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A World of Wounds: American Nature and the Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Military
Veterans, 1918-1955

By

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract: The last five decades have seen a proliferation of organized nature therapy programs for military veterans. These programs are seen as a cheap, effective, and politically popular method for dealing with the social problem of reintegrating veterans into civilian life and treating the physical and psychological injuries that they have suffered in war. This dissertation uses several case studies to explore an earlier history of veteran engagement with the natural world. Many American veterans of the First World War sought to reintegrate into society by living and working in nature, including veterans in the earliest generation of National Park Service employees, veterans who claimed public land through the Homestead Acts, and veterans who took public employment in the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression. These examples reveal that far from laying any exclusive claims on American nature by virtue of their service or isolating themselves into veteran-exclusive communities and organizations, these returning soldiers and sailors translated ideas of public service, democratic idealism, and health which they developed during their military careers into a mission-oriented disposition towards nature which saw its benefits as vital for all Americans. A final chapter shifts to veterans of the Second World War who then worked in the environmental preservationist movement and the resort skiing industry, highlighting how the outdoor recreation became the primary method by which Americans enacted their relationship with the natural world.

Introduction: A Great Constructive Ideal

In 1912, the German pacifist and educator Wilhelm Lamszus published *The Human Slaughter-House: Scenes from the War that is Sure to Come*. Written from the perspective of a conscripted soldier, the book depicts a conflict entirely drained of any honor, redemption, or humanity. The tools of industrialized combat bring about mass death notable above all for the absence of any intimacy between its participants. In one charge, the unnamed narrator's unit seems to be facing no human enemy at all. "Never a single arm raised against us, never the eye of a single man to challenge us," he marvels. "We are not even charging men...Why, we are only charging machines. And the machine triumphs deep into our very flesh." Modern war, Lamszus saw, remove the possibility of "a knightly death, an honorable soldier's death," and left only the prospect of "death by machinery." For Lamszus, such horrors were the logical endpoint of industrialization, the application on the human body of the automated processes already unleashed upon the Earth. "It is as though Death had scrapped his scythe for old iron," the narrator says in contemplation of the machine-gun. "They have ceased to mow corn by hand nowadays...[a]nd so they will have to shovel our millions of bodies underground with burying machines." Even before the advent of atomic weaponry, Lamszus feared that conflict now threatened ecocide, perhaps even omnicide. "[T]he human race died out this very night," the young soldier laments at the book's close. "[T]he fields are dead—the woods dead—the villages dead—the cities dead—the Earth is dead—the Earth was butchered to-night..."¹ The scale of death seemed to confirm these predictions. In the words of the philosopher Frédéric Gros, it constituted "the end of war as a possible moral experience." All that remained was "shapeless,

¹ Wilhelm Lamszus, *The Human Slaughter-House: Scenes from the War that is Sure to Come*, (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1913), 32-33, 75-76, 109-113.

anonymous, ‘great butchery’ which, far removed from heroic reveries, could inspire nothing but...disillusioned cynicism.”²

Though American soldiers would not see such devastation until near the end of the War, they returned home well-versed in its destructiveness. Their memories frequently went beyond the destruction of human bodies and minds and included the carnage that industrial war had enacted on the landscapes of Europe. Writing in 1930, veteran Tom Gill, then employed by the American Forestry Association, recalled standing next to a fellow soldier "in the midst of what had once been a thrifty forest" now reduced to "a shambles of twisted, broken snags, and shattered stumps" by artillery. "Nothing lived here. Nothing could live. It was desolation incarnate," Gill had thought. In his new postwar career, Gill was constantly reminded of what he had seen in combat. As he observed the aftermath of unregulated lumbering in Northern Michigan he wrote "[t]his time not the guns of the Boche but axe and fire had created the desolation before us...but the result was not far different. The destruction was just as complete." Gill offered a solution to this problem. If war had damaged men and the natural world together, the two could heal together. In Europe, American soldiers had also encountered cutting-edge forestry practices which allowed them to undertake a new project for the protection and restoration of American nature. "They knew now that something could be done to reestablish a forest cover and bring those barren stretches back to productivity," Gill wrote. "Before the Big Parade we were inclined to look at forest destruction with a shrug." The "returned soldier," would fight "this waste of millions of fertile acres." Conservation offered veterans not just a

² Frédéric Gros, *A Philosophy of War*, (New York: Verso, 2026), 19-20.

career, but a chance to serve the public good, “a great constructive ideal, [the] creation of future wealth and human happiness...on a permanent basis.”³

