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## WEST VIRGINIA'S STATE PARKS

by

Robert L. Beanblossom

Robert L. Beanblossom is District Administrator for the Parks and Recreation Section of the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources. He is a graduate of West Virginia University and is a frequent contributor to *Goldenseal* and *Wonderful West Virginia*. Mr. Beanblossom presented this paper at a "Little Lecture" sponsored by the West Virginia Humanities Council in April.

In 1864, at the height of the Civil War and largely due to growing concerns about resource depletion, two significant events occurred that laid the groundwork for our present day conservation and wildland recreation policies. George Perkins Marsh published his monumental treatise on the environmental impacts of human activities, and the federal government granted to the State of California the Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Grove of Sequoias "for public use, resort, and recreation". Marsh's book, *Man and Nature*, laid the foundation for utilitarian conservation. That is, the wise use of our natural resources for the benefit, especially the economic benefit, of mankind. The Yosemite Grant was

the first major action in federal wildland preservation for recreational purposes. This book and the grant signaled the start of a new era in American land policy. One in which abundant resources were no longer taken for granted, and one in which increasingly active steps were taken to secure both economic and aesthetic benefits from our land.

These twin approaches of addressing concerns about resource depletion continued to grow and gain widespread acceptance throughout America. By the turn of the century, this concept had filtered down to the individual state level. As early as 1897, the West Virginia Legislature had provided for a game and fish warden. By the 1910s, largely in response to the Federal Weeks Act, the legislature had initiated steps to begin protecting the forests of this state from fire. By the 1920s, the concept of conservation was well established in public policy here in West Virginia. To improve upon the Warden system, the 1921 legislature placed the administration of the forest, game, and fish laws in a 3-member board named the Game and Fish Commission of West Virginia. This commission had decided that 10% of all hunting and fishing license monies be set aside to acquire land. The state's first area, Seneca State

Forest was established in April 1924. Two other events, at that time, would also have a profound impact on creating a state park system. The state was led by a progressive Republican governor by the name of Ephraim F. Morgan. Governor Morgan was noted, among other things, for the:

launching of a new highway system  
the raising of sufficient revenues to construct a new state capitol  
taking quick decisive action when dealing with labor unrest, which was occurring at the time

This, of course, was during the days of the Matewan Massacre, the Battle of Blair Mountain, and other attempts to unionize the southern West Virginia coalfields. Being a progressive thinker, Governor Morgan appointed a state park and forest commission in 1925. This commission was directed to study and investigate the needs and opportunities to create forests, parks, and game preserves. They also were required to make a comprehensive report with recommendations to the 1927 session of the legislature. In its report, the commission recommended:

The creation of a Conservation Commission, which was ultimately established in 1933.

The commission also suggested that large areas of outstanding, scenic, and natural areas be secured before commercial exploitation made purchase difficult. Among the areas identified in the 1927 report was:

“Spruce Pine Hollow” and  
“Meadow Branch Valley” in  
Morgan and Berkeley Counties  
respectively.  
Coopers Rock and Cheat Lake  
Cranberry Glades  
An area near White Sulphur  
Springs and the intersection of the

Midland and Seneca  
Trails (Greenbrier State  
Forest)  
Pinnacle Rock  
Blennerhassett Island  
Hawks Nest and others

All of these areas have since been acquired by either state or federal land management agencies. The second significant event was the formation of the Droop Mountain Battlefield Commission. This was largely at the insistence of a political leader from Braxton County, John Sutton, who had fought there in the Civil War as a private and no doubt possessed a degree of nostalgia for the area. Acquisition of Droop Mountain was the first instance where the term “state park” was used.

