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HISTORY COMMENTARY

Sacred Space and the New Expedience

By Alfred Runte

COLUMBIA The Magazine of Northwest History, Fall 2010: Vol. 24, No. 3

Whenever I am asked about the future of conservation, I instinctively recall my past. Having grown up in Binghamton, New York, in the upper Susquehanna Valley, I remember vividly my first visit to New Jersey just after Christmas in 1952. My mother had won a trip to New York City on the Phoebe Snow, the Lackawanna Railroad's crack passenger train. My family and I entered New Jersey through the Delaware Water Gap in the glow of a winter twilight. I had never been more excited in my young life.

For all of us, it's those memories that lead to despair, reminding us these past 50 years how much our hometown landscapes have been dramatically changed. About an hour south of Binghamton, my college friends and I had a favorite place, a sweeping river overlook called Azilum. Allegedly, Marie Antoinette was to have been spirited there had she escaped the French Revolution. Although her exile failed, we escaped every summer to a glorious bluff above the river's edge where, after a day of hiking, we stared deep into the Pennsylvania hills. Later, we would retire to watch the sunset at Wyalusing Rocks, just downriver. The Susquehanna, 500 feet below, seemed on fire from the sky above. We thought of Henry David Thoreau: "Sky water. It needs no fence. Nations come and go without defiling it. It is a mirror which no stone can crack." Indeed, the waters of our beloved Susquehanna seemed like perfection itself.

You know what happened next. Trucks got bigger and cars got faster. Pennsylvania decided that the highway needed widening and the overlooks took the brunt of it. They are all graffiti and litter now. The farms in the valley have also changed. Most come today with trailers and gravel pits. Below Wyalusing, a big cornfield has been turned into a racetrack. Throughout the valley and across the ridgelines, cell phone towers have sprung up like weeds.

The pain of those changes runs deep, the more so because Azilum saved a dear friend's life in Vietnam. In January 1970 a mortar attack left Brad critically wounded—mortally wounded, the medics thought. Lifted off the battlefield with seven other soldiers, he was flown to the triage ward at Lon Binh. The doctors agreed all of the men would die. And indeed, one by one during the night, the others slipped away. As the zippers were closed on the body bags, Brad knew that one was meant for him. He needed something—anything—to shut the terror of those zippers out. That something was the memory of one special evening at Azilum with his fiancé and friends. On the sound of each zipper, he returned with us to our overlook, recreating that sunset in his mind. He knew that if the vision kept him alive until morning, the doctors would probably operate. He did, and so they did. Brad knows that the river got him through the night.

You can imagine my response when our congressman proposed a series of dams on the Susquehanna. That led to my first published article in March 1971—three pages in the

Binghamton morning newspaper suggesting that our congressman was no friend of rivers. I still lost Azilum; I lost Wyalusing Rocks. Recently, I lost a lovely canyon in Arizona—to rock quarrying, of all things. There are no major dams on the Susquehanna, but neither is it the river I once knew.

Our anxiety about the future comes from the perspective of having known loss. As conservationists, we lack not for a perfect formula or even a new technique. By now we have probably tried them all. Rather, our problem comes with aging. These days, what does it mean to be a preservationist? Certainly our predecessors never answered this way: first go to college and get a master's degree in business administration, the most popular college major by far. A big salary is proof of a successful education and profit the goal of all.

Now that our values are being displaced, we are forgetting what they were. Forty years ago, our message was still front and center, led by the timeless wisdom of Aldo Leopold. "Examine each question in terms of what is ethically and esthetically right, as well as what is economically expedient. A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."

Following Leopold, our leading scientists, humanists, and philanthropists never hesitated for a moment. All believed in public spaces as America's outdoor universities. No less than formal schools and universities, the University of the Wilderness was meant to endow every American with a lasting respect for the natural world. How did we allow our country to forget that, often slipping ourselves into a business model? Perhaps if we hired more fund-raisers, the country would learn to respect us. Our historical term was conscience. Conscience is defined with the simplest of words—knowing right from wrong.