In Gill’s association of the protection of nature with a stable and happy future for American veterans we can see the emerging outlines of a now common phenomenon. In our own time, nature and recreational therapy grow in popularity year by year. The exact mechanism by which this process of environmental convalescence is thought to work remains unclear. Nature-based therapeutic interventions among military veterans have, as one recent overview stated, “been shown to provide at least short-term improvements to PTSD symptoms, depression, and stress, and foster improved self-esteem, personal growth, and social identity. However, *understanding of the mechanisms for this change requires more research*, in particular to understand the optimum elements that make interventions beneficial.” Multiple psychological theories, including attention restoration theory (ART), stress reduction theory (SRT), and conditioned restoration theory (CRT), have offered answers to this question that stress different aspects of physiology, emotional processing, and social interaction in their explanations, with none achieving dominance among researchers or clinicians. It is now generally uncontroversial to state that “[q]uantitative research has produced consistent evidence of improvements in PTSD symptoms following attendance at nature-based interventions.”⁴ Some theories, such as the

³ Annotated manuscript of “Wanted – 15,000,000 Trees” by Tom Gill, July 19, 1930, 1-12, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 6, folder 5, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

⁴ Rachel K. Marrow, “Examining the Role of Nature-Based Activities in the Lives of Military Veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder,” (PhD. Diss., University of Essex, 2022), 56, 64, 69-74. 134-144; See also, Dorthe Varning Poulsen, Ulrika K. Stigsdotter, and Anne Dahl Refshage, “Whatever Happened to the Soldiers? Nature-assisted Therapies for Veterans Diagnosed with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: A Literature Review” in *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening* Vol. 14 No. 2 (January 2015), 438-445.

biophilia hypothesis popularized by biologist E.O. Wilson, suggest that primordial connections exist between nature and human well-being.⁵

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is commonly associated in the public mind with military veterans who have experienced combat. The disorder was added to the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders only in its third edition in 1980 after much pressure from, among other groups, alienated Vietnam War veterans. Some psychologists have argued that PTSD is less a timeless condition which has been discovered than the manifestation of changing historical conditions.⁶ Still the bundle of symptoms categorized as PTSD – including depression, irritability, intrusive memories, hypervigilance, and insomnia – are consistent with a long litany of soldier's complaints from antiquity to the present day.⁷

A similar association has long existed between military veterans and the natural world, not only as a rhetorical stand-in for the geographic and cultural entities on whose behalf they fought, but as a potential solution to the social and political problems of their reintegration into civilian life. The most direct method for this was also the longest lasting: simply granting tracts of land to discharged veterans, to work either as individuals or in planned veteran communities. The Roman Senate, and later Emperors, purchased veteran loyalty with such settlements, sometimes on land those veterans had conquered. Similar policies were employed in ancient

⁵ Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia: The Human Bond with Other Species* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

⁶ Allan Young, *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 13-42.

⁷ The earliest work of Classical history, Herodotus' *Histories*, tells the story of the Athenian soldier Epizelus, who was said to have been rendered blind at the Battle of Marathon, "neither having received a blow in any part of his body nor having been hit with a missile," upon seeing a nearby comrade struck dead. Spanish soldiers of the 16th and 17th centuries claimed to suffer under a variant of combat fatigue they named *estar roto*; "to be broken." Subsequent wars, increasingly modernized and industrial in scale, continued to produce similar conditions under different guises, from Da Costa's Syndrome, Irritable Heart, Nostalgia, and Homesickness in the 19th century to the more familiar or clinical Shell shock, combat fatigue, and war neurosis in the 20th; Joshua A. Jones, "From Nostalgia to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: A Mass Society Theory of Psychological Reactions to Combat" in *Inquiries Journal* Vol. 5 No. 2, (2013).

China, the early modern Ottoman Empire, 19th century Russia, and across British Empire after the First World War in a policy the environmental historian J.R. McNeill has termed, the “environmental preemption” of future unrest.⁸ The Homestead Acts in the United States applied to all white male citizens but built special preferences into the process by which public lands could be claimed by veterans. Homestead Act claims were bookended by veterans. The first claim certified by the U.S. government granted 160 acres of Nebraska prairie to Civil War veteran Daniel Freeman in 1863 while the final one deeded a 50-acre claim in Alaska to Vietnam veteran Kenneth Deardorff in 1974.⁹

Over time, the relationship between veterans and nature took on more and more of a romantic dimension as the land ceased to be used as material reward for service. Rehabilitative nature existed uneasily but persistently alongside negative depictions of wilderness as barren, dangerous, or evil in Western thought. In the newly independent United States, Dr. Benjamin Rush, Delegate to the Continental Congress and Surgeon General of the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War, sporadically explored incipient ideas of nature therapy in *Medical Inquiries and Observation Upon Diseases of the Mind* in 1812. Alongside physical trauma and internal disease, he recognized “impressions that act primarily upon the heart” such as joy, terror, and grief as causes. In his identification of potential cures for “madness,” his work is peppered with “natural” remedies. “A pleasant season, a fine day, and even the morning sun, suspend the

⁸ J.R. McNeill, “Woods and Warfare in World History,” in *Environmental History*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (July, 2004), 388-410, 403.

