

Intersections and Detours: Tracing Standard Oil's Trails through Grand Teton National Park

By Laurie Hinck

Ph.D. Candidate
115 Highway 212
Silver Gate, Montana 59081

lauriehinck@hotmail.com

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Rockefeller Archive Center Research Reports Online is a periodic publication of the Rockefeller Archive Center. Edited by Ken Rose and Erwin Levold under the general direction of the Center's Executive Director, Darwin H. Stapleton, Research Reports Online is intended to foster the network of scholarship in the history of philanthropy and to highlight the diverse range of materials and subjects covered in the collections at the Rockefeller Archive Center. The reports are drawn from essays submitted by researchers who have visited the Archive Center, many of whom have received grants from the Archive Center to support their research.

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Beginning in 1927, John D. Rockefeller Jr. (JDR Jr.) initiated a captivating conservation and tourist management project in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. His venture involved purchasing private lands and changing them into Grand Teton National Park (GTNP). Since becoming a National Park in 1950, Jackson Hole has been pictured everywhere from the walls of New York City's enormous Grand Central Station, to endless truck commercials on television, as *the* global icon of rugged Western American mountain "wilderness."¹

¹ I mark "wilderness" with quotations because its meaning is highly contested among environmental historians in much the same way that the word "frontier" creates fervor within the discipline of Western history. Much of my interest in the Rockefeller project in Jackson Hole relates to the intriguing cultural meanings behind this term. See William Cronon ed. *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996) and Michael Pollan, *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education*, (New York: First Grove Press, 1991).

Until I conducted research at the Rockefeller Archive Center, my dissertation orbited rather loosely around a fascinating paradox concerning this Rockefeller project. I was intrigued that the Rockefeller family made incomparable contributions to the growth of both American industry and environmental conservation during the twentieth century. Rockefeller Sr.'s Standard Oil, JDR Jr.'s Colorado Fuel and Iron Company and Laurance Rockefeller's Eastern Airlines, along with countless other Rockefeller investments, linked the family's vast financial power to America's incomparable impact on the global environment. During the same period, the family was an equally powerful force behind America's rising environmental and scenic conservation movement. What could this interesting contradiction, painted so profoundly upon the canvas of Jackson Hole, illuminate about America's environmental history during the past century when our culture simultaneously intensified its energy consumption and vigorously sanctified wild lands? Since consulting the RAC's vast collections, I have formally categorized these circling questions.

My thesis is that the Rockefellers stamped GTNP with their ideals, hopes and dreams for American society which came directly from their central place within the creation, maintenance and growth of American industrial capitalism. I support this argument by analyzing evidence from RAC documents that identifies three key strategies that Rockefeller Sr. used to create Standard Oil and which his heirs applied to their conservation work in Jackson Hole. First, each generation sought to control the public's access to information through the skillful use of language about their projects. Second, they tightly managed people in their organizations, creating human "machinery," as one

Rockefeller aide termed it.² Directing information and people were crucial to controlling a third key component of each generation's projects-- environmental resources such as the drills, wells, refineries, rails and pipelines of the oil market and the fences, roads, service stations and hotels of Jackson Hole. Standard Oil became a "new corporate ideal" for American business by effectively deploying these strategies.³ Its model often faltered in Wyoming, however, as the family used it to orchestrate their conservation project. My dissertation explains important aspects of GTNP's landscape by analyzing the historical moments when Standard Oil's strategies worked in Jackson Hole and when they precipitated conflict.

This research report highlights documents that I investigated at the RAC in order to briefly elucidate one of the three categorical intersections between Standard Oil and GTNP: how the Rockefeller conservation team attempted to control flows of information related to their project. Just four years before his death, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. wrote to his abundant progeny about the Grand Teton project. Perhaps hyperbolically, he claimed that the churning conflict that had surrounded his bid to create GTNP was "burned into [his] very being." His letter celebrated an unusually encouraging editorial out of Salt Lake, one of the first with any positive spin on his project. The article was a "complete change of attitude" which demonstrated to JDR Jr. "the principle which grandfather followed so unfailingly throughout life...of doing what he knew to be right and in the public interest regardless of whether praise or blame was currently accorded him."⁴

² Raymond Fosdick to Rockefeller Jr. (JDR Jr.) June 2, 1921, Fosdick "Recollections." Rockefeller Family Archive, RAC.