The 1930s, however, is when our state park system really began to develop and take shape. State parks were developed solely as a response to a tremendous social problem, which was, of course, the need to eradicate the vast unemployment created by the Great Depression. Parks were simply an afterthought. Now, I’m not going to enumerate all of the accomplishments of the CCC program and the vast contribution that it made in construction of facilities, the establishment of an adequate forest fire control program, and reforestation efforts. These are well known. Nevertheless, what you may not know is the program’s influence in requiring states to act to develop public property. The federal government did not provide money for a CCC program without some strings attached. States were informed they could have this massive federal work program to put young men to work only if the work could be performed on public lands. West Virginia, like most states, hurriedly acquired lands in order to avail

themselves of this program. This is true in every state that I know of with the exception of Tennessee, and there it was because of the Tennessee Valley Authority, another New Deal program of the Roosevelt administration, instead of the Civilian Conservation Corp. By the end of the decade, more than 350,000 were visiting West Virginia State Parks annually and cabin rentals had increased from 216 weeks in 1937 to 874 weeks in 1940.

However, the tremendous growth and popularity of West Virginia State Parks came to a grinding halt with the onset of World War II. The CCC program ended in July, 1942, and wartime travel restrictions reduced the number of day-use visitors to West Virginia State Parks. For example, Hawks Nest State Park in Fayette County had 148,000 in 1941 compared to 47,000 in 1942. It's also interesting to note that the park system hired the first female superintendent at about this time because of the manpower shortage brought about by the war. Following WWII, America switched to a peacetime economy, but there was an extraordinary demand for all consumer goods and services including public recreational facilities. It was inevitable that West Virginia be caught in this surge. However, another parallel event was also taking place here with the first major mechanization of the coal industry. Consequently, West Virginia's economy was suffering severely.

With a need to create a more diversified economy because the coal industry was collapsing and a demand for more parks and public recreational facilities, it was inevitable that attention be focused on the system. In fact, it became a campaign issue in the race for governor in 1952. Candidate William Marland pledged, if elected, to find a method for needed improvements and additional parks. In 1953, he was

successful in getting the West Virginia Legislature to give the state park system authority to sell revenue bonds. The sale of these bonds in 1955 and 1956 enabled the park system to construct lodges at Blackwater Falls, Cacapon, and Mont Chateau State Parks as well as cabins at Bluestone, Lost River, Tygart Lake, Watoga, and many other facilities. Marland was an interesting character himself. He was a brilliant man and he was a man well ahead of his time. In his first speech to the West Virginia legislature, he literally dropped a bombshell. He proposed a severance tax on coal, timber, and other natural resources. So strong was the opposition to his proposal that, without a doubt, it contributed to his continuing bout with alcoholism. Eight years after he left the Governor's office, he was discovered driving a taxi cab by a reporter in Chicago, Illinois. Incidentally, Governor Marland also pursued other aspects of industrial and economical development with such vigor that Governors in at last two other states, Massachusetts and Connecticut, lodged formal complaints against him. He was politely told by those two governors to "quit trying to steal our businesses and stay the hell out of our state.

West Virginia changed governors in 1957, but economic conditions continued to decline. The Underwood Administration was compelled to address the continuing deteriorating economic conditions. Underwood persuaded the 1960 legislature to fund a program entitled "The State Temporary Economic Program" or S.T.E.P. for short. This program was a public works program designed to put unemployed coalminers to work at \$1 an hour and improve the facilities on state parks, state forests, and fire control establishments throughout West

Virginia. Under this program, trails were built; campgrounds constructed; major repairs to cabins and other park buildings were made; swimming pools at Bluestone and North Bend were built; and roads or water systems were built or repaired. At the change of administrations in 1961, the program was largely continued under a new name "The Emergency Employment Program". Both of these programs expanded the park system more in camping than any other single facility. New campgrounds were constructed at Blackwater Falls, Holly River, North Bend, and Babcock and most of the state forests including Kanawha, Panther Seneca and Cooper's Rock.

