THE CREATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF

PLATT NATIONAL PARK

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By

RUTH CUNNINGHAM

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G B Hawkins
Adviser for Thesis

T. H. Reynolds
Head of Department of History

D. G. McIntosh
Dean of the Graduate School

PREFACE

This study was made for the purpose of putting forth in a comprehensive form the facts concerning the creation and development of Platt National Park and the benefits derived from it. The recreational nature of the park and the curative qualities of its mineral waters have been stressed as well as its favorable location for serving the people of Oklahoma and the great Southwest.

An attempt has been made to show the struggle through which the park has passed and to honor in a feeble way those noble characters who have worked to create for it a worthy place among the national parks of America today.

Acknowledgment of valuable advice is made to the director of this study, Professor T. H. Reynolds. The writer is also indebted to Mr. William E. Branch for his kindly interest in loaning material; to the Sulphur Times-Democrat for the use of their files; to Mr. Frank Crawford for his aid in securing maps; and to the pioneers of Sulphur who contributed to this thesis by their reminiscences of early days in Platt National Park.

Ruth Cunningham

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INTRODUCTION

Chapter One

The United States National Park Service supervises twenty-seven national parks throughout the nation, embracing 14,898.54 square miles. With the exception of only seven, all of these are located west of the Mississippi River.[1]

Two of our national parks, Platt and Hot Springs, share the distinction of having been set aside because of the mineral properties of the waters. They were reserved by the national government to make the waters available without exploitation to all classes of visitors. They likewise hold the distinction of being the smallest two of our national parks.[2]

Platt National Park, "The Playground of the Southwest" as it is advertised by the local Chamber of Commerce, is Oklahoma's only national park. It is located in the south central part of the state eighty miles south of Oklahoma City, in the county of Murray, and adjacent to the town of Sulphur. It is the smallest federal reservation in the nation, covering an area of only 848 acres of land and extending in irregular form for a distance of approximately three miles from a northeast to a southwest direction along Sulphur and Rock Creeks.[3]

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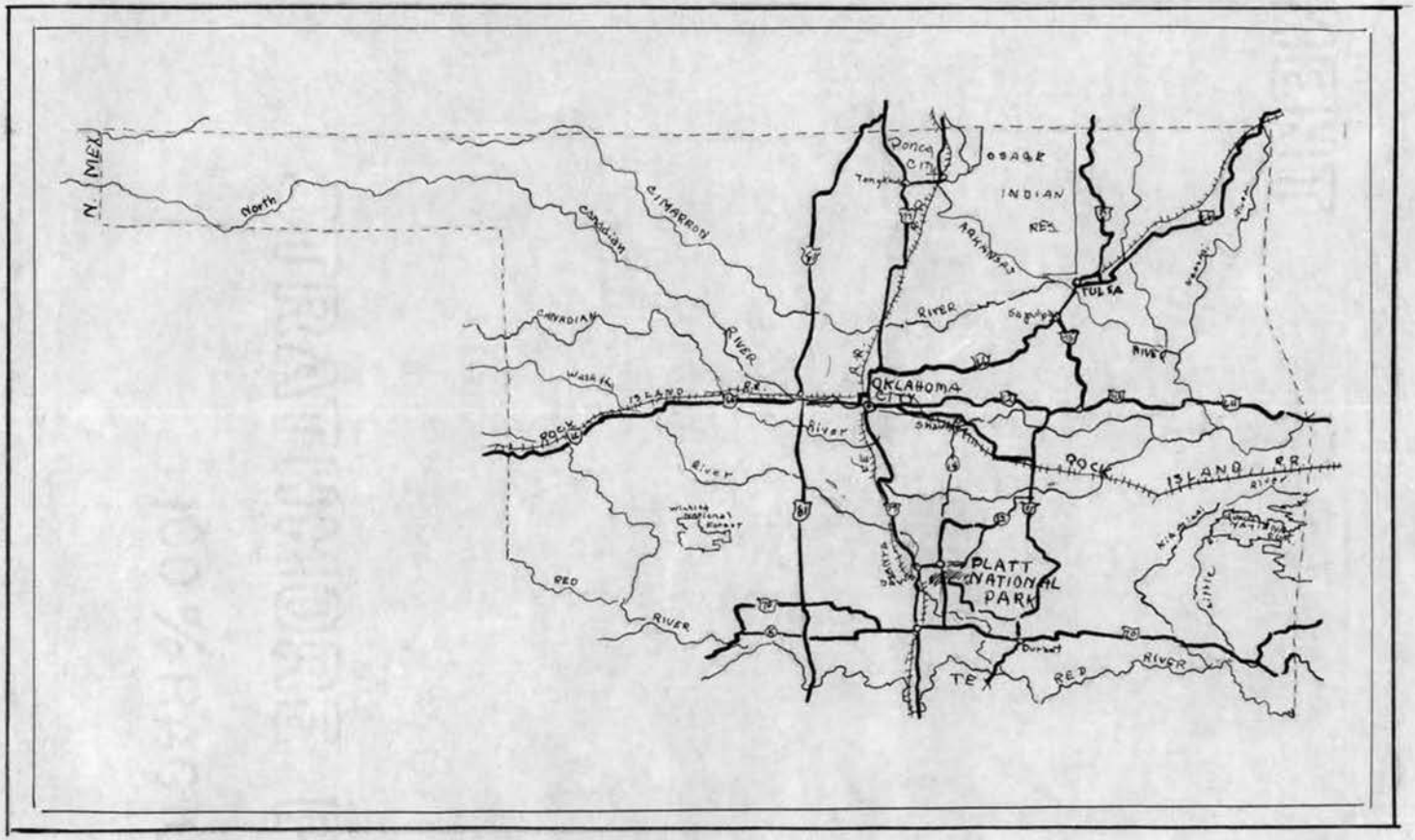
1 Annual Report of Secretary of Interior, I, (1925) 22.

2 Anonymous, "Information Table", National Park Service, p. 1.

3 Ibid.



Roads to Platt National Park

The park is small, yet because of its recreational facilities--woods, mountains, and water--it ranked ninth in 1938 among the national parks.[4] In that year the records showed an official attendance of 285,000 persons and an actual attendance of probably twice that number who failed to register.[5]

Within the park are to be found thirty-three known mineral and two non-mineral springs. The mineral springs include sulphur, soda, bromide, and iron qualities. The non-mineral springs, called Buffalo and Antelope after the early herds that grazed around them, flow at the rate of 5,000,000 gallons daily and feed the creek that runs through the park.[6]

The elevation of the park ranges from 950 feet to 1150 feet, and its winter temperature averages from thirty-four to fifty-eight degrees.[7] It is the only national park in the Southwest and is one of the two or three in the entire country that is available as a resort throughout the year.[8] For thirty-eight years this park has served as a pleasure resort for the middle classes of the great Southwest. Each year it is becoming more widely known as a health resort for those people who can

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4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Arno B. Cammerer, "Platt National Park", National Park Service, p. 1

7 Ibid.

8 Anonymous, "Information Table", National Park Service, p. 1.

not afford to visit the more expensive resorts.[9]

Most of the area is well wooded and is traversed by picturesque streams with a number of springs, small waterfalls, and cascades. Travertine Creek, which flows through most of the eastern end of the park, is a beautiful stream of clear, sparkling water; it is fed by numerous springs and is named for the deposits of travertine rock. This rock is a variety of soft limestone precipitated from the water of the stream. Rock Creek enters the park from the north just below the principal entrance from the town of Sulphur and joins Travertine in Central Park above the low water bridge. To the south of Rock Creek is Bromide Hill, a steep wooded bluff 140 feet high. From the summit, known locally as "Robbers' Roost" and easily reached by trail or road, there is a splendid view to the north and east over the whole park and the town of Sulphur. Far in the distance to the Southwest can be seen the picturesque Arbuckle Mountains and the Washita River Valley. The principal bromide and soda springs of the park issue from the base of this hill.[10]

From the peak of Bromide Mountain, in ages past, Indian smoke signals broadcast the news of peace and good hunting in the edge of the Arbuckles where water was plentiful.[11] In modern times white men have taken over the spot; they have built trails, roads, and bridges; but they have left the peace, the beauty, and the mineral waters which have attracted the ill and the weary for generations.