Just when one Trojan horse has been identified, we see another being pushed to the gates. Consider how preservation now stands accused of everything, including a lack of relevance to minorities. In the old days, the word was elitism. As elitists, we stood in the way of progress. The charge rarely troubled us then. Why does it appear so troubling now?

This movement has always been inclusive. Consider another of our greatest heroes, Frederick Law Olmsted, the architect of New York City's Central Park. On his return from England in 1850 he wrote of visiting Birkenhead Park in Liverpool. It and Victoria Park in London were the first parks in Europe expressly purchased for public instead of private use. Noting that fact, Olmsted could not contain himself. "It is entirely, unreservedly, and forever the people's own. The poorest British peasant is as free to enjoy it in all its parts as the British queen. More than that, the baker of Birkenhead has the pride of an owner in it. Is it not a grand good thing?"

Really, does that sound like elitism to you—or a lack of sympathy for minorities? Obviously, the peasants Olmsted described were England's poorest people. We meet them face to face in *A Christmas Carol*, written just a few years earlier by Charles Dickens. Through his character Ebenezer Scrooge, Dickens, like Olmsted, asks his readers to believe in the common good.

If in the beginning our forebears had believed in elitism, parks as we know them today would not exist. After launching Central Park, Olmsted went to California, where he figured prominently in the preservation of Yosemite Valley. When founded as a park in 1864, Yosemite had been seen by perhaps a thousand people. No matter—as president of the Yosemite Park Commission, Olmsted convinced his country to think progressively, to agree that the future mattered. Within a century, he predicted, millions would be visiting Yosemite, and no longer just

the rich. "[Those] millions who are hereafter to benefit by the Yosemite Act have the largest interest in it," he wrote, "and the largest interest should be first and most strenuously guarded."

Sacred space is now a global phenomenon. The last time I checked, 187 nations have followed the United States' example in establishing national parks and equivalent reserves. Combined, those nations have saved 102,000 separate areas totaling 12.5 percent of the earth. A love of nature has nothing to do with race, class, gender, or ethnicity. All peoples of the world believe in nature and, although inspired by our example, have eagerly protected it without our help.

Inclusiveness is not our problem; expedience is. Expedience fears the timeless words in our arsenal. "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." Expedience needs us to doubt ourselves before anything wrong can fall into place.

And so we come to the heart of the problem: When did our message start sounding expedient and why are we still losing open space? To reemphasize, the problem is not with the truths we admit. It is rather with those we no longer mention because we are told they might offend. Forty years ago, global warming was just a symptom; it was hardly the disease. The disease was our willingness to exceed limits—the recognized carrying capacity of the earth.

Why should this concern us now? Because no one wants to admit those limits—even the Sierra Club. By the 1980s the term "limits to growth" had been replaced by every euphemism in the book. Really, is there such a thing as "smart growth?" Is an "urban village" in fact a village? Is growth of any kind in fact "sustainable?" How is it that a "partnership" is called "win–win" when the earth is still asked to lose? And let us not forget the king of euphemisms—"green." But again, exactly what does a "wind farm" grow if not the hope of exceeding limits? If the nation makes greener cars but doesn't limit highways, exactly what about the car is green?

The slightest concession from us—well, the laws of thermodynamics might be wrong—was all it took. Maybe there IS a free lunch—a perpetual motion machine, a way to tinker ourselves past natural limits. Good-bye Albert Einstein; hello Gene Roddenberry. The moment the world denied Einstein's limits, critical thinking stopped dead in its tracks. And the worst part is: we know better. From Thoreau to Rachel Carson, environmental writing has been all about respecting limits. There are some things we just can't do.