³ Paul Roberts, *The End of Oil: On the Edge of a Perilous New World* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 37.

⁴ JDR Jr. to Children. February 28, 1956, Folder 831, Box 90, Series 2E, Record Group 2 Office Of Messrs Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

With that, Rockefeller Jr. placed his controversial Wyoming conservation project firmly within his father's lifelong struggles with public relations.

In the same letter, JDR Jr. identified notions most crucial to his control of the public's knowledge about GTNP. First, he branded his work in Jackson Hole as an attempt to "rescue that incomparable region from being over run by hot dog stands and cheap commercialism."⁵ This viewpoint characterized the project as purely benevolent and opposed to any concern with financial return. JDR Jr. was a liberator attacking "cheap commercialism" that in this representation was the area's single most significant threat. Equally important here was the idea that the project passively protected a natural and wild space— an "incomparable region"-- rather than actively reshaped previously inhabited lands. These two important clusters of information--related to profit and wilderness-- became critical in the Rockefeller team's negotiation of the public's perception of their conservation project.⁶

Information about profit was ripe for misunderstanding because the GTNP project involved several companies. The team formed the Snake River Land Company (SRLC) in 1927 as a corporation to acquire and manage property to be turned over to the government. It was Rockefeller-managed from the East. Harold Fabian, a lawyer from Salt Lake City, Utah, was the SRLC's western representative. The Teton Companies, as they were jointly termed, were corporations that profited from a tourist infrastructure that

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ When referring to the Rockefeller team, I mean to include a host of people involved in the project. The key players were Horace Albright, a powerful nationally recognized conservationist who initiated the project with Rockefeller Jr. and provided crucial bureaucratic support through the National Park Service; Harold Fabian, an associate of Albright's who became the Rockefellers' western lawyer for the project; Struthers Burt, a Pennsylvania-born Jackson Hole dude rancher and writer who proposed to Albright a conservation program for the valley as early as 1923; and a number of local Wyoming professionals and politicians who worked to purchase and nationalize Jackson Hole lands. Differences existed between these professionals but their commonalities were sufficiently strong, allowing me to refer to them collectively.

they managed on SRLC lands. These were Fabian-managed from Utah and included a host of Utah businessmen and investors. Elaborate connections between each of these companies made controlling information regarding their profits an important facet of the overall GTNP project.

The SRLC and Teton Companies were intimate financial partners. For instance, the SRLC leased their land to the Teton Companies for which the SRLC received rents and royalty cuts based on the Teton Companies' profits each year. Often, negotiations about the details of those leases were intricate and aggressive. When tourism faltered during the Great Depression, for example, the Teton Companies made numerous requests for more favorable lease conditions with the SRLC. Kenneth Chorley, the aide who Rockefeller Jr. appointed as the Teton project supervisor, was unmoved, arguing that despite the company's economic woes there was "no possible justification for the granting of either of the alternative requests outlined...or for that matter for making any of these requests."⁷ His position revealed that profit, quite naturally, was a distinct concern for the SRLC. In fact, when Chorley and his Rockefeller associate, Vanderbilt Webb, introduced the Jackson Hole conservation project to lead Rockefeller counsel Thomas Debevoise for approval, they assured him that the properties could "be operated so as to pay a fair return on the amount of money that we paid for them."⁸ In some cases, they even expected "a substantial financial return."⁹ In 1936, the SRLC invested over \$30,000 in the Teton Lodge Company towards remodeling Moran, the site of the valley's

⁷ Kenneth Chorley to Vanderbilt Webb, September 17, 1934, folder 232, box 26, Jackson Hole Series 3 Sub Series A3, Record Group 4, Kenneth Chorley Papers, RAC.

