

How Denver Acquired Her Celebrated Mountain Parks

A Condensed History of the Building of America's Most Unique Park System

By WARWICK M. DOWNING

THIS year is the 20th Anniversary of the beginning of the Mountain Parks. In retrospect, Denver's Mountain Park System is perhaps her greatest achievement; certainly such Parks have returned more for each dollar invested, have brought greater happiness to more people, and have done more to advertise and build Denver, than any other municipal undertaking.

After twenty years, the why, how and wherefore of such beginning is of the greatest public interest. The entire credit must be given to the Commercial Organizations. Their usefulness was never more thoroughly vindicated. On February 9, 1911, President Charles A. Johnson of the Chamber of Commerce appointed a Special Parks Committee, and named Warwick M. Downing, then a member of the Board, as Chairman thereof, and commissioned it to report on the proposition of a park near the mountains. A few days prior thereto, the Denver Real Estate Exchange had, on motion of John Brisbane Walker, appointed a committee headed by Kingsley A. Pence to study the question of a foothills park near Morrison. A few days later, the Denver Motor Club appointed Elmer E. Sommers, Chairman of a similar committee. The idea of a park near the mountains was not new; it had been advocated perhaps ten years prior, in a public address to the Chamber of Commerce, by Thomas F. Walsh. But the idea had never been in concrete form. In fact, the first effort of the Committee was to educate the people to forget a "Foothill Park" and think only of a Mountain Park System.

On March 2, 1911, the committees from the three commercial bodies met, and resolved themselves into a Joint Committee, with Mr. Pence as Chairman, and appointed an Executive Committee, which was the working committee, and which later became the Mountain Parks Committee of the

Commercial Bodies. Its members were Mr. Downing, Chairman; Mr. Pence, Vice-Chairman; C. H. Howe, Treasurer; William H. Malone, Mr. Sommers and D. L. Webb. Thorndyke Deland, Secretary of the Chamber, was

IN THE past seven years, the area of Denver's Mountain Parks has been more than doubled. The development of the Echo Lake and Mount Evans area, the building of the Deer Creek Road, the construction of the Evergreen Dam, and the acquisition and development of the Park of the Red Rocks—are among the outstanding improvements. The hundred miles of mountain highways maintained and policed by the City have been constantly widened and perfected and the lower areas kept open through every season from gate to gate. The past few years have seen the vision, of which Mr. Downing tells, become a fact.

Secretary. Later Mr. Webb was succeeded by F. W. Sanborn, and E. R. Conaway, J. Foster Symes, and Findlay R. McFarland were added, making a committee of nine, three from each of the said bodies. Fred Steinauer, Superintendent of Parks, was at all times an active ally.

An Idea Without Precedent

This Committee had no precedent to follow. The idea was unique, never before considered by any municipality, and by the way, even until this day, no other American city has undertaken a project at all similar. On every side were difficulties, legal and financial: an innate opposition of the people to the crazy idea of spending any of the City's money way off in the mountains; the mountains for the most part were inaccessible for purpose of study, except by team or on horseback.

Nevertheless, the Committee plunged heartily into this work. Perhaps no other Civic Committee ever worked harder or longer, and certainly no other similar committee has had its early struggles so thoroughly crowned with success.

Saving Genessee Mountain

The first general public meeting was a luncheon on March 28th, attended by the Governor, the Highway Commission, members of the Legislature, City officials, and delegates from Arapahoe, Jefferson and Park Counties. All summer and well into the fall, the Committee worked, often meeting several times a week, and frequent trips to the mountains were made, where every nook and corner was explored. It was discovered that the 1200 acres covering Genessee Mountain had been sold to a sawmill about to convert that magnificent forest into lumber. With the help of E. W. Merritt, public-spirited citizens were prevailed upon to purchase this tract for \$3,000.00, and hold it for the chance that Denver would at a later time reimburse them. Thus Genessee Mountain was saved.

The Committee early realized that City officials would never lead in such a project; that no City Council would ever appropriate money for its commencement, and it would be difficult to procure continuing appropriations in a region where there would be no votes; that appeal must be made to the people by charter amendment, and that the people would never vote to tax themselves for an "idea," but there must be presented for their consideration a definite, complete, comprehensive and practical plan, which would explain just what a Mountain Park System was, what it would accomplish and what it would cost.