The next major wave of development for the park system came in the 1960s. The presidential race in the spring of 1960 propelled West Virginia into the national spotlight. In the end, Hubert Humphrey lost the primary to John F. Kennedy. During his tenure as president, Kennedy was especially grateful to the voters of this state, because after his defeat, Humphrey dropped out of the race for president. This left clear sailing for Kennedy all the way to the democratic convention in Los Angeles later that summer. I also think Kennedy was genuinely concerned about what he saw when he campaigned here. As I mentioned earlier, the 50s had not been kind to West Virginia, and high unemployment and poverty were very much prevalent. West Virginia again benefited because of federal attention to social problems, and this included the park system with a loan/grant program administered by the Department of Commerce. The Division of Natural Resources embarked upon another major park expansion program. Pipestem, Twin Falls, and Canaan Valley State Parks were built and numerous other improvements were made throughout the system. As a matter of fact, Pipestem, in part, was a political

payoff of the Kennedy administration because John Faulkner, the editor of the Hinton Daily News at that time, became the first newspaper in West Virginia to endorse Kennedy in his presidential bid.

With a somewhat robust economy spurred by the Vietnam War and its aftermath, combined with numerous federal programs implemented during the 1960s such as the Land and Water Conservation Act of 1965, expansion and improvements of facilities in our system continued throughout the 1970s. In response to a request from the legislature to consolidate and improve the management of recreation on public lands, all of the state forests and four wildlife management areas were transferred from the Division of Forestry and the Wildlife Resources Section to state parks. Even today, we are responsible for the total administrative management of these areas.

The 1981 national recession hit West Virginia so hard that it has yet to this day to fully recover. The effects were hard felt in our state park system. We went through some very lean budgetary years in the early 80s and gradual attrition has reduced the number of full-time employees by about 100 since that time.

In their efforts to control government spending in the 1990s, the Caperton administration was an especially difficult one for the state park system. In 1994, a concentrated effort was made in the legislature to reduce the park system by eliminating or closing day-use state parks and forests. This effort failed. In 1995, the administration came back at the park system once more and made an attempt to reduce it by privatizing all of the lodge parks. During both of

these years, the prevalent attitude was that the park system “cost” too much money to operate, and that taxpayers could no longer afford to provide funding for it. So—what do you think happened in 1996—an election year by the way? The Caperton Administration and the legislature reversed themselves and provided the Parks system with \$44 million to initiate another major expansion program.

West Virginia has an outstanding state park system. For a state that so consistently ranks near the bottom on almost every list that is generated, it is gratifying to know that it is very near the top on this one. It is also one of the most diverse systems in the nation in terms of the type of areas operated and the complexity of the recreational facilities provided. They are:

- 34 state parks
- 9 state forests
- 4 of the 66 wildlife management areas in the state
- 2 long-distance rail trails

On those areas, we operate:

- 7 golf courses
- 10 lodges (802 rooms)
- 333 cabins
- 1,729 campsites
- 1,036 miles of hiking trails
- 3,863 picnic tables
- numerous swimming pools,
- trams, tennis courts, picnic shelters, hiking trails
- and even a railroad.

West Virginia hosts about 7.5 million visitors annually and generates about \$18 to \$19 million a year in revenues. In FY2003, the State Park system operated at 61% self-sufficiency while the national average for state park systems was a little over 35%. Any state park systems that ranked higher had mandatory entrance fees. West Virginia’s park system also has a

tremendous economic impact. \$127 million is added annually to West Virginia’s economy through visitor spending. For the modest amount of state revenues received, the parks truly make money for the taxpayers of West Virginia.

#### EDITOR’S NOTE:

On the following pages are early pictures from Droop Mountain Battlefield State Park and Blackwater Falls State Park.

The first shows the watch tower at Droop Mountain State Park which overlooks part of the Greenbrier River Valley and the present town of Hillsville. Droop Mountain Battlefield is considered the site of one of the most important, if not the most important, Civil War Battlefields in West Virginia.

The following two pictures date from the 1960s and show the tow rope and sled slope at Blackwater State Park and a scene of one of the campgrounds.

The pictures are courtesy of the WVDNR’s Andy Stout.





