

# Creating Grand Teton National Park

## A Case Study in Honor of the National Park System's Centennial

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In August 1916 President Woodrow Wilson founded the National Park Service (NPS) as a means of preserving the United States' wildlands, battlefields, and historical monuments.<sup>1</sup> Over the last century this agency has grown exponentially, rising to 409 sites of significance as of 2014.<sup>2</sup> In celebration of this achievement and in time for the National Park Service's centennial later this year I have chosen to focus on the origin of one site in particular: Grand Teton National Park. This article thus seeks to present a case study of the park's creation narrative as told through government documents, and to provide a starting place for researchers interested in the National Park System and/or Grand Teton National Park.

Initially founded in 1929 and significantly amended in 1950, the evolution of Grand Teton National Park spanned several decades and was fraught with much controversy. The legal narrative was complicated, and key players ranged from federal officials to local ranchers to an eccentric billionaire. Today the park stands not only as a monument to the American wilderness but also to the ever-contentious nature of local versus national politics as well as the tenaciousness of the American spirit.

### A Brief History of Teton and Park Counties

Present-day Grand Teton National Park is situated in the northwestern corner of Wyoming, straddling Teton and Park Counties.<sup>3</sup> The landscape is famous for mountains, glaciers, mirrored lakes, and picturesque farmland, as well as the popular ski resorts. Before there was Grand Teton National Park, however, Wyoming already had a rich human history and a diverse collection of flora and fauna (most notably its elk herds). The earliest inhabitants were Native Americans but, after the

Louisiana Purchase, new groups appeared, including fur trappers and explorers.<sup>4</sup> By 1849 gold rushers passed through on their way to California, but they did not stop because there was no gold to be found.<sup>5</sup> During this time explorers first began to note the majestic Teton Mountains, and the territory gained notoriety for its natural beauty.<sup>6</sup>

The late nineteenth century saw the arrival of homesteaders in Wyoming, especially in the area known as Jackson Hole.<sup>7</sup> This land and the attitude surrounding it began to change during the 1880s as new settlers discovered that the flat basin was a friendly environment to farm and raise cattle.<sup>8</sup> They began to establish dominion over the acreage adjacent to what became the earliest version of Grand Teton National Park, and this sense of ownership remained problematic well into the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> Future disputes over rancher entitlements would spring from this historic practice of allowing homesteaders to graze their cattle within the Teton National Forest.<sup>10</sup> As the idea to form Grand Teton National Park gathered steam during the later decades of that century, the ranchers felt encroached upon, and the once civil relationship between the locals and the US government grew extremely tense. Though conservation was desired by many supporters, the foundation of Grand Teton National Park did not come easily, largely because of this politicized issue.

### Grand Teton National Park is Born

During the fall of 1916, Congress created the Department of the Interior's National Parks Service, and Grand Teton National Park was well on its way to foundation.<sup>11</sup> Teton National Forest already existed, and the surrounding mountains, glaciers, and lakes had gained celebrity with each new visitor to the area.

In a February 14, 1929, report from the Committee on the Public Lands, Wyoming Representative Charles Edwin Winter debuted the future park's Congressional approval in an encouraging tone:

This bill provides for the establishment of what are justly considered the greatest and most beautiful peaks on this continent as a national park, to be known as the Grand Teton National Park of Wyoming. The Teton Range presents the most profoundly impressive mountain view in America. It is a gift to the Nation and posterity in which the people of Wyoming may well be proud, that the grandeur and scenic beauty of these rugged Alpine Peaks . . . and the wilderness area surrounding them may be preserved in their natural state for the benefit and enjoyment of the people of these United States and future generations to come.<sup>12</sup>

Winter subsequently notes that this victory was “the happy culmination of 21 years of effort,” undoubtedly referencing growing concerns among local ranchers about the federal government's perceived encroachment.<sup>13</sup> Ranchers did not want to lose land rights on what they believed to be personal property and were also not in favor of hordes of tourists interrupting their privacy.