Presenting the Plan

On December 7th of the same year, the plan was complete and in writing. It presented a proposed amendment to the City Charter, creating the author-

ity to expend public moneys for park purposes outside of municipal bounds, providing for a one-half mill levy for Mountain Park purposes, as a special fund and to be used only for such purpose. The proposal was the same as adopted by the people the following year; it was later sanctioned by the Supreme Court; and no one since has ever suggested the necessity or advisability of any further charter powers to accomplish the purposes of the Mountain Parks. Denver's Charter could authorize Denver's expenditures, but Denver could not by Charter amendment affect jurisdiction in another county. Therefore, the plan presented a Legislative act granting to Denver powers of Eminent Domain and Police in respect to its Mountain Parks, which, through the work of this committee was enacted in 1913, Session Laws, Page 422.

A few sentences from report of this Committee will show the vision of these men, and how well they planned:

"A Mountain Park for Denver will be the first step, and, perhaps, the greatest step, in the great movement of making our mountains available for the people. It is Denver's chance to open a gateway into the mountains, and to take the lead in the work of making Colorado more attractive to tourists than Switzerland. It will also give Denver an opportunity to start the work of building good roads all over the state. Such a park will yield untold pleasure to the people of Denver, and as an attraction to visitors will prove a commercial asset worth one hundred times its cost.

"Our conception of a Mountain Park is a chain or series of parks somewhat in the form of a semi-circle, commencing at a point in the vicinity of Lookout Mountain, a tract in Bergen Park, a tract along Bear Creek above Evergreen, a tract in Spruce Park, a tract in Eden Park and following Turkey Creek canon to its mouth. Each park should be connected with all the others by a well-built road, and each end of the chain should be connected with Denver by a splendid drive.

"In general, there is a vast region immediately tributary to Denver, extending from South Boulder Creek to the Platte River, and from the foothills to the crest of the Continental Divide, which embraces scenery that for beauty and grandeur is unexcelled in the world. It is well watered and well wooded, some of it covered with immense pine forests. It has all the attractions that endear the mountains to everyone. In climate, it has Denver's climate, only far superior, cool or even cold at night during the hottest weather, and with air invigorating beyond belief. Indeed it can be made the great playground of the nation.

"It is impossible to select the entire region as a park, and similarly impossible to select any one portion without omitting much of value. Hence the plan of a chain of parks so as to embrace every character

of mountain scenery, viz: The view of the plains overlooking Denver, the view towards the main range, the open rolling parks, the charming canon and in particular the mouth of Turkey Creek, the region of the forests, the running water of Bear Creek and the wild flower section.

"Our mountains offer the opportunity of the greatest summer resort country in America. Nowhere else is there such a combination. Cool weather, climate, healthful surroundings, variety of amusement, with invigorating atmosphere. Yet, at present, they are not visited as they should be. . . . Our belief is that such parks will not only prolong the average visit of the tourist several times, but will add very greatly to the number of visitors, and in the end will largely be the cause of adding millions yearly to the wealth of the state."

Of particular interest was the fierce controversy within the Committee, as to the proposal to mention the development of the Mt. Evans region, now familiar to all as the road to Squaw Pass, Echo Lake, Summit Lake, and to the top of Mt. Evans. Some members of the Committee feared that the mere mention of a suggestion to spend any of Denver's money so far away, and to accomplish what then seemed so wild a dream, would so arouse the opposition of the tax payer as to defeat the whole plan. The majority, however, as a compromise, couched their hopes in the following harmless language:

"We have considered the question of asking the Federal Government to establish a Mountain Park immediately west of Denver's park extending westward so as to include the crest of the Continental Divide. Much of the land to be included in such a National Park already belongs to the Government. It is argued that the establishment of such a National Park would add many fold to the value of Denver's park, and would make available a region of surpassing grandeur and beauty, too far removed from Denver to be desirable for Denver's Park, and practically inaccessible without Denver's park. However, we have decided to refer the matter to the commercial bodies for their consideration without action on our part."

