks, of course, because states no longer had the large labor forces needed to construct the intricate rockwork. Yet the idea of a park centered on an artificial lake with cabins and camping areas remained the dominant model.

NOTES

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