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9 Cammerer, op. cit., p. 2.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

More than 150 men in a Civilian Conservation Camp in the park have been busy for nearly seven years making the natural beauty of the park more convenient for modern use. They have built hard surfaced roads, picnic sites, and natural swimming pools in the stream bed of Travertine Creek and have cleared out the underbrush, set out new trees, built roads and paths, and made it a place more accessible for the general public use.[12] Attractive markers made from native wood have been placed along the roads throughout the park to guide the traveler within its bounds. Every effort has been made to make the facilities of the park adapted to the needs and wishes of the public.

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12 William E. Branch, Interview (Sulphur, Oklahoma), June 1, 1940.

EARLY HISTORY OF PLATT NATIONAL PARK

Chapter Two

Although the history of Platt National Park technically begins in 1902 with the creation by the government of Sulphur Springs Reservation, it had been for many years the gathering place of the Indians.[13] It is not definitely known when the spring waters were first used for curative purposes, but tradition has it that the waters were known to the Indians for many decades before the coming of the white man. At certain seasons of the year the creek banks were dotted with the tepees of the Indians who came to drink the waters, to stage their dances, and to hold their councils and pow-wows. It was they who first found the springs bubbling out of the hillside and paused to rest beside them. The summit of Bromide Hill was known to them as "Council Rock", and from there signal fires flashed messages to distant points. Later it became known as "Robbers' Roost", as it was frequently used as a look-out point for bandits.[14] From this vantage point they could set a watch on the country for many miles in every direction.

The abundance of water in a comparatively arid area also attracted numbers of wild animals and gave the region a reputation as a hunting ground.[15] Traces of this linger in the naming of the principal springs after the antelope and buffalo.

It is thought by many people that the first white man to visit

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13 Cammerer, op. cit., p. 3.

14 Ibid.

15 W. B. McDougall, Plant and Animal Bulletin, p. 1.

Plat National Park was Thomas Nuttal, the famous botanist.[16] Nuttal was a Harvard professor of botany who had accompanied a band of soldiers from Fort Smith in 1819 into the Indian territory to drive white settlers from the Choctaw region. After the soldiers had departed, he remained to study the plants and animals of the present park area.

It is also very probably that some of the early Spanish explorers may have crossed the same area while exploring along the nearby Washita River Valley. The old North-South Trail, which follows the Washita River, lies only nine miles to the west.[17] Old Fort Arbuckle, thirteen miles away, was a most important frontier post in early days and served as headquarters for surveying parties throughout all the surrounding area.

In the spring of 1824 Fort Gibson and Fort Towson were established in eastern Oklahoma and were for a long time well known and important places in the Indian country of the south.[18] Several years later when war broke out between the Osages and the Kiowas and the other small tribes who lived in the southwestern part of the state, a large expedition was sent out from Forts Gibson and Towson to stop the warfare.[19] At the same time the expedition was to pay a visit to the wild bands of Kiowas, Wichitas, and Comanches who lived in the Southwest about the Wichita Mountains. This expedition was almost large enough for an army and was under the command of General Henry Leaven-

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16 Wm. H. Powers, "Facts in the Life of Thomas Nuttal", Science, LXII, (October 30, 1925), pp. 389-391.

17 Angie Debo, Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic, p. 73.

18 Ibid., pp. 194-197.

19 Ibid.

worth. They advanced up the Washita River, explored the region surrounding, probably crossing the Arbuckle Mountains and park region to a place ten miles west of the present park. Here they established Fort Arbuckle on April 19, 1951.[20] At this time the country was settled by a few wandering Indians and still fewer white traders. The fort, named for General Arbuckle who had succeeded Leavenworth in command, served the Indian country during the Civil War and was abandoned June 24, 1870 when the establishment of Fort Sill absorbed all business of the region.[21]

When the Five Civilized Tribes were moved westward to Indian Territory, the Choctaws and Chickasaws were given land in joint ownership between the Red and Canadian Rivers,[22] but this form of government did not last long. Soon the Chickasaws became dissatisfied because the Choctaws, who had the greater population, also had the greater influence in government. A division of government and property was made in 1855, and the part area became a part of the Chickasaw Nation.[23]

At this time the springs region was used by the Indians as a watering hole for their animals, but it was undeveloped in every other respect. It was known among the tribe as "Buffalo Suck" where great herds came to water. H. H. Allen, an old cow-man, purchased from the

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20 Samuel Y. Allgood, "Historic Spots and Actions in the Washita Valley up to 1870", Chronicles of Oklahoma, V, 83.

21 Ibid.

22 Grant Foreman, Indian Removal, pp. 216-219.

23 Ibid.

Indians in 1882 a ranch near the present Platt National Park; he said that he first visited the famed springs in 1848 and '49. He found the region quite undeveloped. He stated:

> That was about ten years after the Indians had emigrated here from Mississippi. Where your pavilion springs now are was a perfect loblolly of mud and water. This was a favorite place for great herds of buffalo that roamed over the rocky hills and valleys at that time. They would coat their furry hides with a plaster of mud in order to free themselves from insect pests. After completely plastering themselves with mud, the buffalo would stand around the wallows and sip up the water, so I presume this is how the springs came to "Buffalo Suck". During my first visit to the springs I shot buffalo on the hills south of the pavilion. Deer, antelope, and wild turkey were to be seen in great herds and flocks. The Indians were quite a different people from what they are now; they knew much less of white man's ways.[24]

In 1885 Dan Carr, a settler from Alabama, hearing of the vast opportunities to be found in the new lands across the Mississippi River, joined the westward trek and moved on until he reached the Indian country.[25] Crossing the present park region, he found it to be the site for the headquarters of the old Froman Ranch. The only white man in the country at that time lived ten miles to the north. The Froman ranch house was located near the present Hillside Spring and just across the street south of the Pavilion Springs.[26] The location is now marked by a "bench stone" placed by the government surveyors when they surveyed the region.

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24 Sulphur Times-Democrat (Sulphur, Oklahoma) November 18, 1909.