⁸ Chorley to Thomas Debevoise, April 24, 1928, folder 1, box 19, Jackson Hole Series 3 Sub Series A3, Record Group 4, Kenneth Chorley Papers, Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

⁹ Chorley to V. Webb, June 8 1929, folder 154, box 19, Jackson Hole Series 3 Sub Series A3, Record Group 4, Kenneth Chorley Papers, RAC.

first Jackson Lake Lodge.¹⁰ Like any corporation, the SRLC was interested in profit but its members worked to skillfully parley information about their financial concerns to the public.

With a commitment to privacy that matched Standard Oil's inclination toward secrecy, the team erased all of their concern with financial return in Jackson Hole from public acknowledgement. In all written and verbal representations of their project, the team segmented the SRLC from the Teton Companies. Kenneth Chorley provided the group with a simple linguistic recipe for handling the issue of profit when he assured Wyoming's Senator Robert Carey that "there is no connection whatever between the Teton Lodge Company and the Snake River Land Company."¹¹ The team turned often to this formula, repeating that "neither the Snake River Land Company nor Mr. Rockefeller owns or has any interest in... any stock of any of the Teton Companies" and that the SRLC and the Teton Investment companies were "separate and different."¹² Rhetorically, the project was solely about Rockefeller Jr.'s "desire to present the area to the national government for the enjoyment of all the people."¹³ With similar, carefully constructed phrases repeated countless times and under varied circumstances, SRLC officials rhetorically divorced their plan from profit. In these and other attempts, the group acted according to a Standard Oil-bred impulse to control the dissemination of public information regarding their goals.

¹⁰ "Grand Teton lodge and Transportation Company Report: An Audit of Accounts and Records, October 12, 1946, folder 831, box 90, Series 2E, Record Group 2 Office of Messrs Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archive, RAC.

¹¹ Kenneth Chorley to Senator Carey, March 4 1931, folder 232, box 26, Jackson Hole Series 3 Sub Series A3, Record Group 4, Kenneth Chorley Papers, RAC.

¹² "Mr. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s Proposed Gift of Land for the National Park System in Wyoming; History of the Snake River Land Company and of the Efforts to Preserve the Jackson Hole Country for the Nation." Yellowstone National Park, n.d., 57.

¹³ JDR Jr. To Children. February 28, 1956, Folder 831, Box 90, Series 2E, Record Group 2 Office Of Messrs Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

The conservation project also hinged upon the team's strategic use of the idea of wilderness. Much of the public's opposition to the creation of a national park in Jackson Hole centered upon the area's long human inhabitation, first by Native Americans and then by Anglo agriculturalists and ranchers. The team's rhetoric reframed this history, making the goal simply to "preserve" a "truly great wilderness area, all parts of it wonderfully scenic and great game ranges still unspoiled [sic]."¹⁴ The team formed Jackson Hole Preserve Incorporated as the SRLC's successor with a mission that underscored this preservationist premise. Its stated charge was to "protect and preserve...the primitive grandeur and natural beauties of the landscape" surrounding the Tetons.¹⁵ Disregarding long-established trade networks, towns and working ranches within Jackson Hole, Albright told Congress that he "pictured Jackson Hole... far removed from great cities [so] that its beauty and wilderness charm could be preserved for all time."¹⁶

The conservation team strategically handled the area's history by mythologizing all previous human activity. When Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes presented the plan to President Roosevelt, for instance, he took his lead from the Rockefeller team, noting that

the area within the proposed monument in early pioneer days was historically important because of the many stirring episodes of pioneer life which transpired there. During this time, Jackson Hole is reputed to have been the retreat of Western bad men and the fur trade also flourished there. John Colter, Jedediah [sic] S. Smith, Jim Bridger, Thomas Fitzpatrick, William L. Sublette, and David

¹⁴ Fabian to Webb, August 28 1929, folder 14, box 2, Jackson Hole Preserve Incorporated Series, Sub Series A 7.1, Record Group 4, Harold Fabian Papers, RAC.

¹⁵ Horace M. Albright Papers, University of California Los Angeles, Coll. 2056, box 81, folder 54.

¹⁶ "Mr. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s Proposed Gift of Land for the National Park System in Wyoming; History of the Snake River Land Company and of the Efforts to Preserve the Jackson Hole country for the Nation." Yellowstone National Park, n.d., 4.