⁹ Paul W. Gates, *The Jeffersonian Dream: Studies in the History of American Land Policy and Development*, (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 40-48; The National Park Service has itself leaned into the connection between Freeman and Deardorff. Freeman’s homestead was purchased by the United States government in 1938 and is now designate as Homestead National Historic Park. In 2018, Kenneth Deardorff’s 1945 Allis Chalmers Tractor was transported from Alaska to Nebraska to complete the narrative circle of veteran homestead memorialization; Mike Tobias, “A 1945 Tractor Connects the First and Last Homesteaders,” *Nebraska Public Radio*, December 28, 2018, <https://nebraskapublicmedia.org/en/news/news-articles/a-1945-tractor-connects-the-first-and-last-homesteaders/> (accessed September 23, 2025).

disease” he wrote. Other cures, supported by anecdotal evidence frequently gleaned, though not exclusively, from Revolutionary War veterans, included “amusements” such as long walks or viewing natural features of particular grandeur or beauty, travel “to relieve the mind of a monotony of objects,” and vigorous activity including, “the healthy and pleasant exercises of cultivating a garden.”¹⁰

As federal interventions in the lives of veterans increased after the American Civil War, administrators of the developing veteran health system began to implement some of Rush’s ideas on an ad hoc basis. Homes for disabled veterans began to take landscaping into account as a therapeutic tool, with one manager at the National Asylum for Disabled Veteran Soldiers proposing an arrangement of cottages with semi-commercial gardens to defray the cost of care and to provide “outdoor relief” to wounded soldiers.¹¹ Countless Civil War veterans took the outdoors on their own initiative, discovering pleasure and peace though rarely conceptualizing of it as treatment. Skills and habits they had learned as soldiers were applied to their lives and careers in nature. John Mead Gould became a prominent veteran proselytizer for benefits of camping through his 1877 guidebook *How to Camp Out: Hints for Camping and Walking*. Gould pushed the use of military equipment for recreation and described how camps replicated the camaraderie of the Union Army. Subsequent editions of *How to Camp Out* would be subtitled *Advice From a Civil War Veteran*.¹² The First World War saw the deepening of the institutionalized use of nature as a therapeutic tool on both sides of the Atlantic, where doctors as distant as those at Walter Reed General Hospital in Washington, D.C. and the Craiglockhart

¹⁰ Benjamin Rush, *Medical Inquiries and Observation Upon Diseases of the Mind*, (Philadelphia: Kimber & Richardson, 1812).

¹¹ Brian Matthew Jordan, *Marching Home: Union Veterans and Their Unending Civil War*, (New York: Liveright, 2014), 175-176.

¹² John Mead Gould, *How to Camp Out: Hints for Camping and Walking*, (New York: Scribner, Armstrong & Co., 1877), 6; See also, Phoebe S.K. Young, *Camping Grounds: Public Nature in American Life from the Civil War to the Occupy Movement*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 19-21, 34-42.

psychiatric war hospital in Scotland experimented with outdoor recreation and horticulture therapy as treatment for mental and physical conditions.¹³

The role of nature in the conduct of warfare has long been a major area of concern for military historians. The outcomes of countless engagements have been determined by environmental factors, recognized or unrecognized by commanders and soldiers. In “Woods and Warfare in World History,” a seminal article which sought to strengthen the link between military and environmental history, J.R. McNeill covered “thirty centuries of history” to probe how war has “affected land- and resource-use policy” and influenced the way people conceived of parts of nature, such as “iron, coal, horses, or mosquitoes,” with a special emphasis on forests and woodlands. Despite the capaciousness of McNeill’s vision, it remains entirely focused on the preparation and execution, rather than the aftermath, of war. Sections of the article cover “forests as a source of war materiel,” “forests as a direct factor in how wars are fought,” and the effects of war planning and combat on forests themselves.¹⁴ Environmental historians writing about war mostly fall silent at the same time as the guns.¹⁵