25 Daniel H. Carr, Diary, (January, 1885--October, 1888), p. 10.

26 Ibid., p. 17.

GOVERNMENT PURCHASE AND OWNERSHIP

Chapter Three

In 1902 the United States Government became interested in creating a national park to serve the central part of the United States and to provide recreation and curative benefits for the vast multitude of the middle classes who were not able to afford the more distant and more expensive parks. Accordingly a government commission appointed by the president and approved by Congress was sent to select the location and make arrangements for the purchase of the land.[27]

On July 1, 1902 a bill was passed in Congress authorizing the Commission to the Five Civilized Tribes to meet with a commission from the Chickasaw and the Choctaw Nations to draw up a treaty. This meeting was to take place on March 21 of that year.[28] According to the treaty the two tribes were to cede to the United States an area in the Chickasaw Nation near the village of Sulphur and embracing all of the natural springs with as much surrounding lands as was deemed necessary by the Secretary of the Interior. This cession, which was to be chosen by the Secretary of Interior within four months after the signing of the treaty, was not to exceed 640 acres. It was to be held, owned, and controlled by the United States absolutely and without any restriction, except that no part should be disposed of for town-site purposes during the existence of the two tribal governments.[29]

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27 United States Statutes at Large, XXXII, part I (1901-1903), 665.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

In exchange for this cession of land the United States Government was to pay the Indians $20 an acre for each acre ceded in this reservation. It was to be paid to the tribal government unless the tribes should be dissolved; in that case it was to be divided per capita among the members of the tribes.[30]

All improvements already on the land were to be appraised at their true value and paid for by warrants on the United States treasury. This included settlement for the houses and improvements in the village of Sulphur, which had grown up around the springs. Houses were then to be sold to the highest bidder and torn down and moved from the land.[31]

Unless otherwise provided the Secretary of the Interior was to control the use of the waters of the springs and the temporary use and occupation of the lands.

For two years Sulphur Springs Reservation, as it was called, continued to be an amusement center and summer pleasure resort for thousands of people who gathered by wagon, by buggy, or by train and pitched camp along the banks of the creeks that flowed through the park. Along these same creeks were to be found many places of amusement, such as swimming pools, dance halls, "Coney Islands", and almost any kind of entertainment for which a person could wish.[32]

Meanwhile the town of Sulphur was being moved. It had grown up as a mere village of wooden buildings along the banks of the creek and around the springs; now it was to be moved to the hilly regions just outside the park limits. Overnight it became a town on wheels.

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30 Ibid., p. 666.

31 George W. Cunningham, Reminiscence (Sulphur, Oklahoma), August 1, 1940.

32 Ibid.

Residences, butcher shops, grocery stores, post office, and hotels were moved to lots selected in the nearby townsite on the hills to the south of the park. One large $50,000 hotel was dismantled and joined piecemeal with the throng of moving houses.[33] Soon a new town of thriving prospects sprang up. Many of the houses were new and a great number of them were brick.

It was not long until the government realized that a town overlooking the park would not be so good because it would detract from the park's beauty and would also drain into the park. Therefore the appraisers and surveyors were put back on the job, and soon a new treaty was made whereby more land was bought from the Indians.[34]

This land was purchased in the same manner that the earlier tract was except $60 was given per acre instead of $20 as in the former purchase. Likewise all improvements were appraised and paid for.[35]

In this manner 208 acres were added to the park making it the present total of 848 acres.[36] This new addition included the main part of the new town and again Sulphur went moving.

This time the residents began to disagree among themselves over the town's best location; some wished to settle on the hills to the east, others thought the region to the west would be more desirable, and still others wished to remain in the residential part of the old

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33 Gene White, Reminiscence (Sulphur, Oklahoma), July 5, 1940.

34 U. S. Stat., XXXIII, 220.

35 Annual Report, I (1908), 514.

36 Ibid.

town to the south. As a result, the different ones settled in the place of their choice and the town became widely scattered along the boundaries of the park.[37]

On June 29, 1906 a bill passed Congress authorizing the Secretary of Interior to change the name of Sulphur Springs Reservation, the government reservation in Indian Territory, and thereafter call it Platt National Park in honor of Orville Hitchcock Platt, deceased senator from Connecticut. For twenty-six years he had served Connecticut in the Senate and for many years had been a member of the committee on Indian Affairs.[38] No other member of Congress knew as much about the Indians as he. No other was so familiar with their lives and legends. From them he learned of the great curative powers of the springs and from them he learned of the danger that when Oklahoma was made a state these springs would become private property and that the waters would be sold at so much a gallon. To prevent this he secured the creation of the Sulphur Springs Reservation.[39] The naming of the park for him was made in recognition of his distinguished services to the Indians and the country at large.[40] In this manner Platt National Park came into existence as the seventh in age of all the parks owned by the United States Government.[41]

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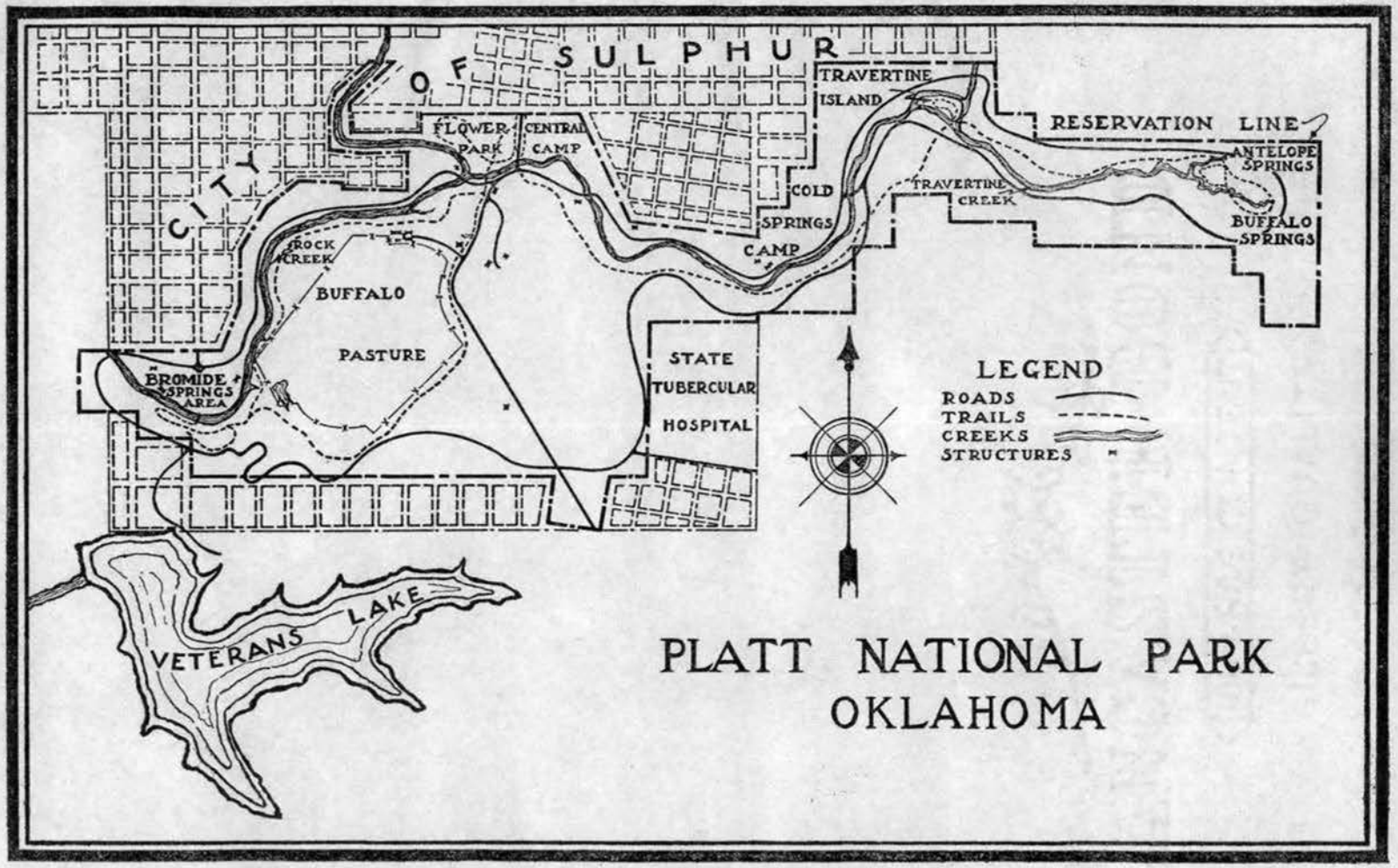
37 George W. Cunningham, Reminiscence (Sulphur, Oklahoma), August 4, 1940.

