

Grand Teton National Park turns eighty

By MJ Clark

February 25, 2009 --

MOOSE — Grand Teton National Park celebrates its 80th birthday tomorrow. The park, which is now a world-renowned destination, the economic engine of the valley and a favorite backdrop for SUV ads, was not always thought of as a good idea.

When the area was first protected in 1897, it was as an afterthought to the creation of Yellowstone National Park. In 1918 Wyoming Congressman Frank Mondell unsuccessfully introduced a bill to extend Yellowstone's southern boundary, and it was 10 years before Wyoming Sen. John Kendrick successfully sponsored a bill to establish a separate Grand Teton National Park.

In 1929, when President Calvin Coolidge signed the legislation creating Grand Teton National Park, the park was one-third the size of the park we know today: 96,000 acres consisting of just the Teton range and the six glacial lakes at the foot of the mountains. But plans were already in motion to enlarge the park. Beginning in 1928, John D. Rockefeller Jr. quietly bought up about 35,000 acres of valley lands for \$1.4 million, intending to donate them towards the formation of the park. Local residents saw the stealth purchases as a land grab, however, removing land from grazing and hunting access, and resentment grew.

Local and statewide opposition to the park stalled Rockefeller's efforts to donate the land for 15 years. Finally he wrote to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, threatening to sell the land to "...any satisfactory buyers" if the federal government would not accept his gift.

Spurred by his fellow millionaire's letter, on March 15, 1943, Roosevelt used a presidential proclamation to establish a 221,000-acre Jackson Hole National Mounument, effectively overriding Congress' deadlock but not local opposition.

Wyoming Gov. Lester C. Hunt was quoted in the June 24, 1943 Jackson Hole Courier as saying "I shall utilize all police authority at my disposal to evict from the proposed Jackson Hole National Monument any federal official who attempts to assume authority."

Hunt's sentiments were echoed by local ranchers, led by then-future Gov. Clifford P. Hansen, who notified the press that they would hold a cattle drive across the Valley, and then did so "to Hell with the consequences," according to *and That's the Way it Was in Jackson Hole* by Jack Huyler. Photos of the protest made news nationwide, appearing in Time, Newsweek, Life and Look magazines.

Creation of the monument was so unpopular with Congress that they voted to abolish it — forcing President Roosevelt to counter with a pocket veto. The state of Wyoming sued the National Park Service to overturn the proclamation, but that lawsuit failed in the courts.

After World War II, sentiment against the park and its enlargement eased somewhat, and President Harry S. Truman eventually signed a bill on Sept. 14, 1950 that merged the original 1929 park with the 1943 monument. Former Gov. Hansen is on record as a supporter of the park today, saying in a 1999 letter to Huyler, "I've said many times how grateful I am to the Rockefeller family for the prescience in protecting this valley."