¹³On conditions in post-World War I veteran’s hospitals and the response of soldiers to them, see Beth Linker, *War’s Waste: Rehabilitation in World War I America*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011); Jessica L. Adler, *Burdens of War: Creating the United States Veterans Health System*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), and John M. Kinder, *Paying With Their Bodies: American War and the Problem of the Disabled Veteran*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015); For the history and later readoption of veterans’ horticulture therapy, see Sue Stuart-Smith, “Fresh Clean Soil: On War and Gardening,” in *The Times Literary Supplement (London)*, No. 6110, (May 8, 2020); Kenneth I. Helphand, *Defiant Gardens: Making Gardens in Wartime*, (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2006), 12-13; and Dorte Varning Poulsen, Ulrika K. Stigsdotter, Dorte Djernis, and Ulrik Sidenius, “‘Everything Just Seems Much More Right in Nature:’ How Veterans With Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Experience Nature-Based Activities in a Forest Therapy Garden,” in *Health Psychology Open*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (March 31, 2016).

¹⁴ McNeill, “Woods and Warfare in World History,” 389, 399, 401.

¹⁵ Historians working at the intersection of environmental and military history done a great to analyze encounters between common soldiers and their surrounding environments during combat, most prominently in the context of the American Civil War. See, Lisa Brady, *War Upon the Land: Military Strategy and the Transformation of Southern Landscapes during the American Civil War*, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012); Kathryn Shiveley Meier, *Nature’s Civil War: Common Soldiers and the Environment in 1862 Virginia*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Erin Stewart Mauldin, *Unredeemed Land: An Environmental History of the Civil War an Emancipation in the Cotton South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), and Judkin Browning and Timothy Silver, *An Environmental History of the Civil War*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020); Mauldin does follow the postwar environmental attitudes of certain individuals, some of whom served

Neither have historians following the lives of returning veterans consistently integrated concern for the environment or its use as a therapeutic tool into their analysis. Marginalized and stigmatized veterans have pressed for the recognition of their sacrifices and the amelioration of their subsequent struggles.¹⁶ This activism has frequently come in the context of disability and rehabilitation, from the recognition of the legitimacy of veteran pain to the improvement of conditions in veteran's hospitals and the implementation of jobs and rehabilitation programs for wounded soldiers and sailors. However, the relative recency of formalized veterans' nature therapy means that these trends are only now becoming more visible in the records of veteran's advocacy organizations or government institutions.¹⁷ The primary historiographical goal of this dissertation is to bridge this divide. Military veterans have used work and recreation in the outdoors to reacclimate to civilian life, assert their claims for support on the government and public, and recuperate mentally and physically from the traumas of their service.

This dissertation argues that current understandings of veterans' nature therapy offer a well-intentioned but historically decontextualized and limited view of how veterans have engaged with the natural world. Today there are a truly staggering array of options available for

in the Union Army, but largely does so in the context of their emancipation from slavery and navigation of subsequent regimes of racial violence and labor coercion. Others have examined the legacies of war on landscapes themselves but not the soldiers who fought upon them. David Biggs, *Footprints of War: Militarized Landscapes in Vietnam* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018); *War and the Environment: Military Destruction in the Modern Age*, Charles E. Closmann, ed., (College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 2009); one popular history has explored the relationship of World War I British soldiers' acquaintance to horses, dogs, cats, rabbits, birds, insects, deer, fish, and meadowlands, noting their recognition that in the trenches "[a]n ancient idea emerged – that nature could heal" without following this idea away from the front. John Lewis-Stempel, *Where the Poppies Blow: The British Soldier, Nature, The Great War*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2017), 13.

¹⁶ See *Service Denied: Marginalized Veterans in Modern American History*, John M. Kinder and Jason A. Higgins, eds. (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2022); Stuart McConnell, *Glorious Contentment: The Grand Army of the Republic, 1865-1900*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992); and Paul Starr, *The Discarded Army: Veterans After Vietnam*, (New York: Charterhouse, 1973).

¹⁷ See Sarah Handley-Cousins, *Bodies in Blue: Disability in the Civil War North*, (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2019); Keith Wailoo, *Pain: A Political History*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); David Kieran, *Signature Wounds: The Untold Story of the Military's Mental Health Crisis*, (New York: New York University Press, 2019); and Audra Jennings, *Out of the Horrors of War: Disability Politics in World War II America*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

veterans seeking rehabilitative outdoor activities. Organizations offer programs, clinical or recreational, based on hiking, climbing, camping, hunting, fishing, surfing, swimming, forest bathing, outdoor meditation, skiing and snowboarding, orienteering, falconry, gardening, and sailing, among others. Memoirs abound which follow the same general script of veteran healing in nature, wherein a veteran, damaged from the effect of war and stymied by the perceived betrayal or incompetence of government agents, engages in some form of outdoor recreational activity and is subsequently healed.¹⁸ What links all of these efforts, from the institutional to the individual, is the near-total conflation of veteran nature therapy with veteran nature recreation. Recreation has become the primary mechanism by which a veteran is thought to be able to access the healthful aspects of the natural world.