Campaigning for Mountain Parks

The campaign for the adoption of the Mountain Parks Amendment at the May, 1912, City Election was memorable. The campaign fund of about \$4,500 was raised by private subscription. Every public official, every newspaper, the civic societies, the labor organizations, and many prominent citizens were labored with, and any opposition forestalled. The city was placarded with maps and pictures. The most effective was the picture of a modest home, assessed at \$3,000 whose owner would be taxed 50 cents a year, but whose wife and children would

forever enjoy the Mountain Parks. At this time it is impossible to conceive the strength of the opposition to the Mountain Parks. The Playgrounds' advocates, who were submitting a somewhat similar amendment, refused to join forces for the reason that their supposedly popular amendment would certainly go down to defeat if coupled with the unpopular Mountain Parks Amendment. Yet it so happened that the Mountain Parks Amendment carried by a substantial majority, whereas at the same election the Playgrounds Amendment was decisively beaten.

The most effective feature of the campaign was the employment on Election Day of two or more beautiful young ladies for each voting place, each dressed in white with wide blue sashes, who carried the appeal, "Vote for the Mountain Parks." Who could resist?

After the successful conclusion of the campaign, the Committee supposed their labors finished, only to find that their work had just begun. The machinery had been installed, but it needed fuel to keep it running. There was for many years the indifference, and at times the active opposition of public officials. For many years it seemed that the Denver voters took pains to elect for officials in charge of Mountain Parks, those of its citizens most indifferent thereto, and some who at first were actively hostile.

Reporting on Mountain Parks.

During the fall of 1912, Frederick Law Olmsted was employed to make a report on the proposed Mountain Parks System. His report followed almost identically the lines of the Committee report. The first money for Mountain Parks was available in January, 1913. Under Mr. Olmsted's supervision, the Lookout Mountain Road was laid out. The Committee had the very helpful assistance of "Cement Bill" Williams, who had been trying for many years to get the Lookout Mountain Road built. An interesting sidelight was the intense opposition of the County Commissioners of Jefferson County to the building of an 18-foot roadway. They insisted the Lookout Mountain Road would be ample if a single-track road with frequent turn-outs. However, the County Commissioners were won over, and gave their hearty co-operation. During the year Denver spent \$44,000; the State High-

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way Fund contributed \$4,500; Jefferson County contributed from its own levy \$7,500, and from its allotment from the Highway Fund, \$15,000.

On August 25, 1914, the Committee procured passage of the Act of Congress granting 7,047 acres of public land to Denver at a cost of \$1.25 per acre, 38 Stat. 706. This land included all the Government land in the Mountain Parks region outside of the Forest Reservation.

The Lookout Mountain Roads

At the time, Mr. Otto F. Thum was Commissioner of Property under Commission Form of Government. He had been elected in May of 1913, and for more than a year was suspicious of the Committee, and indeed hostile. However, he was fair-minded, and in time became a sincere and active supporter of the Mountain Parks. Finally, on September 15, 1914, he invited the Committee to act as the Mountain Parks Advisory Committee of the City of Denver, a committee to take under his supervision the active charge and management of the Parks. This was a duty the Committee did not care to assume, but in the public interest Mr. Thum's request was accepted. During the year, the Lookout Mountain Road was finished, and was extended beyond Genesee Saddle. The City expended \$41,000; the State Highway Commission \$4,000; and Jefferson County \$10,000.

In December, the City Commissioners refused to make the half-mill levy in accordance with the Charter Amendment. Inasmuch as the assessed value of all property in Denver had been raised, the half-mill levy would produce \$180,000. The City Commissioners determined to make a levy of only one-quarter of this amount. Various efforts were made to compromise. The City Commissioners refused to concede. Thereupon, and on December 11th, the Committee on motion of J. Foster Symes, decided to take legal steps to enforce the levy. This motion was carried in the Committee by a vote of five to four. The minority members insisted on an appeal to the so-called Joint Committee which had ceased to function. The argument before the Joint Committee was bitter. The final vote was seventeen to fourteen in favor of legal proceedings. The lawyers on the Committee brought man-

damus suit to compel the levy, and won both in the District Court and in the Supreme Court. Incidentally, they procured the Supreme Court's opinion that the Mountain Parks Amendment was constitutional and valid.