38 Annual Report, I (1907), 463.

39 New York Tribune (New York), October 1, 1909.

40 U. S. Stat., 59 Cong., XXXIV, Part I (1905-1907), 837.

41 Anonymous, "Information Table", National Park Service, p. 1.


CITY OF SULPHUR
FLOWER PARK
CENTRAL CAMP
TRAVERTINE ISLAND
RESERVATION LINE
ANTELOPE SPRINGS
COLD SPRINGS CAMP
TRAVERTINE CREEK
BUFFALO SPRINGS
ROCK CREEK
BUFFALO PASTURE
BROMIDE SPRINGS AREA
STATE TUBERCULAR HOSPITAL
LEGEND
ROADS
TRAILS
CREEKS
STRUCTURES
VETERANS LAKE
PLATT NATIONAL PARK
OKLAHOMA

12-B

DEVELOPMENT OF PLATT NATIONAL PARK

Chapter Four

In 1908 the Department of Interior reported Platt National Park to cover 848 acres of land and to contain thirty-three known mineral and two non-mineral springs. The mineral springs contain sulphur, bromide, soda, and iron in varying amounts, and from the base of one hill are known to issue several springs containing these different kinds of minerals.[42] The two non-mineral springs are Antelope and Buffalo, the ones which feed Sulphur Creek. Antelope bursts forth from beneath a huge rock in the side of a hill; Buffalo bubles from a sandy depression in the ground several hundred yards away; and the waters of the two join about three hundred yards distant to form the main stream of the creek. The approximate combined discharge of these two springs is 5,000,000 gallons daily.

According to the report of the Department of Interior for 1908, the flow from the mineral springs was as follows:[43]

Spring	Gallons per day
Bromide (3)	275
Bromide Sulphur	250
Black Sulphur	500
Hillside	129,600
Pavilion (7)	200,600
Beach (3)	125,000

Further reports referred to the regulations made by the Secretary of Interior in regard to the operation of the springs. No person was

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42 Annual Report, I (1908), 514.

43 Ibid.

permitted to remove more than a gallon of water at a time from the Bromide Springs because of the small flow and because of its beneficial medicinal value. No water was to be used for commercial purposes except in pursuance of a license issued by the Secretary of Interior. The park superintendent might, if judgment warranted, prohibit the use of waters for any reason other than for immediate drinking.[44]

The several offices in the park were connected by telephones and the West Central Park (that is now the part around the main springs) was wired for electric lights. Besides the main office there were in 1908 five residences, five pavilions, and ten rest houses, all badly in need of repair. Thus far, appropriations for the park had been small and little improvement had been made. Since Senator Platt died, the park had been sadly neglected. There was no one in Congress to care for its need. There were almost no funds available to protect it from trespassing and to preserve the mineral springs uncontaminated. The salaries of all employees aggregated only $5780 and still less was given for improvements. That year money spent for improvements was:[45]

Springs and creeks	$ 1,057.74
Bridges	1,213.58
Survey for sewer	761.90
Domestic water	674.09
Building repairs	590.00
Mowing weeds, building trails	429.89
Miscellaneous	607.07
Total	$ 5,334.94

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44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

The park was located in a ranching country. Before government ownership it had been used by the Indians to graze their herds, and ranchmen still longed and sought for that privilege. In 1907 approximately six thousand herd of cattle had been driven through the park during daytime hours. In the summer time many more than this had gone through at night because of the hot weather. The stockmen resented any efforts on the part of the government to prevent grazing on the rich grass of the park, and over eleven thousand head were driven off. It became necessary to invest in barbed wire to keep the cattle men out. $2,500 was spent for this purpose, and temporarily the trouble was settled.[46]

Throughout the park fishing was permitted with hook and line. Fish to be found in the streams were: black bass, trout, red horse, sunfish, and cat fish. It seems that the pure cold water was adapted to the propagation of the more desirable species of edible fish, such as trout and black bass, and the Secretary of Commerce was requested to stock the streams with fish if he thought it practical.

Central Park, the region just north of Lincoln Bridge and east of the Vendome, was being used as a general meeting place for all public gatherings, conventions, ex-Confederate soldiers' meetings, and summer chautauquas. In fact, the National Chautauqua asked the Federal Government to build a large steel auditorium for convention purposes; but the government seemed to be short of money for such purposes at that time, and the request was never granted.[47]

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46 Ibid.

47 Sulphur Times-Democrat, August 4, 1908.

Many people, particularly ones from Texas, were building summer homes in Sulphur. It promised to be a beautiful, cool, mosquito-free resort. All roads led to Platt National Park. Elaborate plans were being made to build an interurban from Chickasha to Sulphur if the latter would guarantee a bonus of $50,000 and grant a street car franchise with interurban privileges. The project was to be completed on or before September 1, 1910.[48] Stocks in the company were sold, attempts were made to raise the money, and even the road bed was constructed between Sulphur and Davis. Remains of the old dump or road bed are still to be seen along the highway west of Sulphur. A year passed and the guaranteed bonus had not yet been raised. There were rumors of the interurban running to Ardmore instead of Sulphur because of the apathy of the Sulphur populace, but the roadbed construction continued. Wild schemes were plotted; stockholders sought eagerly to sell stocks and raise the money; but finally the bubble burst, the scheme failed, and the rosy air castle became merely an idle fantasy of a bankrupt company with impractical dreams and little financial backing.

Another fantastic idea prevalent at the time was the building of Arbuckle City in the foothills of the Arbuckle Mountains near Platt Park. This was to be a great manufacturing city. A dam project was proposed to harness the powers of the Washita River. Once the Washita waters were harnessed to turn the giant dynamo, Arbuckle City would be made. Directly abuting the city site and above the river rose the

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48 Ibid., August 8, 1908.

Arbuckle Mountains, grand, grim old hills waiting to open their thousand ledges and dump their vast wealth of raw material into the jaws of industry.[49] This plan, like the interurban idea, did not materialize so rapidly.