The intuitive association of recuperation and recreation after the Second World War has benefited from one story that serves as an ur-narrative of peace through nature. In 1948, an avid outdoorsman and amateur poet from York, Pennsylvania named Earl Shaffer became the first person to hike the entire Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine. Shaffer had spent the Second World War as a radioman and radar technician in the Pacific Theater. The experience – “four and a half years of Army service...without furlough or even rest leave” – had left Shaffer “confused and depressed.” His best friend and trail partner had been killed at Iwo Jima, ending their plans for a long-distance hike. Learning that the A.T. had never been hiked in a single season, Shaffer

¹⁸ An exhaustive list of outdoor rehabilitation memoirs would both contain more entries than time or space permits and become out of date almost immediately as more are published. Such memoirs, whether written by veterans or civilians, have become ubiquitous to the point that publishers have pressured writers to include what the British poet and disability advocate Polly Atkin has termed the “redemptive Nature Cure arc,” in works of non-fiction even in cases where no such “cure” was found. The seemingly inevitable result has been that some works, such as Raynor Winn’s wildly popular *The Salt Path*, appear to have exaggerated or wholly invented such cures. In *The Salt Path* Winn claimed that extensive walking along England’s southern coast relieved her husband’s incurable corticobasal degeneration; Chloe Hadjimatheou, “The Real Salt Path: How a Blockbuster Book and Film Were Spun From Lies, Deceit and Desperation,” in *The Observer* (London), July 5, 2025; See also, Polly Atkin, “Nature is Not Going to Cure You: On Raynor Winn’s Fabricated Memoir,” in *Literary Hub*, August 26, 2025, <https://lithub.com/nature-is-not-going-to-cure-you-on-raynor-winns-fabricated-memoir/> (accessed September 23, 2025).

resolved to do so. “Why not,” he asked in a phrase that would inspire countless veterans, “walk the army out of my system, mentally and physically.” The War, aside from motivating Shaffer’s “expedition,” also made the seemingly impossible accomplishment more practical. Military surplus gear, including “an Air Corps survival tent, a Marine Corps poncho...” and “a Mountain Troop cook kit,” filled his backpack, itself a surplus “Mountain Troop rucksack.” Shaffer found hiking “an exquisite kind of torture.” Promoting the trail to the public by turning the journal he had carried with him into a narrative memoir, *Walking With Spring*, gave the remainder of his long life the structure and purpose whose absence he had felt after his homecoming.¹⁹ In both his actions and their subsequent retelling, Shaffer established a pattern by which a great deal of thinking about the links between trauma, nature, and recovery has since been organized.

Organized nature therapy for military veterans is usually considered a phenomenon of the United States’ post-Vietnam attempts to grapple with the problem of what to do about socially alienated and economically dislocated returning veterans. Informal programs of rehabilitation in nature began to be established in the 1980s before, as noted previously, proliferating rapidly during the Global War on Terror. Rather than directly focus on the astronomical growth of these programs, this dissertation excavates some of their pre-history. The shadow of Earl Shaffer looms over nearly the last eight decades of veteran nature therapy and offers such a seemingly unavoidable starting point for such discussions that attempts at a fuller understanding of the phenomenon require pushing back our timeframe to account for the first half of the 20th century. Thus, the first three chapters of this project explore specific cases of American veterans of the First World War who engaged with the natural world in a variety of ways, sometimes more and

¹⁹ Earl V. Shaffer, *Walking With Spring: The First Thru-Hike of the Appalachian Trail* (Harper’s Ferry, WV: Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 1983, 2004), 8-12, 152; David Donaldson and Maurice J. Forrester, *A Grip on the Mane of Life: An Authorized Biography of Earl V. Shaffer*, (Gardners, PA: Appalachian Trail Museum, 2014), 53-69.

