

The evolution of the Nevada state park system began at least as early as 1923, when the Legislature authorized the governor to "select, designate and set aside" areas of the public domain for recreation grounds and game refuges. The statute gave the State Fish and Game Commission responsibility for administering the sites, some of which later became parts of the park system. The lawmakers appropriated \$5000 to launch the program. That year, by proclamation, Governor James G. Scrugham set aside eleven sites. Later in 1923 he added more (the act allowed as many as twenty-five). To finance the effort, the Legislature, in 1925, appropriated \$20,000. Some of the sites became scenes of activity by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), working with the National Park Service on several projects in Clark and Lincoln counties in the 1930s.

By an act approved on March 26, 1935, the first four State Parks came into being: Cathedral Gorge, Kershaw Canyon-Ryan, Beaver Dam, and Boulder Dam-Valley of Fire. The statute gave the State Highway Engineer supervisory power over the parks "pending the creation of a state parks commission." On the same day the governor approved an act establishing a five-member, unsalaried State Park Commission, which was to supervise and make regulations for the parks. The act made the State Highway Engineer the ex officio Superintendent of State Parks. Both statutes prohibited the destruction or removal of equipment, structures, and artifacts at these facilities. The lands for the parks had been acquired by donations from or land exchanges with the federal government. A legislative act of 1925 had authorized the governor to accept lands, up to 30,000 acres, offered to the state by the federal government. Later park sites came into the System through leases, donations, and use permits from the federal government and private citizens and organizations.

In 1941 the Legislature passed the Baker Act, a measure that authorized the Governor to transfer to the federal government lands within the Boulder Dam-Valley of Fire State Park in exchange for equivalent federal lands. This made possible private purchases of what became state land within the park. The sales became one of the objects of a 1956 grand jury investigation of the Surveyor General and other state officials.

Meager state appropriations, the demise of the CCC, and the coming of World War II caused the parks to languish until the 1950s. Governor Charles H. Russell reactivated the Park Commission in 1952. Beginning in 1955 more generous state funding allowed for the appointment of a director, the hiring of additional personnel, restoration of deteriorated facilities, erection of signs, planning for new sites, and the combating of vandalism. A statute of 1957 reorganized the Park Commission and expanded its membership to seven; the members of the commission, who were to serve at the pleasure of the Governor, were required to elect a chairman and vice-chairman annually. The law empowered the governor to appoint a director, who was to serve as Secretary of the Commission. It also required the Commission to cooperate with federal agencies.

Section 4 of the 1957 statute gave the Governor the power to designate, by proclamation and upon the recommendation of the Park Commission, "any site, place or building located on any publicly owned land, or any land in the state held by the State Park Commission under lease or permit, as a state park, state monument, historical landmark, historical building, an archeological area or recreational area." Section 5 designated the Genoa fort and stockade as a state monument and placed it under the jurisdiction of the Park Commission.

Based on the power granted in Section 4, Governor Russell issued a proclamation later in 1957 setting aside Fort Churchill, the Ichthyosaur Fossil Area, Ward Charcoal Ovens, and Snyder Meadows as state parks. (That portion of the proclamation concerning Snyder Meadows was later voided upon the request of the Director of State Parks.) Based on legislation of 1931 and 1933, Fort Churchill had been maintained by the Nevada Sagebrush Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. A statute of 1955 created a separate Park Board to oversee the Ichthyosaur site; the act of 1957 changed this by designating the Park Commission as the Ichthyosaur Park Board.

Another legislative measure of 1957 enabled the governor "to accept...any conveyance by the United States Government, or by any person, firm, association, corporation or political subdivision or municipality of this state... lands for park, recreational or other public purposes."

An act of 1961 officially designated the state parks collectively as the State Park System and spelled out in greater detail the duties, powers, and qualifications of the Director and Commission. It also broadened the System's authority to acquire lands for park purposes. In 1963 the System became a division of the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, to be headed by an Administrator appointed by the Director of the Department. The same legislation abolished the State Park Commission, replacing it with the State Park Advisory Commission. As the name indicates, the new Commission's duties were to recommend policy, rather than to set it. A central figure in the development of state parks was Thomas W. Miller (1886-1973). He served on the original Park Commission in the 1930s and for many years as chairman of its successors. Miller directly oversaw the establishment of the first parks, and was successful in getting more generous financial support from the Legislature.

The 1965 Legislature gave the Division of State Parks added responsibilities to: prepare and maintain a comprehensive statewide outdoor recreation plan; represent and act for the state in dealing with the Federal Government for the purposes of receiving financial assistance for planning, acquisition or development of outdoor recreation projects; and maintain and protect all existing historical markers.