On February 26, 1929, President Calvin Coolidge signed the executive order that created Grand Teton National Park.<sup>14</sup> The result was the encapsulation of thousands of acres of unspoiled western terrain into 150 square miles of federal land, combining the Teton Mountain Range and many lakes with Teton National Forest.<sup>15</sup> Although impressive at the time, Grand Teton National Park in 1929 was less than one-third of the size it is today.<sup>16</sup> It is also worth noting that the conversation about preserving the area began much earlier with discussions about amending neighboring Yellowstone National Park's borders to accommodate roving elk herds.<sup>17</sup> These very elk herds would prove particularly important—and controversial—in the decades that follow.

## The Rockefellers Visit Wyoming

In 1926, John D. Rockefeller Jr. made a visit to Jackson Hole, the fertile basin near to the soon-to-be established Grand Teton National Park. He was met by the superintendent of Yellowstone National Park, Horace Albright, and while touring the area Albright explained his grandiose plans for Jackson Hole.<sup>18</sup> Concerned by growing popularity and the entitled ranching community already living there, Albright hoped to save the land from future commercial development.<sup>19</sup> Given

that the largest hurdle in accomplishing his vision was a lack of funding from the federal government, Albright hoped he could ally with Rockefeller in order to preserve the land before further expansion.

In 1927, Albright knew success when Rockefeller created the Snake River Land Company. Because the ranchers in Jackson Hole would not donate their property and Congress would not appropriate new funds, Rockefeller began to privately purchase land parcels under the company name with the ultimate goal of giving the land to the US government.<sup>20</sup> By 1929, Rockefeller's new company was embroiled in local controversy as it continued to purchase several properties desired by the Elk Commission, an interest group appointed by the Committee on Outdoor Recreation.<sup>21</sup> The Commission sought to create an enlarged National Elk Refuge for the prized roaming elk herds, but Rockefeller's agenda made that project impossible to complete. The Wyoming Game Commission was concerned with the Snake River Land Company's motives, too, fearing that the land company would throttle hunting leases in the area with their private purchases.<sup>22</sup>

By 1933, Jackson Hole locals had discovered Rockefeller's involvement and a bitter rivalry began between ranchers and the Snake River team. The National Park Service itself also came under fire from the Jackson Hole community during these years. The Senate Public Lands Committee even held subcommittee hearings in Wyoming to directly address charges that Rockefeller was privately purchasing lands in order to make a profit and that Albright was then interested in buying the lands for personal use.<sup>23</sup> After days of hearings in Jackson Hole, Rockefeller was deemed innocent because he could not possibly make money from lands he intended to donate. The claims against Albright were also unsubstantiated and the National Parks Service was not charged with any unethical activity regarding the land purchases either.<sup>24</sup> In the remaining years of the decade, as the United States became involved in World War II, the federal government turned its attention elsewhere and activity surrounding the “privatization” of Jackson Hole grew stagnant. Despite this general pause, however, local tensions did not decrease.<sup>25</sup>

## Jackson Hole National Monument and Local Strife

By the early 1940s, Rockefeller had not yet donated the land he had purchased over the preceding decade. In the wake of the Great Depression and the ongoing World War, the federal government did not have funding to spend on additional national park land. Rockefeller grew disappointed and frustrated, and in 1942 he directly contacted Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes to let his feelings be known.<sup>26</sup> An ultimatum

was presented: either the US government accept the donation of land or Rockefeller would put it for sale on the commercial real estate market. On March 15, 1943, and in accordance with the 1906 Antiquities Act, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed a proclamation drafted by Ickes which preserved more than 200,000 acres of land in Jackson Hole as the new Jackson Hole National Monument.<sup>27</sup>

Rockefeller was pleased, but the sudden announcement was poorly received by the Jackson Hole community. This only further compacted local fears about the federal government's encroachment and amplified general distrust of outsiders. Tensions finally erupted when a group called the "Jackson Holers" assembled at the local Elks' Club with guns in hand, hoping to cause a government shutdown to prohibit the fruition of the Executive Order. Newspapers printed this story and others nationwide, publishing statements like "We GAVE them the Tetons! What *more* do they want?" as evidence of misdoings.<sup>28</sup> To make matters worse, the issue escalated from rancher versus the federal government to the State of Wyoming versus the federal government when Wyoming sued for threatening the state's financial solvency.<sup>29</sup> The court ruled in favor of the federal government, however, citing the rights of the executive branch. This triggered immediate Congressional retaliation with aims to abolish the new monument.<sup>30</sup> The rest of the decade saw several attempts to dismantle Jackson Hole National Monument, but each endeavor failed.<sup>31</sup>