Ten miles to the south of Platt National Park was another attraction to exploit and to add to the fame of the park, a cave known as Mystic Cave and offered to the public for exploitation. In the cave an iron ladder was lowered to an underground river, and boats were placed on the waters of the river stream. Adventurers explored for several miles down the stream to where it ran through a narrow passage, too narrow to permit admittance. It is reported that some fish were actually caught in these underground waters. Many theories were advanced that the underground river was in some way connected with the mammoth springs in the park, but no study of the question was made. Finally interest waned, a landslide occurred, and the cave was abandoned.[50]

1908 seemed to be a year of proposals and failures. Among these was a motion to change the direction of the park over to the Smithsonian Institute, but a mass meeting of citizens, who felt that the Interior Department would develop it more, declared against it and persuaded the Department to keep it.[51] Next, the United States Government proposed the building of a hundred-foot street and boulevard all the way around the park, but since it would come within

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49 Ibid., September 30, 1909.

50 Ibid., January 3, 1909.

51 Ibid., August 29, 1908.

the city limits and would have to be maintained by the already financially poor city, it was not carried out either.[52]

One successful thing accomplished during 1908 was the building of a wire suspension bridge at Bromide Springs. It was designed by H. V. Huckley and built at a cost of $650 during the administration of Colonel Greene as park superintendent. This bridge exceeded all expectations; it carried an average of five hundred people daily, was described in an illustrated article in The Scientific American, and drew forth an inquiry from London regarding it.[53]

For some time the question of the water supply for the city of Sulphur was a paramount one. In 1903 General Matthes, the United States geological engineer, recommended that the town of Sulphur be permitted to divert water from Antelope and Buffalo Springs for their waterworks system. In this he was governed by the fact that in setting aside the land for the park the government had deprived the future city of one of the very finest sources of water and that its use should be restored in so far as it would not interfere with the use by the government or mar the beauty of the stream. In 1905 N. C. Grover, of the United States hydrographic survey sent by the Interior Department, recommended that the town construct two reservoirs, one at each of the two springs. It was estimated that they would cost $2,500. Since the springs flowed 5,000,000 gallons of water daily, which was ninety-eight percent pure, enough could

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52 Ibid., September 10, 1908.

53 Annual Report, I (1908) 514.

easily be drawn for the city without depriving the park of a necessary flow. This idea was impractical and was not adopted. In 1907 the city of Sulphur was granted temporary permission to take water from the creek, not at the springs but just below Little Niagara Falls to the extent of 100,000 gallons daily. The city was to build a reservoir, which must be outside the park,[54] but, as before, the city was unable to build a reservoir. This plan was adopted, however, a few years later, and Sulphur obtained its supply of water from the creek until some wells were sunk by the city in 1920.

During 1907 approximately 25,000 persons visited Platt National Park by rail and 1,000 by wagon. The latter group camped in the park for at least three days. Platt Park was rapidly becoming a summer tent city. Camps were pitched by many people in the Bromide camp ground and in the camp ground farther up the creek.

Until this time the creek flowing through the park was called Sulphur Creek. The United States Board on Geographical Names now changed it to Travertine Creek because of the deposits of soft limestone, known as travertine, caused by the water running over them.[55]

The superintendent of the park recommended to Congress that enough money be set aside to build a stone and iron building near the superintendent's office for a calaboose or holdover for men and women arrested and held waiting trial before the United States

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54 Senate Reports, 60 Cong., 1 sess., No. 652, (May 13, 1908)

55 Ibid.

Commission. He further recommended that an electric light plant be constructed and operated by water power from the springs, that a fish hatchery be created, that the government employ a scientific forester for reforestation of the denuded parts of the park, and that a summer camp be established for a squadron of cavalry from Fort Sill or some other convenient military post. As yet no appropriations for the park had been made and the park revenues were depleted. A $20,000 estimate was submitted but not acted upon at that time.[56]

In the summer of 1909 Governor Haskell visited the park. It was to be a great celebration in the little town of Sulphur and in Platt National Park. Less than eight months before, Oklahoma had been made a state and Charles N. Haskell was coming to pay his first official visit to the park. The entire community turned out to help in the festivities. The Santa Fe depot grounds were crowded with people as the train pulled in and the governor, his wife, and his daughter alighted. A huge float waited to carry the distinguished family to the hotel. Here Governor Haskell during the afternoon delivered an address to a large audience and for an hour and a half held them spellbound. Meanwhile his daughter had gone with a group of young people to the park. The first place of interest was the old natatorium or indoor swimming pool. While enjoying a swim, she was seized with a cramp and almost drowned before she could be rescued by some of her swimming companions.[57] The celebrated occasion had

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56 Ibid.

57 Sulphur Times-Democrat, July 8, 1909.

almost ended in tragedy.

On June 3, 1909 Colonel A. R. Greene resigned to live in Washington and was succeeded by Will French as superintendent.[58]

The summer of 1909 had been an unusually hot and dry one all over the country. Many people had suffered from the heat and drought, and such cities as Dallas and Oklahoma City were faced with a water famine; but in spite of the dry weather, the springs and wells in the park never faltered nor reduced their flow. Sulphur sent out an offer to furnish water free on board the railroad cars to the needy cities. A study of the situation revealed that at least 10,000,000 gallons could be furnished and shipped out each day over the two railroad lines.[59] Fall rains came in time to prevent dire shortage and the plan was never carried out because it was no longer necessary. However, records show that the water was shipped out of the park to different places, some as far away as Pennsylvania, throughout various years of its existence.[60]

During this period in the history of the park, the government appropriations were very low and little was done to improve the area. It was here, and that was about all. Visitors came to the park and camped in great numbers during the summer; all camping sites and amusements within the park were free to the public, but little beautification was carried on. To help meet expenditures the

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58 Ibid., June 3, 1909.

59 Ibid., October 7, 1909.

60 Ibid.

authorities fenced off parts of it and rented it out as grazing lands to the neighboring ranchers. This practice continued until Stephen T. Mather, National Park Inspector, visited the region, inspected the situation, and recommended that all entrances be closed except two or three and these be beautified and maintained in better form. He also recommended that cattle grazing be eliminated and that more land be purchased to square the boundaries of the park,[61] but this was not acted upon by the government.

One new spring was discovered near the Bromide Mountain and was found to contain elements different from any others in the park. This was called Medicine Spring because of its medicinal qualities and was analyzed to contain the following ingredients: chloride, sodium, bicarbonic acid, calcium, magnesium, silica, sulphuric acid, potassium, bromide, and iodine.[62] Today it is piped to the Bromide Pavilion and flows from fountains beside those of the bromide and sulphur waters. Four different kinds of water can be had under the same pavilion by merely a turn of different faucets.

In the town of Sulphur a well was being drilled for oil but instead still another kind of water was found. This contained more iron than any of the other wells or springs yet opened.[63] The park region was becoming more and more a region of many waters famed for their healing qualities. The following extract is taken from a

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61 Ibid., September 15, 1909.

62 Anonymous, "Information Table", National Park Service, p. 1.

63 T. P. Tripp, loc. cit.

letter written by Colonel W. H. Wray, a leading citizen of Dallas and general manager of the Bush and Gerts Piano Company of Texas:

> For several years I have been suffering from insomnia. Last year I tried the Colorado resorts and mineral waters; I was helped but not cured. This summer I determined to try the eastern and northern resorts. After spending several weeks in Canada and at the lake resorts and getting no relief, I heard of Sulphur and its healing and rejuvinating waters. I went there and must confess that I was greatly surprised at what I found. You should advertise more and let the people know what nature has placed here in the way of scenery, climate, and waters.[64]

But still the park did not develop rapidly; the appropriations were but $5,000, which was barely enough to pay salaries of employees; and nothing was given for the development of the area. In 1910 the appropriation was raised to $10,000. This was to cover the salaries and to provide for the construction of a sewer through the park.