**BORN OF REBELLION:  
West Virginia Statehood**

is a new traveling exhibit developed by the West Virginia Humanities Council. The exhibit focuses on the unique circumstances surrounding the creation of the state of West Virginia and the constitutional issues involved.

After having viewed the exhibit, people will have the opportunity to vote on whether they feel the formation of the state complied with the requirements for a new state as stated in Article IV, Section 3 of the US Constitution. Section 3 requires that a state must give its consent before it is divided and the question boiled down to whether the Reorganized Government at Wheeling could legitimately give Virginia's consent to the creation of West Virginia.

The visual and graphic elements for the exhibit were designed for the Council as a project of the West Virginia University Graphic Design Studio 3 junior class of Professor Eve Faulkes. This creative collaboration enabled the exhibit to serve two educational purposes. First for the sixteen WVU students who researched and created the visual look for the exhibit and second for the public who will view the exhibit as it travels.

The informational content of the exhibit was developed by the Council with assistance from the West Virginia Division of Culture and History and a team of state historians and scholars. The statehood story is organized into four sections - *Divergence*, *Civil War*, *Birth of West Virginia*, and *Statehood*.

The exhibit was created with the generous financial support of Columbia

Gas Transmission, a NiSource Company, and the *We the People* program of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Born of Rebellion consists of three 8' tall x 7' long panels that form a large triangle, a separate triangular kiosk with 8'x2' panels, and a triangular 6'x2' introductory kiosk. The 8'x7' panels are designed to be set up to form a triangle but may also be set up separately if necessary. The hinged display frames are lightweight and fold down to fit into three wheeled crates. The graphics travel in a separate case much like a golf bag and are unrolled to fasten over the frames. The entire exhibit can fit into a van.

The exhibit is available for loan to interested groups starting this summer. Contact West Virginia Humanities Council Program Officer Mark Payne at 304-346-8500 or [payne@wvhumanities.org](mailto:payne@wvhumanities.org) for information on scheduling Born of Rebellion in your community.

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## CIVIL WAR, CONTINUED

Though the Civil War ended in 1865, its impact was felt for years after. The following items from the newspapers show that there were liabilities existing from War time actions and veterans organized themselves into groups to keep the memory of their actions alive. Interesting, too, the cooperation between former enemies as evidenced by the second article.

“An Interesting Case”

**DAILY STATE JOURNAL**  
(Parkersburg)  
July 3, 1886

The case of the United States vs. Lieutenant James Heins, of Point Pleasant, came up this morning for trial in the United States District Court. The Government sued for \$36,600 which it had furnished the Lieutenant in 1863 and for which he had not accounted. The trial developed the fact that the money had been furnished Lieutenant Heins while on a forced march just preceding the battle of Chickamauga. Evidence was offered by the defendant that he had paid out the money as soon as received for provisions for his men and horses, and that in the dreadful batt of Chickamauga, in which the Lieutenant took a gallant part, lost all his papers and vouchers. This evidence was rejected by the Court as being inadmissible under the U. S. statute. The jury found a verdict for the Government which was promptly set aside by Judge Jackson (John Jay Jackson) in order that the defendant might have a chance to mature his defense by proceedings in the Third Auditor's office at Washington.

The Judge, in the course of his remarks, said that the defendant was a Union soldier who had faced shot and shell in the defense of his country and

while his defense in this cause was not strictly and technically legal it was nevertheless meritorious, and that he was entitled to some consideration in this court, as Union soldiers ever had been and would be as long as he was Judge.