The Bear Creek Road

The result of an ample treasury was that in 1915, the Bear Creek Road was commenced on April 29, and finished on December 7th. The Lookout Mountain Road was carried from Genesee Saddle almost to Bergen Park, and a passable road was built to connect Bergen Park with Bear Creek. With the completion of such drive during the year, the success of the Mountain Parks became assured, and those who had most bitterly opposed the mandamus proceeding, confessed their error, and rejoiced that the big start had been made.

During 1915, the Committee actively undertook the work to create a National park in the Mt. Evans area. Senator Shafroth introduced a bill in the Senate, and Congressman Hilliard a bill in the House, to provide for the first mile of a cement road between Denver and Golden. This mile was built entirely with Denver's funds, but with the understanding that the State Highway Commission would carry the road forward during the succeeding years. During the year Mr. Thum's term expired, and he was succeeded by Mr. L. C. Greenlee as Commissioner of Property. Mr. Greenlee continued the authority of the Committee, and until Mr. Speer became the Mayor the following year, the Committee continued in entire charge of the administration of the Mountain Parks System.

Early in 1916, the Committee appropriated \$30,000 to start the road from Bergen Park to Squaw Pass. It also secured the order for condemnation suit to acquire the Dedisse Ranch (the site for Evergreen Lake), and procured the State Highway Commission to commence the construction of the Denver-Morrison Road.

From Bergen Park to Squaw Pass

On Mr. Speer's election as Mayor in 1916, he appointed W. F. R. Mills, Commissioner of Improvements and Parks. One of the first official acts of Mr. Mills was to stop the construction of the road from Bergen Park to Squaw Pass, saying, "It is a road that starts nowhere, ends nowhere, and never gets there." As Mr. Speer and

Mr. Mills gave further study to the question, they both became glorious advocates of the Mountain Parks. Mr. Speer decided to continue the Mountain Parks Advisory Commission in force, but named the members thereof. Mr. John S. Flower was selected as Chairman, but the other members were taken from the Mountain Parks Committee of the Commercial Bodies. The Committee of the Commercial Bodies, however, continued to function for many years thereafter, and as occasion required, rendered valuable assistance to the official Advisory Commission.

In 1918, a determined effort was made to have Congress pass a bill creating a National park to the west of Denver's Parks. It had been decided, however, to ask that the Mt. Evans area be made a National park as an addition to the Rocky Mountain National Park. Senator Shafroth and Congressman Hilliard introduced the necessary bills. Under the direction of Congressman Ed Keating, a plan was evolved to have the bill passed. W. F. R. Mills went to Washington to assist in the work. Horace M. Albright for the National Parks Department made a glowing report. However, there was considerable opposition on the part of Chief Forester Graves of the National Forests. Col. Graves proposed that his department develop the Mt. Evans area. He promised immediately the commencement of construction of the road from Squaw Pass to Echo Lake. As a result, it was decided to abandon the idea of a National park, and accept the proffered aid of the National Forestry Department. Ever since that time, the Forestry Department has sincerely co-operated in the development of the Mt. Evans region, and has expended probably three or four hundred thousand dollars of its funds in the development of such area.

Mr. Bailey was elected Mayor in May of 1919. He continued the Mountain Parks Advisory Commission, but selected W. F. R. Mills as Chairman. In August of that year, the road from Bergen Park to Squaw Pass was completed, and work was started by the Forestry Department from Squaw Pass to Echo Lake. In August of 1921, Echo Lake was purchased.

Prior to the Municipal Election in May of 1923, the Denver Civic and Commercial Group of Mountain Parks, Roads and Forestry, which had succeeded the original Mountain Parks

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miles up grade and water was not available. Although, during the past summer, two gasoline engines have been used on the road, the last ten-mile stretch resolved itself into a job for the man of brawn.

During 1926, six husky giants built 900 feet of road in one week, moving by hand 700 cubic yards of material. Materials vary from solid rock to large boulders and this made surfacing another problem. At one place, within 150 feet, there were 4,000 cubic yards of rock excavation.