There was no means of conveyance then, so hacks were issued permits upon payment of a certain license fee and permitted to carry people to and from the springs or through the park. During 1910 permits were issued for seven autos, five two-seated hacks, and two three-seated hacks. Thirty thousand people visited the park that year.[65]

Because of the growing importance of the increased attendance in Platt National Park, the government now saw fit to define certain rules and regulations pertaining to its protection and operation. Accordingly, on June 10, 1908 the following rules were formulated in

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64 Sulphur Times Democrat, April 28, 1909.

65 Annual Report, I, (1911) 687.

Congress:[66]

(1) Persons are forbidden to injure or cut any timber or plants growing on the park lands or to deface any of the government property.

(2) Persons are forbidden to injure in any manner any of the springs, mineral deposits, or natural features of the park.

(3) No camping is allowed within one thousand feet of any spring nor on any land except where designated by the authorities.

(4) It is forbidden for any person to deposit garbage or refuse on park lands, except at designated places or to contaminate any of the springs or divert the waters of such springs from their natural course.

(5) No person shall remove from any of the bromide, iron, or soda springs more than one gallon of water in one day nor more than five gallons from the other springs, nor shall one use the water for commercial purposes except in pursuance of a license from the Secretary of Interior.

(6) Hunting, killing, wounding, or capturing any bird or wild animal is forbidden except in the case of dangerous animals when it is necessary to prevent injury.

(7) Fishing other than by hook and line is prohibited. Fishing for profit is forbidden at any time.

(8) No person is permitted to live, do business, or erect buildings in the park.

(9) Trespassing of cattle is forbidden.

(10) Driving at high speed is forbidden.

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66 Ibid.

(11) Selling liquor, gambling, or disorderly conduct of any kind is forbidden.

(12) The penalty for disobedience was set at a fine of not less than $5.00 nor more than $100 and imprisonment of not more than six months.

Meanwhile roads and trails were being improved, stone culverts were built, and a sidewalk was laid to the Bromide Spring. Over a hundred young trees had been set out, the springs had been improved, and all indications pointed toward a promising season if only a summer drought did not come. But the drought did come. In 1911 the flow of the springs began to weaken.[67] In March Antelope ceased to flow at all and in June Buffalo Springs became dry. That season everything suffered; the creeks were dry; the city had to tap the sulphur wells for its water supply; and visitors, who had come to Sulphur in years past, now went to other places.

By April, 1912, Buffalo began to flow one fifth of its former capacity, and on the twenty-eighth of that month Antelope came back with as strong a flow as ever.[68] Once again the creeks filled and the people rejoiced, but suddenly on September the eighteenth the springs stopped again for nearly a year. It was feared that they were permanently dry and that they would never flow again, but by November, 1913, they were both flowing at their natural strength once more.[69]

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67 Ibid., I, (1914) 843-854.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.

The natives stated that this was the first time in thirty years that the springs had gone dry. An old Indian advanced the theory that they were supplied by a subterranean branch of the Canadian River. His reason for this deduction was that every time the Canadian River went dry the springs did likewise. He claimed he could remember twice when they had ceased to flow.[70]

In 1913 Congress failed to pass any appropriation for the park. This caused the care and maintenance of the park to be suspended beginning July 1, 1913 at the height of its summer season, and it lasted until October the twenty-fifth when an emergency bill of $8,000 was passed through Congress. Meanwhile weeds grew rank, the park was dilapidated, visitors moved on, and the report circulated that the government had abandoned the park.[71]

But with the new appropriation improvements were made and progress moved forward again. In 1915 from eighteen to twenty thousand people visited the park, and water was shipped to such distant places as New York, Brooklyn, Chicago, Kansas, and Arkansas. Over four miles of park road were built and an effort was made to create a "haven for the sick and a place of rest and pleasure for the well."[72]

The greatest need of the park now was a new administration building. The first one had been an old building constructed by two

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70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

72 Sulphur Times Democrat, September 18, 1915.

Germans as a summer camp. It had been so loosely put together that rodents and snakes inhabited the walls, rats stocked them with winter provisions, and on damp days the odor was offensive. A prop held the chimney in place. The mice built nests in the desk drawers, using office supplies to build them with. A recommendation was made by the superintendent for a new building.[73]

The office was then moved to a stone building which had been erected in 1894 by Graves Leeper, who used it as a family residence while he managed an adjoining lumber yard. It was later used for Federal Court Commissions meetings, and when court was not in session, it became a school house and community center. In 1902 when the reservation was established, it shared the fate of all the buildings in the area--it was condemned--but instead of being destroyed it became the office of the park superintendent in 1904.[74]

It was used in this way for nearly twenty years when it was remodeled and a wing of native stone similar to that of the old building was added. Now one must look very closely to detect the difference between the old and the new parts. Today it houses an office for the superintendent, a room for the clerk, a public room for visitors, and a large porch extending across its eastern side. The public room has an attractive fireplace, a file room, and a museum of natural history pertaining to Platt National Park.

A few enterprising citizens of Sulphur felt that they could add

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73 Annual Report, I, (1913), 843-854.

74 William E. Branch, Interview, (Sulphur, Oklahoma), August 12, 1940.

to the interest of the public in the park if they could import some animals from other game reservations, therefore they applied to the government to fence off a large pasture on the hill overlooking the pavilion and another pasture on the opposite hill secluded enough that the animals would not be frightened by the traffic and yet close enough to the road that the general public could view them without much walking.

They then applied to Yellowstone National Park and secured three elk and several white tailed deer.[75] Arrangements were made to get some buffalo also. Three were brought from the Wichita Reservation provided that the people of Sulphur would pay for their transportation. This amounted to about $87 and was raised by public subscription.[76] Soon a young baby buffalo was born in the park. Today the herd has increased to some thirty or more head. This is the natural habitation of the buffalo and they seem to thrive exceptionally well in their new pasture, which is located on the hills extending from the superintendent's home near the Soldiers' Hospital to Bromide Hill. Late evening is a good time to view them, for it is then that they come near the fence to be fed. At other times during the day they are often far over in the pasture or under the trees where they cannot be seen except from the distant top of Bromide Hill.

On June 30, 1919 Colonel Robert A. Sneed, who had served as park superintendent since February 14, 1914, resigned and was

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75 Annual Report, I, (1919), 1025-6.

76 Sulphur Times-Democrat, December 11, 1919.

succeeded by Mr. Thomas Ferris, who had been superintendent of the Pawnee Indian School.[77]

1918 and 1919 had been very dry years, and for the second time in the history of the park, the springs went dry. Again the city had to tap the sulphur wells for drinking water. This was not very satisfactory because many people did not like the taste of the sulphur water, and worse still, the water broke through the pipes so frequently that it kept the water department busy mending pipes. Again the park attendance fell and again the government appropriations were reduced. But on December the eleventh of that year they came back with their normal flow.