sometimes less with the explicit intent of seeking rehabilitation of physical and psychological traumas, but always with ideas about healthful nature and social reintegration in their minds. The Great War and its aftermath transformed much about life in Europe and the United States and ideas about nature and how to employ it materially and ideologically in the reconstruction of shattered men and nations were hardly exempt. The reaction of American servicemen like Tom Gill to industrial war echoed their nation's tradition of skepticism towards mechanization, urbanization, and industrial consolidation, which many took as destructive to the personal, social, political virtues necessary for republican governance and democratic equality. War had become part of the threat of what historian and literary critic Leo Marx later termed, "The Machine in the Garden:" the "sense of the machine as a sudden, shocking intruder upon a fantasy of idyllic satisfaction," which was "invariably...associated with crude, masculine aggressiveness in contrast with the tender, feminine, and submissive attitudes traditionally attached to the landscape."²⁰ According to the historian David M. Kennedy, "[t]he war assuredly disabused many writers of their illusions about the romance and nobility of warfare," a shift inseparable from the machine age represented by the war and its dangers for social health. "An older generation had preached that combat offered adventure-filled liberation from the iron trend of peacetime society toward mechanization, routine, and the suppression of the individual," Kennedy continued. Those who

²⁰ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 29, 236-237; see also, T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Anti-Modernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920*, (New York: Pantheon Book, 1981), 7-11; Even Ralph Waldo Emerson, who saw mechanical innovation as impetus for a utopian broadening of the American mind, thought it needed to be tempered by the environment, "the appointed remedy for whatever is false and fantastic in our culture" due to its "tranquilizing, sanitizing influences." Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Young American: A Lecture Read Before the Mercantile Library Association, Boston, February 7, 1844," in *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press, 1903), 365-366.

faced its reality now knew “that war was in fact the supreme embodiment of those hated tendencies.”²¹

The following case studies help explain how some veterans engaged with nature in ways that seem unfamiliar in light of current trends in nature therapy programs. They demonstrate that prior to the Second World War veterans were much more likely to enjoy the possibilities of doing so in ways other than outdoor recreation. Here we will see veterans enjoying nature on those terms but also living and working in it to support themselves and their families. Their activities indicated a profound interest in the protection and cultivation of American natural resources, landscapes, and wildlife and not just their exploitation. Crucially, the stories of these veterans and their motivations for coming closer to nature challenge assumptions about veterans’ political and social proclivities. Countering present-day stereotypes of veterans as isolated and alienated from civilian life, the lessons that these veterans took from their experiences of war and applied to their environments usually served their reintegration explicitly. American nature became a stand-in for faith in democracy, public service, and pluralism.

They also offer an additional dimension to our understanding of how veterans might relate to the federal government. Despite highlighting occasionally eccentric characters, these stories do not feature veterans who retreated from public life to seek hermitic isolation in nature.²² Though largely distrustful of militarism and war (at least until the Second World War

²¹ David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 221, 227-229.

²² Though this has become a stereotype it remains one which reflects the lived reality of some post-Vietnam veterans, such as those who have sought refuge in the wilderness areas of Washington’s Olympic Peninsula, due to its popular designation as “the quietest place in America,” and who have since had their peace disturbed by the noise of frequent military airplane flights. Madeline Ostrander, “Quiet: A Soldier’s Fight for the Most Silent Place in America” in *Seattle Met*, December 2016; Chris Marvin, “Warplanes Are Roaring Over One of the Quietest Places on Earth. Backpackers Are Fighting Back” in *Backpacker Magazine*, January 25, 2023, <https://www.backpacker.com/trips/trips-by-national-park/olympic-national-park/growler-noise-hoh-rainforest-silence/> (accessed April 22, 2026). In this, veterans are enacting a familiar American story by seeking the cathartic experience of being subsumed in overwhelming by their environment which the environmental historian Jon

began), they met a beneficent nature alongside other veterans and through the facilitation of different parts of the United States government including the National Park Service, the Government Land Office, various agencies of the New Deal State, and the Army itself. In spite of the difficulties many of them had experienced, they remained ordinary Americans who saw their government as the means of their reintegration into society, not because it would repay them for their service or offer them exclusive access to the benefits of nature, but because it afforded them the opportunity to do this for themselves as they helped extend those benefits to all Americans.

Finally, each of the chapters in this dissertation show veterans engaged in the self-conscious constructions of narratives about themselves and their experiences of war and combat which made sense of their traumas, their earlier life stories, and their place within American history. They variously recast themselves as noble public servants, soldiers for nature, quasi-Native Americans, a new generation of pioneers and more. Each of these identities refracted through their relationship with nature. In this they were anticipating a later realization of some of the much later clinical research on the treatment of trauma, namely, as one study puts it, that “veterans who narrate themselves as growing from and exerting control over their most stressful service experiences may achieve better mental health and day-to-day functioning.”²³

The first chapter of this dissertation examines the role of military veterans in the early years of the National Park Service (NPS). Founded in 1916, during the First World War but

Coleman has dubbed “Nature Shock.” Jon T. Coleman, *Nature Shock: Getting Lost in America* (New Have: Yale University Press, 2020), 1-11.