Unlike the engineers, however, these men worked only in the summer season and the actual building of the road was in progress in July, August and sometimes part of September. Yet here too, there have been hazards. At one time a crew of sixteen became marooned between Echo and Summit Lakes in a land-slide. Their rescue was due to the heroism of one man who worked his way out and went to Echo Lake for help. He arrived exhausted but his call brought two crews from Denver. They set to work at either end of the barricaded section and soon released the self-imprisoned workers.

Once an impatient governor of Colorado demanded to know why work was not progressing on the Evans road in the month of June, so he dispatched two men from the state engineering department to investigate the condition of the road. From Echo Lake to the saddle of Evans these men picked their way on snow shoes. They were lost in fogs, found themselves on snow drifts overhanging ledges and, only by dint of a friendly moon, arrived safely back at Echo Lake at midnight. As the result of this expedition one man was ill for several weeks and their joint report convinced the governor that the moods of the high mountains are not to be reckoned by the moods of man and yet within the next few weeks that same road would be as safe as a city boulevard!

Mind and Muscle Win

And so it is that the building of the Evans thoroughfare represents the pitting of the mind and muscle of man against the obstacles of natural forces. Climbing along the gradual grade of this giant highway, surveying its breath-taking expanses, marveling at its vistas, and enjoying the thrill of its topmost elevation, all these sensations are augmented by the contemplation of the successful struggle of its accomplishment.

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Committee, made a comprehensive report, demanding the expenditure of \$125,000 per year for five years in the maintenance and development of Denver's Mountain Parks System.

Mayor Stapleton, prior to his election, pledged his support to this program, and has zealously performed his pledge. On his election he continued the powers of the Mountain Parks Commission. He appointed Charles MacAllister Willcox as Chairman, and the other members were Kingsley A. Pence, Fred R. Ross, E. E. Sommers, Warwick M. Downing, George H. Harvey, Fred C. Steinauer, and Peter Seerie. All of such members had long been identified with the work. The Commission was particularly fortunate in that Mr. C. D. Vail was Commissioner of Improvements and Parks. He continued in office until recently selected as Highway Commissioner, when he was succeeded by Mr. F. J. Altwater.

The achievements during the last eight years are well known to the people of Denver. Steady progress had been made year by year. The active administration has been under Craig Bradford, Superintendent of Mountain Parks. Mention, however, should be made of the great achievement of E. E. Sommers, who at the time was also a member of the State Highway Commission, in procuring the building of the highway from Echo Lake to Summit Lake, and equally of the work of his successor, Mr. Peter Seerie, who completed that work and also was responsible for the building of the magnificent new highway from Echo Lake to Idaho Springs.

It is difficult to visualize the days before the Mountain Parks, as difficult to visualize as the days before the automobile. It is impossible at this time to appreciate the efforts and struggles of the pioneers in this work, many of whom have passed to their reward. After the lapse of twenty years, it is fitting that this short record should be made to perpetuate the memory of their achievements.

A Book of Nation-Wide Interest

Since the installation of modern methods of appraisals under the "Denver Plan of Assessment," enquiries from all parts of the United States as well as from foreign countries have been received by the Assessor's office asking for complete information regarding this system.

To meet the evident need for such information, Clem W. Collins, Manager of Revenue of the City and County of Denver, in collaboration with W. L. Prouty and Frank H. Prouty, Appraisers and Engineers of this City, have recently published the "Appraiser's and Assessor's Manual," a book which is unique in its field.

While a great many volumes have been written concerning numerous theories of valuation, not until now have these various theories been reduced to a workable basis and been compiled in one publication.

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To all who are concerned in any way with the appraisal of land, buildings, machinery, merchandise, personal property, automobiles, household goods, stocks and bonds, etc., the book offers clear and complete directions for effective procedure.

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Darby & Co. of No. 2 Wall Street, New York, rate Denver as follows: "Denver has the lowest bonded net debt and the lowest ratio of net bonded debt to assessed valuation of any city in the United States with over 100,000 population."

Denver's condition is thus summarized: "Denver with its net bonded debt of \$285,000, its city owned property valued at \$83,787,000, and its record of tax collection averaging 99 per cent for the past three years stands in our judgment as probably our pre-eminent municipal security."

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