The city realized some more stable way of providing city water must be adopted so they planned to drill some deep wells. The next question was where they should be dug. All around Sulphur wells had been dug at various times but always with the same results - the force of sulphur water would blow the tools out of the hole with its strength - and the city did not want sulphur water. Consequently, they drilled three deep wells near the springs at the head of the creek and secured a permanent plentiful supply of clear, cold, non-mineral water. These wells were completed during the administration of Mayor Pat Riley.[78]

At the same time a new well was being drilled at the Vendome near the park. The owners had planned to drill to the depth of five

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77 Ibid., July 1, 1919.

78 Ibid., November 16, 1922.

hundred feet to insure a strong flow of water, but at three hundred and sixty feet there was tapped a current of sulphur water with force enough to throw a stream of water fifty feet into the air above the casing and with a flow of 28,000 gallons of water per minute. The drillers had not expected to strike water for at least another hundred feet, therefore no preparations had been made to take care of the overflow. As a consequence, everything was flooded, and workmen labored all night digging a drainage ditch to Rock Creek.[79] The owners offered the city sufficient overflow from this well to supply the water need, but the wells of non-mineral water were much more satisfactory for that purpose. The Vendome swimming pool was built, a small lake was made, and still there was an overflow. This was channeled through the park in a most attractive manner to a place near Lincoln Bridge where it empties into Travertine Creek.

Exactly one week after the drilling of the Vendome well another well of almost equal strength was brought in just a mile north of town. This well was four hundred feet deep and had such a force of artesian water that, coming in unexpectedly like the Vendome, it caught the drillers unprepared and a veritable river was formed down the road before a relief ditch could be dug.

During a previous year Platt National Park had experienced its most serious flood. Just a mile or so north of town stood an old reservoir that had at one time been used by the Frisco railroad.

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79 Mary A. Rolfe, Our National Parks, Book I, p. 139.

The dam, having become weakened by the accumulation of water and by the wet season, suddenly gave way sending a mighty force of water down the bed of Rock Creek, flooding homes along the creek and uprooting trees and washing out bridges through the park. Among the bridges to give way was the suspension bridge at Bromide, the one that had drawn national comment in 1908. Now it was swept before the flood leaving nothing but a shot gun barrel imbedded in concrete near the Bromide Spring House. This had served as an anchor to the suspension bridge tower.[80] This evidence may still be seen. Until a new bridge could be built all visitors to Bromide had to cross the creek by means of a low-water bridge below the springs. This was not at all satisfactory because the water too often was above the bridge and Bromide was closed to the public. Immediately a new bridge was built of steel with a span of one hundred and twenty feet and with a pleasing arch which allows ample clearance for drift in the creek. This bridge is not likely to be carried out by any flood. As some person has said, "It was built to span a rainbow and not a creek; you don't walk, you climb it."

Because this bridge is built of steel, it does not harmonize with the park's general design now, which is a tendency toward rock construction. The Bromide Spring has been moved across the creek and is housed in a most attractive rock pavilion along with the fountains for sulphur, medicine, and iron waters. The community houses and comfort stations in the area likewise are of stone. All new bridges

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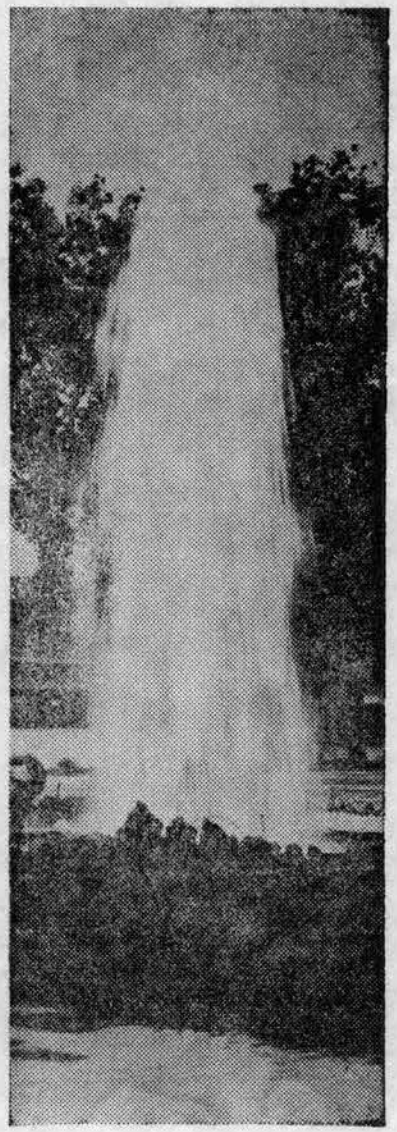
80 Gene White, Interview, (Sulphur, Oklahoma), August 21, 1940.



The Vendome Well at Sulphur

At three hundred and sixty feet there was tapped a current of sulphur water with force enough to throw a stream of water fifty feet into the air above the casing and with a flow of 28,000 gallons of water per minute.

and buildings in the park are being built of the same material. Therefore, because the Bromide bridge does not relate to future constructions in the area, it will be removed and replaced by a bridge of stone which is now being designed and estimated to cost about $10,000.[81]

One of the prettiest and best known of the older bridges in the park and one that will not have to be removed is the Lincoln Bridge, because it is built of stone. It was completed in 1919 by the Liberenz and Robinson Company at a cost of $3,665. It is only a foot bridge, but it is known for its picturesque turrets that reflect the vogue in architecture during the period in which it was built.[82]

A new disasterous experience befell the park in the spring of 1922. Early in the afternoon of March the thirteenth while people were rejoicing over the excellent rains that had fallen for eight or ten hours, the clouds grew suddenly darker and rain began to fall in torrents. A black, funnel-shaped cloud formed over Bromide Hill and within a moment's time a cyclone had come and gone, leaving suffering and confusion. Two people were killed and thirty-four were injured. The cyclone had formed over Bromide Hill and had moved at rapid pace up the bed of Rock Creek through the park uprooting many trees and performing freaks of nature that usually accompany cyclones. It passed from the creek through the western part of town, lifted

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81 William Branch, Interview, (Sulphur, Oklahoma) August 10, 1940.

82 Ibid.

into the air, but settled again in the rural community north of town.[83]

It is said that the animals in Platt National Park had sensed the oncoming storm for more than an hour and had retired to the caves or had settled behind cliffs for protection.[84]

After the storm had passed, the park crew went to work to clear the debris from the regions near the creek and to remove the trees that had been broken or uprooted by the storm.

Several years passed by with nothing of particular interest taking place so far as the park was concerned. Crowds came and went. Some seasons were better than others particularly during week ends or during unusually hot and dry summers.

People in several states outside of Oklahoma were receiving regular shipments of the bromide water, which is said to be especially efficacious for all nervous diseases. The sulphur wells were reputed to be the largest of their kind in the world.[85] The water was the greatest attraction in the park, and it was bringing in no remuneration whatever to the government. It seemed to be a case of constant expenditure and no gain. In 1925 and again in 1933 the Secretary of the Interior recommended that Platt National Park be given to the state to be made into a state park. He advocated that the federal government should be relieved of the supervision of all of the smaller parks and be permitted to confine its administration exclusively to the parks of national proportions and of interest to

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84 Ibid.