²³ Peter C. Tappenden, Rebecca L. Shiner, and Fanyi Mo, “Narrating Life in the Military: Links Between Veterans’ Narrative Processing of Service Experiences and Their Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms and Well-being,” in *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (February 2022).

before American entry into the conflict, the NPS initially struggled to balance the protection of the nation's scenic landscapes and wildlife and the promotion of its use by the American public. The NPS underwent a period of experimentation wherein the rangers and superintendents running its daily operations took inspiration from a variety of sources to inform their management work. Though historians have long recognized the influence exerted on the quasi-military NPS by the U.S. Army units which famously protected the parks from the 1880s until 1916, insufficient attention has been paid to the first generation of civilian rangers and superintendents disproportionately made up of veterans. Many veterans of the Great War and the Philippines, explicitly recruited by NPS administrators after 1918 for their perceived reliability and physical capability, had their own motives for joining the Service.

This chapter takes the form of the biography of John Roberts White, an English-born veteran, frequently though unfairly described by colleagues as “a soldier of fortune.” White lived a dramatic and fascinating life. He fought against the Ottoman Empire in Greece, Moro rebels with the Philippines Constabulary during the American occupation of the Philippines, and with American Expeditionary Force in World War I, contracting malaria and suffering multiple wounds in combat. After a nervous breakdown in France, he took a job as a ranger at Grand Canyon National Park in 1919 in order to recover his physical and psychological health in what he deemed the “salubrious” and “wholesome” environments of the American West. White's reputation rests on the near quarter-century he spent as the superintendent of Sequoia National Park, where he developed a style of management that prioritized the protection of the park's ecological resources through the education of the public. His career symbolically represents the

larger historical shift from the utilitarian conservationism of the early twentieth century to the ecologically-minded environmentalism of the post-Second World War period.²⁴

The role of White's military life on his subsequent work in the NPS has yet to be fully assessed. His long tenure with the Park Service and the inseparability of his time as a soldier from his larger identity make him an ideal subject through which to understand how ideas drawn from war service became a part of NPS policies. Certain themes relevant to veterans translated directly to the work of rangers and superintendents. Directed towards a mission-oriented career in civilian service, they melded a belief in democratic idealism, a tradition which associated monumental American nature with a sense of national exceptionalism and historical destiny, and a firsthand understanding of the rehabilitative potential of labor and recreation in the out of doors into a functional ethos of ecological preservation and public education. Men like White were not simply healed in and by nature, they were reintegrated by it into American social and political life.

The following chapter explores the establishment of the California desert town of Twentynine Palms by World War I veterans and their families. Multiple attempts to build

²⁴ The historiography of the differences between conservationist and preservationist ideas of nature protection is capacious. See Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* 5th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959); Samuel P. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Stephen Fox, *The American Conservation Movement: John Muir and His Legacy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Ramachandra Guha, *Environmentalism: A Global History* (New York: Longman, 2000). Despite the complexity of the topic the 1980 assessment of historian Thomas R. Dunlap that conservationists and environmentalists can be distinguished by their ultimate goals – “One group sought to rationalize the exploitation of natural resources, to use government regulation and scientific expertise to make maximum use of the raw materials available. The other sought to preserve scenic areas and certain values associated with the wilderness.” – is still generally useful. Thomas R. Dunlap, “Conservationists and Environmentalists: An Attempt at Definition” in *Environmental Review* Vol. 4, No. 1 (1980), 29-31, 30. Little has been written about the role of military veterans in the divide between the two, though historian Michael J. Lansing has explored how American veterans of the Great War themselves became the subjects a Progressive conservation movement which saw their masculine energy as a natural resource threatened by war, one which required careful husbanding like any other. Michael J. Lansing, ““Salvaging the Man Power of America”: Conservation, Manhood, and Disabled Veterans during World War I,” in *Environmental History* Vol. 14, No. 1 (January 2009), 32-57.

planned agriculture communities for veterans were made around the country in the 1920s. Most of the experiments failed within the decade. In 1921, Dr. James Luckie, a former Army Medical Examiner and physician at a veteran's hospital in Pasadena, California began to send his patients into the Mojave Desert to recuperate from various war-related respiratory ailments, including tuberculosis and the effects of mustard and chlorine gas barrages. Most coalesced around the Oasis of Mara, just north of the present boundary of Joshua Tree National Park. The homesteaders eventually built a narrative of their town's founding which stressed recovery in nature, recreation and military service and persists to the present day.