## The "New" Grand Teton National Park

In April 1949, the Senate Appropriations Committee heard a final compromise to the Jackson Hole drama.<sup>32</sup> On September 14, 1950, the "new" Grand Teton National Park was officially signed into existence under President Harry S. Truman.<sup>33</sup> Just outside of World War II, there was renewed interest in the park at the national level and in preserving Jackson Hole. With a new attitude and new administration in Washington D.C., the 1950 legislation successfully combined what had already been called Grand Teton National Park with the controversially created Jackson Hole National Monument. With sensitivity to lingering local tensions, this document included five significant compromises to make the vision of the park fully realized while appealing all parties involved. Concessions included protection of grazing rights, reimbursed tax revenues, allowance for hunting elk within park boundaries (to maintain local population, not for sport), an agreement that there would not be further Presidential proclamations creating new national monuments in Wyoming, and finally, park and forest access for some existing private property owners.<sup>34</sup> These proved agreeable, and ever

since 1950 Grand Teton National Park has seen no further strife between its neighbors and visitors.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

Grand Teton National Park is recognized today as one of the most pristine and beautiful national parks in the American system. As I have demonstrated in this paper, the story of the park's creation is not as serene as one may think when visiting the placid mountain lakes and forests of the preserved wildlands. In creating this space, a variety of stakeholders were involved, each with very different goals and desires to be considered. The American legislative system cannot and should not be ignored when considering key players in this origin story. Ultimately, Grand Teton National Park's modern existence is a product of those discussions, debates, and the subsequent legal recourse.

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## References

1. *The National Park Service Organic Act of 1916, U.S. Code 16* (1916), §§ 1 et seq.
2. "National Park Service Overview," National Park Service, US Department of the Interior, November 16, 2015, <https://www.nps.gov/aboutus/upload/NPS-Overview-2015-update-11-16-15-2.pdf>. The National Park Service is not only charged with maintaining the National Parks System, it is also responsible for maintaining "sites of significance," which may also include national monuments, national memorials, national seashores, battlefields, and ecological/historic preserves.
3. US Department of the Interior, *Circular of General Information Regarding Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming* (Washington, DC: US GPO, 1930), 1. It is of particular importance that Grand Teton National Park is a geographical neighbors with Yellowstone National Park (the first national park in the United States.) Yellowstone is located just eleven miles north of Grand Teton National Park's northern border.
4. Robert Scharff, *Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks* (New York: D. McKay Co., 1966), 8. One of the earliest groups of fur trappers in the area was John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company (also known as "The Astorians").
5. *Ibid.*, 2, 8.