85 Annual Report, I, (1925), 22.

the people from every state. Furthermore, he believed that the government should not compete in small recreational areas with the states but should concentrate on those of national scope in which recreation should be secondary to preservation of what nature has created and that the smaller areas should be administered by the states in which they are located.[86]

Regardless of the recommendation, the government has continued to maintain its twenty-seven national parks, the smallest and least remunerative of which is Platt. It has continued to be kept on a non-commercial basis, camp sites are free, water is free, and nothing may be sold within the boundaries of the park.

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86 Ibid.

PLATT NATIONAL PARK AT PRESENT

Chapter Five

For thirty odd years Platt National Park has been in existence. During this time some changes have been made; roads have been graveled, springs have been kept open, recreational features have been modernized and attractions for visitors constantly improved. Otherwise nothing spectacular has been done toward beautification of the park. Appropriations have been increased each year as the demands grow greater and more help is employed, yet even then, the various administrations have been handicapped because of lack of finances. In 1906 the appropriation was a mere $5000; in 1932 it had increased to $12,000.[87] Even this, however, hardly covered salaries and buildings and left little for general upkeep.[88]

In 1933, a short time after the Roosevelt administration began, the Civilian Conservation Camps were created throughout the country. One of the first of these was located within the park and was retained there until the spring of 1940 when it was moved elsewhere. During the seven years that it was in operation, 500,000 trees, shrubs, and vines were transplanted to reforest certain areas and to aid in restoring these areas to their original beauty.[89]

During the first summer of the camp's existence a forest fire broke out near the Pavilion Springs and rapidly spread across the shrubbery and high grass of the nearby hills. All of the C.C.C. boys

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87 Annual Report, I, (1933), 38.

88 William Branch, Interview, August 20, 1940.

89 Ibid.

were called into action and soon had the fire under control before it swept into the region of larger trees near the creek.[90] Although the destruction was not so great, it indicated that one of the first projects should be the reclamation of the denuded area. A landscape foreman was called into service and a study of the plant life of the park was made. This led to a more thorough research into the general botanical life of the entire region.

For one year the boys studied the park flora and kept through all the various growing seasons a careful record of each new plant found and its location in the park. At the end of this time six hundred species of flowers had been collected and identified.[91] Beginning in the early spring with the wild plum, dogwood, and red bud, they continued through June with the primrose, the blue irisine, the abundant sand verbena, the cone flower, and the golden coreopsis. In late summer the boys found the Spanish wild larkspur, the great lotus, the yucca, the blazing star, and blue salvia. Among the autumn flowers were asters and goldenrod together with the flaming color of the oaks and the red berries of the hollies.[92]

Platt National Park is within the botanical crossroads of the United States and is recognized as such in the National Park Service. Therefore in recent years when other parks were being developed for spectacular beauty, Platt Park was being made a botanical experiment station and is now recognized as such. In their research the C.C.C.

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90 Ibid.

91 George Merrill, Plant Record and Diary, (1934), p. 45.

92 Ibid.

boys found plants common to many different sections of the country. Western plants such as the cactus, prickly pear, and yucca thrive in abundance; southern plants are the hackberry, the chittan wood, the persimmon, the prairie lily, and the Chickasaw plum; while the redbud and dogwood are typically eastern.[93] Another point of interest observed was the varied plant growth occasioned by soil elevation and water. This gives the variation from the luxuriant growth of the oak-hickory forest of the bottom lands to the stunted prairie grass growth of the hillsides, all within a stone's throw of each other.[94]

Not all the time of the C.C.C. boys was spent in collecting flowers. There were varied improvements to be made throughout the park. One crew, under supervision of a tree surgeon, examined and doctored all diseased trees; another made a survey of the different kinds of trees and labeled each, telling where it was commonly found and what the wood was suitable for.[95] Still another group was assigned the task of clearing rubbish and driftwood from the creeks and deepening many of the swimming holes to make them more useful to the public.[96]

One of the major projects undertaken was the construction of a trail to extend from the Buffalo and Antelope springs at one end of the park to the Bromide springs at the other. The trail was to be five miles in length and follow along the banks of the creek. By following this trail a person would be able to get a much better view and a

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93 W. B. McDougall, Plant Bulletin, (1936).

94 Ibid.

95 William Branch, Interview, (August 10, 1940)

96 Ibid.

greater appreciation of the park than he could by riding along the driveways because he could see the many squirrels and flowers and the numerous waterfalls that are not always seen from the road. The construction of the trail lasted over a period of three years.[97]

Within recent years the increased number of visitors to Platt National Park has made necessary the construction of greater recreational facilities. It has always been the policy of the park to make all buildings as unobtrusive as use will permit and to preserve the primeval conditions of the park. Therefore, all wooden structures within its limits were painted the dark brown color which is used for buildings in all national parks.[98] All new buildings throughout the park were built of native stone. Among these were community houses at Cold Springs and Bromide, a new superintendent's home on the highest point in the park, and many comfort stations in the camp grounds and along the trails.[99]

Through the summer months the two main camp grounds had been crowded to capacity for several years. A demand arose for more camping space. The Cold Springs area, farther up the creek, had been used, but not very satisfactorily, because it had never been improved beyond the natural stage. In 1936 it was closed to the public and remained closed for two years. During this time an elaborate building program was carried on; sixty-four individual camp sites were plotted, each to

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97 Ibid.

98 Ibid.

99 Ibid.

be separated from the others by a plant screen to insure privacy for the camper. Each was to be equipped with oven, lights, and water; and the entire area was to be under the supervision of one of the rangers. It was necessary to keep the camp ground closed until the young shrubs could grow large enough not to need further protection. It was opened to public use in the season of 1939.[100]

Another project worthy of note was the building of picnic places throughout the park. During the period of C.C.C. construction 205 ovens and picnic tables were erected at various shady spots along the creek, many of them being far removed from the beaten roads of travel.[101] Others are easily accessible and can be reached with a minimum amount of walking. The ovens are made of brick covered over with a grate. The tables, like the buildings in the park, are made of native stone or of heavy logs hewn from the trees that have had to be removed from the area.[102]

Attention was next turned to the building of a new road. The old one followed the bank of the creek from one extremity to the other, crossed it at various intervals on low-water bridges, which were often under water during rainy seasons. The new road was to be a perimeter one, following the boundaries of the park and revealing both the lower creek regions and the higher regions of the hills. This road begins at the stone entrance to the park and forks a few hundred yards ahead

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100 Ibid.

101 Ibid.

102 Ibid.

to the left and to the right. The left fork leads to the head of the creek and across the hills past the State Soldiers' Hospital, the superintendent's home, the buffalo pasture, and, by means of a winding route, to the top of Bromide Hill. From here the road winds down the side of the steep hill to Bromide Springs and joins the old road at the camp grounds. This part of the road was not changed; it completes the loop and joins the new one at the fork below the park entrance. The construction of the road required a period of three years because it could be worked on only during the winter when the tourists were not there. It was only a gravel road and became so dusty and unpleasant that in the government appropriations for 1939 enough money was allowed to pave it.[103]

Platt National Park has changed much since its creation in 1902. Its attendance has increased; its appropriations have increased;[104] and its fame as a botanical station has spread. It still remains Oklahoma's only national park, contains the only bromide spring in the world, one of the largest sulphur artesian wells in the world, and serves as a health and pleasure resort for the Southwest.[105]

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103 Ibid.

104 Annual Report, I, (1938), 40.

105 Cammerer, "Platt National Park", p. 8.

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