Forty years ago, what Al Gore calls the "inconvenient truth" of global warming itself came with a deeper cause. Speaking at my university commencement in 1969, Isaac Asimov said it all in his title, "Long may you live, but not forever." Although a renowned writer of science fiction, he reminded us that fiction was indeed the operable word. There was no escaping into outer space; we would never colonize the moon. Perhaps a few hundred people would get to live there, but never the 100 million being added to the earth every year. In retrospect, his prediction was all the more memorable because the first moonwalk was just weeks away—July 20, 1969.

Long before Isaac Asimov, there was a greater honesty to conservation in both word and deed. As preservationists, our predecessors freely admitted to those deeper causes. As much to the point, every form of national expedience needed to be exposed. Listen to J. Horace McFarland, as president of the American Civic Association, writing for *Outlook Magazine* in 1909. "Shall we have ugly conservation?" he asked. "Will we urge expediency rather than actual need as a reason for destroying our great landmarks of natural scenery? We are not making scenery; we are changing it. Shall we continue to change it, through carelessness, from beauty akin to heaven to ugliness suggesting Hades? If so, let us tear up Washington's plan, let us billboard the

White House, let us put a factory on the heights of Mount Vernon, and forget the Father of this country whose wisdom in planning for dignity and beauty we refuse to profit by!"

Where is McFarland's honesty today, especially in the business community he represented? A successful printer and publisher from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, he spent his spare time growing roses. In 1910, still as president of the American Civic Association, he called for a Bureau of National Parks. In 1916, Congress approved McFarland's vision, merely changing the name to the National Park Service. The point is that McFarland, although a businessman, did not see why American business should be creating ugliness. If it looked bad it was bad, no matter what his expedient colleagues tried to call it.

The never-ending mission, McFarland realized, was to open the nation's eyes. Thus, when Niagara Falls was targeted, he felt that American inventiveness had gone too far. "Shall We Make a Coal Pile of Niagara?" he asked in the *Ladies' Home Journal*. The plan was as simple as it was insidious—to divert the Niagara River for hydroelectric power by detouring the water entirely around the falls. The euphemism of the day, cheap power, left McFarland unconvinced:

Every American—nay, every world citizen—should see Niagara many times, for the welfare of his soul and the perpetual memory of a great work of God.... [Yet] the engineers calmly agree that Niagara Falls will, in a very few years, be but a memory. A memory of what? Of grandeur, beauty, and natural majesty unexcelled anywhere on earth, sacrificed unnecessarily for the gain of a few! The words might well be emblazoned in letters of fire across the shameless ly-uncovered bluff of the American Falls: "The Monument of America's Shame and Greed."

If McFarland sounds refreshing, it's because we have forgotten that sound. It remains the sound of conviction, of America the Beautiful, when we dared teach right from wrong. We fight for the land not by following Al Gore but by following McFarland.

McFarland's final example, the spread of billboards, absolutely drove him to the wall. "The sun sets behind Crystal Domino sugar," he wrote in *The Chautauquan*, "and going west, [the traveler] will find the mountain scenery punctuated by Harvard Beer and cheap clothing. [And] let the traveler indulge no hope that the awe-inspiring grandeur of Niagara will daunt the vandals, for he sees the Falls with Coca Cola on the side, while Mennen's Toilet Powder hangs over the great gorge."

In instructing the nation to respect natural limits, we once knew to invoke McFarland. As scientists themselves confirm, beauty is the key to a healthy ecosystem. When scientists say that open space is vital for absorbing carbon, they are also saying that beauty needs to survive. The point is that we cannot possibly reduce CO2 while making natural beauty our perennial victim. Once upon a time, we dared say that ugliness was never beauty and that to be serious about the environment we should never compromise its beauty. Expressed in McFarland's terms, if 40 years ago we had really believed in global warming, billboards would have been the first to go.

Now, we are just as guilty of defining beauty as that which remains after beauty vanishes. Granted, a 40-story windmill is not a smokestack, but then, what will a million windmills do to the land and wildlife? Only by playing with the words have we dodged the answer. McFarland was right. The slightest tolerance for ugliness tells the public that none of us is serious about the environment.