“Confederate Organization”

**THE ADVERTISER**  
(Huntington)  
June 19, 1886

Pursuant to call the ex confederates throughout Kanawha County and Valley met at the Court House at 1 o'clock p.m. Monday. Capt John S. Swan was called to the chair and Mr. H. D. McFarland was chosen Secretary. After a speech by the chair (,) on motion (,) Camp Patton was made a permanent organization with sixty-seven names enrolled. The following officers were then elected: Commander, Col. H. D. Ruffner; First Lieut Col., Capt J. H. McConihay; Second Lieut Col., Capt. John Fulks; Third Lieut. Col, John A. Crockett; Adjutant, John Van Buren; Quarter Master, M. M. Rusk; Surgeon, Dr. J. F. Walker; Chaplain, Rev. J. W. Hampton; officer of the day, W. A. Wilson; Assistant Surgeon, A. A. Rock; Sergeant Major, S. P. Tease; Vidette, C. M. Hansford; Color Sergeant, John T. S. Perry; 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Color Guard, O. T. Wilson and W. A. Gilliland; Executive Committee, W. B. Carder, E. M. Stone and S. P. Trase. After adopting a resolution thanking the G. A. R. for their kindness on Decoration Day, at which they were invited to participate, the camp adjourned to meet on July 4<sup>th</sup> at the State Armory, at 2 o'clock p.m.

## THE CUSTER GUN

by

Helen Hannon

(Helen Hannon is a native of Boston and holds the Master's Degree in Writing Composition and an undergraduate degree in Sociology/Anthropology from the University of Massachusetts. Her research and writing interest is the Civil War and she is widely published in various national and regional media including the *Civil War News*. She wishes to thank Brian C. Pohanka for his assistance in research for this article)

The "Custer Gun" named after George Armstrong Custer was highly polished, weighed 252 pounds and had facsimiles of Custer's shoulder straps engraved on its band. In August of 1904 the cannon was brought to Boston, Massachusetts for the Thirty-Eight National Encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic. The cannon had already participated in nineteen encampments and twenty reunions. Its custodian was Joseph Trax from New Castle, Pennsylvania and a member of G. A. R. Custer Post 588 of Moundsville, West Virginia. Trax was in Company B, Second West Virginia Cavalry and proud to relate that he had served as Custer's orderly. In the Grand Parade, the cannon was drawn by a dozen veterans and Trax fired cannon salutes all along the line of march. The cannon used cartridges eliminating the necessity of stopping to fire and reload. Trax himself was described as "a quaint veteran" and a "droll talker. . . brimming over with patriotism and can spout war from dawn until sunset. He is a little man, with very brown skin."

The "Custer gun" was a "composite souvenir." Cast at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania with relics contributed by every state in the Union.

Inside this cannon were three division bugles, four regimental bugles, two brass drum rims, forty-four United States cavalry buckles, five spears of infantry flags, five eagles of cavalry and artillery flags, two eagles of division flags, nine pairs of Confederate spurs, twenty-four pairs of Union spurs, twenty-four copper cents captured at Lexington, 108 Spencer carbine copper cartridges, thirteen brass caps taken from shells, four pounds of buckles taken from artillery harness, five sleeve buttons, five white metal watchcases of army service type, four pounds of brass buttons, sixteen army spoons and five relic gold army dollars.

Joseph Trax and his remarkable "Custer Gun" were among an estimated 25,000 Civil War veterans attending the Thirty-Eighth National Encampment. This was the Fourth National Encampment to be held in Massachusetts. The first Encampment was in 1871 with only 68 delegates. The Twelfth National Encampment held in Springfield, Massachusetts in June of 1878 had 8,940 participants. The third, and the grandest of the four, was the Twenty-Fourth National Encampment held in Boston in August of 1890 with 40,000 veterans attending. In 1904 the City of Boston and its surrounding communities hosted receptions, parades, a Living Flag, "campfires," excursions, reunions and Open Houses and much more for the veterans.

The fate of the "Custer Gun" is not known.

Source: Lucas Field, Silas A. Baron, William M. Olin, Unofficial Proceedings, Thirty- Eighth National Encampment, Grand Army of the Republic Held in Boston, August 15-20, 1904 (Boston: Griffith-Stillings Press, 1907) 7-10, 61-62; and Brian C. Pohanka who provided information from Joseph Trax service record.

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