6. US National Park Service, *Grand Teton: A Guide to Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming*. Washington, DC: US Department of the Interior, 1984), 39. Recognition of Grand Teton's natural beauty can largely be credited to John Colter, the explorer credited as the first white man to "discover" the area. He was an original member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition in 1804, and upon the journey's end Colter decided to return to the Teton County area to join a group of fur trappers. His reports from the area spread back toward the East Coast by the mid-nineteenth century as many Americans were moving westward.
7. Scharff, *Yellowstone and Grand Teton*, 9.
8. US National Park Service, *Grand Teton*, 39; US Department of the Interior, *Circular*, 4.
9. US National Park Service, *Grand Teton*, 15.
10. Ibid.; Richard C. Davis, ed., "Appendix I. The National Forests of the United States," accessed April 2, 2016, [www.foresthistory.org/ASPNET/places/National%20Forests%20of%20the%20U.S.pdf](http://www.foresthistory.org/ASPNET/places/National%20Forests%20of%20the%20U.S.pdf). The National Forest was founded in 1908 but the Teton National Reserve dates to 1897 as part of young Yellowstone.
11. US National Park Service, "The Creation of Grand Teton National Park," 2000, [https://www.nps.gov/grte/learn/historyculture/upload/The-Creation-of-Grand-Teton-National-Park\\_webiste-2000.pdf](https://www.nps.gov/grte/learn/historyculture/upload/The-Creation-of-Grand-Teton-National-Park_webiste-2000.pdf); Jack Neckles, "Grand Teton National Park 50th Anniversary Newsletter," 2000, <https://www.nps.gov/grte/learn/historyculture/upload/newsletter.pdf>. 1918 saw a discussion of the park when a bill successfully passed in the House but was ultimately killed by the Senate in 1919.
12. US Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Public Lands, *To Establish the Grand Teton National Park in the State of Wyoming: Report (to Accompany S. 5543)*, 70th Cong., 2d sess., 1929, H. Rep. 2516, 1.
13. Ibid.; David J. Saylor, *Jackson Hole, Wyoming: In the Shadow of the Tetons* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), 165–67. This sense of encroachment began as early as 1919 when Horace Albright (then the National Park Service Superintendent of Yellowstone) campaigned in Jackson Hole for an extension of Yellowstone boundaries.
14. US Department of the Interior, *Circular*, 1; *An Act to Establish the Grand Teton National Park in the State of Wyoming, and For Other Purposes*, Public Law 70-817, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 45 (1929): 1314–16.
15. US Congress, House of Representatives, *To Establish the Grand Teton National Park*, 1; US Department of the Interior, *Circular*, 1. It is important to note that although Jackson Hole is part of Grand Teton National Park today, it was not yet included in 1929.
16. US National Park Service, *Grand Teton*, 7.
17. US National Park Service, "The Creation of Grand Teton National Park". Yellowstone National Park is an extremely close neighbor to Grand Teton National Park, and there was a blurring of some of the border areas with roaming herds constantly moving between the two preserves.
18. US National Park Service, *Grand Teton*, 7.
19. Saylor, *Jackson Hole*, 163–64, 175. By 1926 telephone lines were being strung to Jackson Hole and a dance hall was being built, as well as gas stations and food establishments. Albright's fascination with Jackson Hole began a decade earlier when he was assistant to the first director of the National Park System, Stephen T. Mather
20. US National Park Service, *Grand Teton*, 7, 12; Saylor, *Jackson Hole*, 175. It was a conscious choice to keep Rockefeller's identity a secret from ranchers selling their land so they would not be suspicious or try to drive up the prices.
21. Saylor, *Jackson Hole*, 181.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid, 195; US Congress, Senate, Committee on Public Lands and Surveys, *Investigation of Proposed Enlargement of the Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks: Hearings before the Subcommittee on S. Res. 226*, 73rd Cong., 2d sess., August 7 to 10, 1933.
24. Saylor, *Jackson Hole*, 195–96.
25. There was a failed 1934 bill to again expand park boundaries, and another failed bill in 1935.
26. Saylor, *Jackson Hole*, 199–200.
27. Ibid., 200; Kendra Leah Fuller and Shannon Sullivan, *Grand Teton National Park* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2014), 10; U.S. President, *Proclamation to Establish Jackson Hole National Monument Declared by Executive Order No. 2578 of March 15, 1943*, 78th Cong., 1st sess., 1943. According to the 1906 Antiquities Act by Teddy Roosevelt, the US President can create national monuments with an executive order; only Congress can create a national park.
28. Robert B. Betts, *Along the Ramparts of the Tetons: The Saga of Jackson Hole, Wyoming* (Boulder: Colorado Associated University Press, 1978), 208, 210.
29. Saylor, *Jackson Hole*, 201. This accusation was a given in light of the Great Depression, since the newly distinguished federal lands could not be taxed by the state or county.
30. Ibid., 202.

31. Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Veto of a Bill Abolishing the Jackson Hole National Monument," December 29, 1944, The American Presidency Project, accessed April 2, 2016. [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=16489](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=16489).
32. Saylor, *Jackson Hole*, 203–4.
33. *An Act to Establish the Grand Teton National Park in the State of Wyoming, and For Other Purposes*, Public Law 81-787, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 64 (1950): 849–53.
34. US National Park Service, "The Creation of Grand Teton National Park."
35. US Congress, House of Representatives, National Park Service Centennial Act of 2016, H.R. 3556, 114th Cong., 1st sess. As a coda to the sage of Grand Teton National Park, in 1972 the John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Memorial Parkway was established and 2001 there was also a donation of the Rockefeller family ranch (that became what is known in 2008 as the Laurance S. Rockefeller Preserve). For the centennial celebration of the National Park Service, two corresponding bills are currently circulating in this 2016 legislative session: H.R. 3556 and S. 2257 (both titled "National Park Service Centennial Act").