Conscience needs our original, progressive history—what is good, what is better, what is best. The postmodern mishmash we are living in disallows every progression leading to a value. It is

worst in our universities, now gripped in the throes of relevance. When I enrolled in college in 1965, the facts of biology, botany, or history included the nobility of their application. As prospective As president of the American Civic Association, J. Horace McFarland (right) decried the despoliation of Niagara Falls (above). Note the industrial district on the bank extending left of the Falls View Bridge. Planned diversions of the Niagara River for power development, McFarland warned in 1905, would actually dry up the falls themselves. Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg conservationists, all of us were encouraged to pursue—and believe in—the nobility of "the grand good thing."

No more of that today, thank you. Let us, as they say, "deconstruct" preservation. Who says that people like Frederick Law Olmsted and Aldo Leopold somehow stand apart? That thinking is western—and prejudicial. To stand apart is to stand above. Again, only expedience could possibly invent today's curriculum, one that chastises us for believing in anything lest we offend the person who believes in nothing.

Today, what historian and novelist Wallace Stegner once called our best idea is just as likely called a sin. The national parks, originally wrested from Native Americans, now deny that land to the poor. This assertion forgets the nobility of what the parks do protect. In a world of 7 billion people, open space is precious to us all. Perhaps Columbus should not have sailed. But he *did* sail, and millions followed him. All of us have been dispossessed. The world is spoken for, every acre of it. That is the reality our public lands address.

If there is any apology we owe the future, it is for failing to present our successors with an infrastructure that encourages preservation. Few spoke up when expedience killed our allies. As John Muir himself admitted, "Even the soulless Southern Pacific Railroad, never counted on for anything good, helped nobly in pushing the bill for [Yosemite National Park] through Congress." What did Muir know that we have forgotten? Simply, that although railroads may have conquered the country, they had a stake in America the Beautiful. Railroads preferred not to obliterate the landscape; they rather hoped to follow it. It was the widened highway that cost Pennsylvania the Azilum overlook and the glory of Wyalusing Rocks. Married to valleys and rivers by design, our railroads were the technological discipline that kept the landscape whole.

Consequently, Europe preserved and expanded its railroads, even as we did not, adding to its passenger trains by the tens of thousands and planning where highways should never go. As just one example, by 2014 Switzerland will have banned all truck traffic from the Alps. Half of the trucks are already gone. Simply, the Swiss want their mountains pristine again. When Switzerland plans a wind farm, we therefore know the Swiss have tried their best. In the Pacific Northwest, for example, I doubt that they would convert the Columbia River Gorge into a wind farm while allowing the region to light bigger billboards.

This is to explain the battle here in New Jersey, just as it remains the battle across the world. Often, the things we want are not the things we need. If we really believe in the environment, the beauty of the landscape must always come first. Expedience begins with the relegation of landscape to a purely utilitarian role. As J. Horace McFarland warned, not to see the price of that would be to make beauty the perennial victim of everything the nation did.

In other words, the job does not end by identifying expedience. Reasonable alternatives are also needed. In technology, those alternatives are no less clear. Restore your railroads and lessen your reliance on highways. Uphold the landscape by moving through it wisely and removing the incentives for mindless sprawl. I, for one, look forward to the restoration of the Phoebe Snow.

Certainly, preservation in the future will mean knowing how to build for it, and that means more than parks. Earth is the ultimate test of our sincerity, the grand good thing that unites us all.

A Seattle public historian, Alfred Runte specializes in transportation and the national parks. His latest books include Allies of the Earth: Railroads and the Soul of Preservation *(Truman State University Press) and the fourth edition of his critically acclaimed* National Parks: The American Experience *(Taylor Trade Publishing). This essay is based on remarks presented at the 14th Annual New Jersey Land Conservation Rally in March 2010.*