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America's Ultimate Parks 2009: Ken Burns' *The National Parks*

Our Best Idea

Text by Ken Burns
Photograph courtesy of Paul Barnes / Florentine Films

Ken Burns is the director of The National Parks: America's Best Idea. *The six-part series will air on PBS beginning September 27.*

I don't know how cold it was that January morning in Yellowstone, but the night before the temperature had been minus 20. My crew and I had rattled out to Mud Volcano in a snow coach to film at first light. The shoot was quick—subzero conditions tend to focus the mind—and after we crammed back into the cab and thawed the icicles in our nostrils, the driver pointed our treads toward the Hayden Valley.

While the name might not ring a bell with non-geologists, Hayden is one of Yellowstone's most iconic

features. It is named for Ferdinand Hayden, who headed up the first official survey of the region in 1871. In the summer the valley is bustling with visitors. But at that moment, in the midwinter cold, it was as empty and as breathtaking as it must have been some 130 years ago. The Yellowstone River was frozen solid and blanketed in snow. Hundreds of bison idled on the plain, some standing, some lying down. The only movement for miles was their breath steaming upward.

John Muir once stood before Glacier Bay, Alaska, and said, "This is still the morning of creation." While that was true of the Hayden Valley that winter morning, I prefer to think of Yellowstone, and by extension all national parks, a bit differently—not only as something this nation has preserved, but also something we've accomplished: one of America's best ideas.

For the past ten years, I have worked to create a documentary on the history of the national parks. My team and I shot more than 800 hours of footage and stuffed file cabinets full of amazing stories. (Who knew that Rudyard Kipling was a huge fan of Yellowstone?) Yet what impressed me most about the national parks was not the lore or forgotten facts. It was how utterly American they are. That's not as obvious as it might sound. In its early years, America was plagued by great insecurity. We were a new nation, untested and without history. We had none of the monuments or cathedrals of Europe. What we had instead was nature—lots of it—that was spectacular in a way Europe could never match. And we held it dear. Wilderness became part of who we were, at once a point of pride and a mark of national character.

When Lewis and Clark returned from their expedition in 1806, they sat down with Thomas Jefferson (yes, explorers could get an audience with the president in those days) and told him of the wonders they'd seen: the Rocky Mountains, the Missouri River, the plains that stretched for countless acres. Jefferson was amazed. He believed it would take hundreds of generations to fill up such an enormous land. He was wrong. By the end of that century, the Indian Wars were nearly over, the Transcontinental Railroad was complete, and Buffalo Bill had introduced the world to the Wild West—ironic, since the West by that time contained very few buffalo. Then, in an 1893 speech at the Chicago World's Fair, historian Frederick Jackson Turner declared the American frontier closed. The infinite expanses we'd come to think of as a birthright were suddenly endangered. Luckily, scores of determined people, Muir and Teddy Roosevelt among them, rushed into action.

To save these places, they came up with a completely novel idea. In effect, they took the Declaration of Independence and applied it to the wilderness. They resolved to take the nation's most legendary landscapes and place them in the hands of ordinary Americans to be governed by the people, for the people, and for all time.

Anyone who's been to the Yosemite Valley knows that it's impossible to forget your first glimpse. My initial exposure was in May 2003 on our film's second shoot. I had driven east from San Francisco until I found myself on California 120, a two-lane country highway. As you enter the park you run through a few switchbacks, past some unremarkable forest, and then, without warning, the Valley just opens up. Some wise traffic-safety planner has provided a pullout for any driver whose heart is still beating. I remember standing beside my car with the afternoon sun at my back, tears in my eyes.

Over the next few days my crew and I filmed all over Yosemite. We climbed to the top of Nevada Falls and I shot facing down over the plume, leaning out so far my producer had to hold me by the belt (not recommended). We packed in equipment by mule to backcountry camps. We sucked in all we could from dawn until well after dusk, but couldn't see everything.

On the last night I should have been exhausted, but I couldn't sleep. Instead, a memory came rushing back. I saw myself as a young boy, my mother dying of cancer and my father seldom at home. And

then something bubbled up that I had forgotten: the weekend my father took me to Shenandoah National Park.

It was 1959 and I was six years old. I remembered climbing into the car before dawn, the long drive to Front Royal, Virginia, the way the Skyline Drive carved slow arcs through deciduous forest. I saw the cabin that would be ours for two glorious days, and felt the exhaustion of long hikes on small legs. I could hear my father telling me about the trees and lizards and butterflies. I could feel his hand in mine.

Was this a religious experience? "Nature with a capital N," as Muir and Emerson called it? Maybe. I can't say. But every person I interviewed, every figure whose writings I researched, and every member of my crew related a similarly transcendent or life-changing experience in one or another of the parks. All felt dwarfed by the landscapes yet somehow bigger for it. All came seeking solitude but left with a sense of kinship. And all departed believing they'd been privy to something incredibly important.

When we think of history, it can seem distant and abstract. John Muir and Teddy Roosevelt may have lived in a different page, but they were not so different. America's landscapes stirred them the same as us and compelled them to act. Since then, the parks have been built, expanded, and reconceived on the backs of little-known but equally passionate individuals.

Thank George Melendez Wright, the wildlife biologist who fought tirelessly to protect parks as habitats—glimpses of primeval America—rather than glorified petting zoos. Thank Marjorie Stoneman Douglas, who didn't actually like the Everglades but recognized the significance of that swamp when the rest of the country couldn't have cared less. Unlike the great castles and cathedrals of the Old World, America's natural treasures are works forever in progress; they continue to shift and grow over time. Today the Park Service administers rivers and trails, battlefields and monuments. In a place like Manzanar, the Japanese internment camp of World War II, it even administers a site of great shame. It's a measure of a nation's maturity when it can admit such mistakes.

People always ask me if after a decade spent in the company of rangers and RVs, I'm done visiting the national parks. I tell them that in recent years, my oldest daughter and I rafted the Colorado just before she got married. My middle daughter and I retraced my childhood trip to Shenandoah—sharing the "practical immortality," as Muir called it, of trans-generational experience. My youngest and I visited Zion and Bryce and Glacier. In a few months we're heading to Yosemite, and after that, who knows.

So no, I'm not done with the national parks. Far from it. In these troubled times it's nice to know they're out there. By the people. For the people. And for all time.