In 1967 the Division was organized into two units, Planning and Operations, headed respectively by a Chief Recreation Land Use Planner and a Deputy Director. A year later the Division received authority to hire a State Park Construction Engineer.

Beginning in 1971 the Division had charge of the state's historic preservation program. This activity was transferred to the new Division of Historic Preservation and Archeology in 1977.

Originally, the state's general fund provided the financial base of the parks. Later, bond issues and user fees also furnished support. Since 1965 some of the proceeds of a motor boat fuel tax have gone to the Division.

Over the years the Legislature passed several acts permitting and encouraging the State Park Commission/System/Division to acquire lands from the federal government and private owners through exchange, lease, gift, grant, devise, purchase, condemnation, and bond issues. Other statutes have authorized cooperation with the political subdivisions of the state, as well as federal and state agencies. Nevada has taken advantage of federal legislation to expand its system of parks. For example, the Recreation and Public Purposes Act of 1926 (as amended) has allowed the state to acquire several thousand acres for parks.

In addition to land donations, leases, and exchanges, the federal government has aided the development of state parks in a variety of ways. From 1965 through the 1970s a major source of financial support came from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund. Moneys have also come to the parks through the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA), the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Boating Access Program, and grants from the Bureau of Reclamation. Federal work-relief programs of the 1930s, such as the CCC, had helped to launch Nevada's system of parks; later programs, such as the U. S. Youth Conservation Corps, have helped to sustain it.

Park Commission 1934-1960 1 cu. ft.

This box consists of the files of the State Park Commission which was almost dormant from its inception in 1935 to its reactivation in 1955. The first twenty years of correspondence are from the office of Robert Allen who was also the State Highway Engineer and Chairman of the State Planning Board. The files from the 1950's include a transcription of the October 1957 meeting of the Park Commission, as well as correspondence from the Executive Director of the Parks System.

Parks Division 1955-1994, bulk 1961-1994 16 cu. ft.

These records consist of files of the Park Division of the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. The majority of the records are from the office of the Administrator of the Division who, for many years was John Richardson.

The first box consists of correspondence from the 1960s and early 1970s and quarterly reports from the early 1970s. The correspondence is filed by subject, including state and federal agencies and state park organizations.

The other 15 cubic feet of records are arranged by the State Parks filing system developed in the early 1970s and followed by the Division into the early 1990s. The filing system was retained when the records were processed by the State Archives.

Included in the files of the Division are year-end reports from 1980 to 1992, Park Advisory Commission meeting minutes from 1955 to 1992, and records of the Nevada Natural History Association-a group that ran the concessions in the parks. Also included is correspondence regarding the Tahoe Rim Trail and the Young Conservation Corps.

In this collection are records regarding potential park projects and voluminous correspondence related to park planning, including master plans for Nevada state parks. Lastly there are files on real property acquisition and disposal for park units which include land appraisals, title documents, maps, and drawings.

Other sources of records:

Complimentary collections containing Park Commission and State Parks records can be found at the University of Nevada, Reno, Special Collections Department in the manuscript collections of Commission members Thomas Woodnut Miller and Margaret Wheat.

Thomas Woodnut Miller (NC441) was the first Park Commissioner (1935) and active on both the Commission and State Parks Advisory Commission until his death in 1973. 2 1/2 cubic feet of Parks material includes correspondence, minutes, general material and files on specific parks.

Margaret Wheat (83-24) was a Park Commissioner from 1953-1960 and often diametrically opposed to Thomas Woodnut Miller's policies and practices. Her collection of Parks material includes one cubic foot of correspondence, financial statements, clippings, bylaws, invoices, minutes of meetings, and notes.

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Manuscripts:

Thomas W. Miller. Papers. Collection NC441, Special Collections Department. University of Nevada, Reno.

William C. Miller . Papers. Collection 87-06, Special Collections Department. University of Nevada, Reno. Miller served on the Park Board ca.1953-1956 and was its secretary for most of that time. Much of this collection consists of letters to and from Chairman Thomas W. Miller.

Margaret M. Wheat. Papers. Collection 83-24, Special Collections Department. University of Nevada,

Division of State Parks - Bibliography

Reno. Wheat was a member of the Ichthyosaur State Park Board and the State Park Commission, 1953-1960. The papers include correspondence, minutes and agendas of meetings, newspaper clippings, news releases, budgets and expenses, legislation, proposed legislation, regulations, reports, testimony, and maps. Much of this material documents disputes between the Ichthyosaur Park Board and the Park Commission.