Jackson and Kit Carson are among the prominent names identified with the early days of the Jackson Hole country.¹⁷

Ickes' characterization of Jackson Hole echoed Fabian's by turning Jackson Hole's history into another link in America's Manifest Destiny. Fabian used rhetoric that would have made Frederick Jackson Turner proud when he claimed that the valley's trapping history made it the "headquarters of the early day west from which the white man gradually spread over this section of the country."¹⁸ Both Ickes and Fabian spoke according to early conservation plans that proposed making Jackson Hole into a "museum" to exhibit "the trappers, the pioneers and the cattlemen who won the west" in something like a "glass case."¹⁹ These representations cemented the area's human history to the nation's mythology in order to make Jackson Hole worthy of preservation.

Elements of Jackson Hole's complex human history, however, often fractured this depiction, revealing the degree to which the Rockefellers' passive preservation in fact necessitated active changes in the land. For instance, Moran was a town built for reclamation work done at Jackson Lake before the Rockefeller team's project began. Its history complicated the Rockefellers' Jackson Hole mythology. Fabian insisted that the collection of over 100 buildings at Moran "actually was... not and never has been a town."²⁰ Nonetheless, one of the three bills that failed to pass Congress died because many legislators and conservationists thought that Moran and the irrigation dam, by existence, jeopardized Jackson Hole's wilderness qualities. During the 1940s, when the

¹⁷ Ickes to FDR Draft, November 15 1939, folder 23, box 4, Jackson Hole Preserve Incorporated Series, Sub Series A 7.1, Record Group 4, Harold Fabian Papers, RAC.

¹⁸ Fabian to V. Webb, August 28, 1929, folder 14, box 2, Jackson Hole Preserve Incorporated Series, Sub Series A 7.1, Record Group 4, Harold Fabian Papers, RAC.

¹⁹ Fabian to V. Webb, July 3, 1941, folder 775, box 83, Record Group 2 Office of Messrs Rockefeller, Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

²⁰ Fabian to Raymond Lillie, November 9, 1953, folder 831, box 90, Record Group 2 Office of Messrs Rockefeller, Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

team was criticized for fencing wildlife, Horace Albright claimed that Jackson Hole could never be “wilderness...in the true sense of that term in view of the existing highways, the towns, the ranches, the lodge, the great concrete dam at the outlet of Jackson Lake.”²¹ Thus, the team’s wordplay jostled with a long history of human labor in Jackson Hole where dams, fences, towns and roads made wilderness preservation a slippery conceptual trout that often escaped from the Rockefeller team’s rhetorical lines and hooks.

Often, these failed impulses to control knowledge about profit and wilderness materialized upon Jackson Hole’s landscape. In 1931, for instance, landowners adjacent to SRLC holdings needed easements from the Rockefellers to upgrade utility lines. The Grand Teton conservation team saw electrical lines as symbols of human modernity that detracted “from the wilderness character of the place.” When they refused to provide easements, their efforts to control the slippery notion of wilderness reshaped the valley, creating “considerable confusion” and days of delay for work crews who waited to build.²² Laborers eventually placed the poles and wires where the Rockefeller team hoped they would interfere least with scenic views, creating a lasting imprint upon the landscape below the Tetons.

Evidence from the rich and varied documents at the RAC has clarified my understanding of the historical moments when Standard Oil’s corporate model intersected with and created roadblocks for the Rockefellers’ Jackson Hole conservation work. Interplay between Rockefeller industry and conservation made GTNP a place where

²¹ “Draft Response to ‘Fenced Wildlife in Jackson Hole.’” Horace M. Albright Papers, University of California Los Angeles, Coll. 2056, box 81, folder 54.

²² Fabian to Dick Winger, May 15, 1931. Box 26, Folder 224. Jackson Hole Preserve Incorporated Series, Sub Series A 7.1, Record Group 4, Harold Fabian Papers, RAC.

homestead ruins will perhaps continually contend with soaring mountains as America's favored "wilderness" iconography.



"Barn on Mormon Row, with the Teton Mountain Range in the Background, Grand Teton National Park."

Brent Winebrenner." www.allposters.com