In so doing, they also rhetorically linked themselves to an ideological tradition which saw access to public lands as a traditional repayment for military service. The Homestead Acts under which they claimed their new homes had privileged veterans in several material ways, including the reduction of occupancy requirements. As importantly, this transaction was a useful political device for many veterans. In supporting one bill, Civil War Major General and Michigan Congressman William Stoughton claimed that privileged access for veterans was "a graceful tribute to their gallantry and devotion which will be prized alike by the citizen and the soldier."²⁵

However, a closer look at the early history of Twentynine Palms and the development of the town's self-constructed narrative reveals that these homesteaders were actually engaged in a project that was premised on a more universal idea of health through nature, one available to all Americans regardless of previous military service. The actual benefits extended to veterans within the homesteading system were relatively minimal and had only minor influence on the development of white settlement in Twentynine Palms. These benefits, and other things associated with veterans – toughness, resourcefulness, mutual trust and dependability – served a

²⁵ Hon. William L. Stoughton, "Homesteads and Homestead Rights for Soldiers and Sailors," May 7, 1872.

purpose in the process of community formation but were most important in their capacity to help stabilize the community for all of its members through the Great Depression. Veterans groups, particularly the local American Legion, served as the locus of civic organization, mutual aid, the fostering of a positive relationship with desert environment through which veterans (and others) sought to recover their health, and the promotion of economic independence through the encouragement of a tourist industry centered on outdoor recreation and healthful nature.

At the onset of the Great Depression, the homesteaders of Twentynine Palms better weathered the economic downturn than many of their fellow veterans without access to land. Unemployed veterans and their advocacy organizations began to pressure the federal government to immediately pay out the delayed \$500 bonus granted to veterans in 1924 under the World War Adjusted Compensation Act. Bands of destitute veterans marched on Washington in 1932 as the Bonus Expeditionary Force (BEF). The violent dispersal of the BEF's peaceful encampments by the Army proved a political disaster that the Hoover Administration bequeathed to Franklin Roosevelt. Though Roosevelt was himself an opponent of early redemption, he assuaged the veteran's by promising them 25,000 positions within the soon to be established Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC).

Today, the CCC is remembered for employing young men in conservation work for their physical, moral, and economic betterment. The standard policy of the CCC required enrollees to be unmarried and under the age of 25. The program proved immensely popular for both its social and environmental benefit to the nation. Veteran enrollees, constituting nearly 10% of total CCC enrollment at any given time, were based in their own camps, largely due to fears about the negative influence they might exert over younger enrollees. Historians of the CCC have long considered veterans to be peripheral to the program's history. Older enrollees were characterized

as only minimally overlapping with the majority of enrollees and generally maintaining less interest in the educational, recreational, and environmental aspects of its work.

However, an examination of the archival material produced by veteran enrollees demonstrates that they, in fact, embodied many aspects of the CCC's ethos. Conscious of their advancing ages, these men struggled to maintain their dignity and independence while accepting government assistance. Many turned to the mission provided by their work in nature, doing so as a mechanism to prove their continued usefulness to society and their patriotic devotion to the nation. They also found their economic recovery as independent men and fathers entwined with their physical and psychological recovery through the honorable work of environmental restoration. Crucially, the enforced isolation of veterans' camps did not reflect their expressed desires. They repeatedly articulated devotion to the CCC and its work, which they credited with their economic and physical rehabilitation and sought to use their age and experience to assist junior enrollees whenever possible. Rather than claim either federal employment or the benefits of nature as the repayment for their service, they saw their contributions to the public good as the path to both their rehabilitation and their reintegration into civilian society.

The dissertation closes with a chapter which transitions from examples of veterans of the First World War to one drawn from the Second World War. Though many of the figures discussed in the previous chapters first encountered nature seriously as veterans in attempts to recover from the traumas and injuries of wars or as an economic lifeline, those featured here entered Army life as experienced athletes, outdoorsmen, and nature lovers. The 10th Mountain Division is one of the most widely known and well-researched units of the Second World War, famous for its recruitment of skiers, climbers, and other outdoor recreationists and their subsequent record fighting in the Apennines and Alps during the Allied invasion of Italy. The

Division's environmental legacy was further secured by the prominent role played by its veterans after the war in both the development of the resort skiing industry and the environmental preservationist movement in the second half of the twentieth century.

David Brower, who became one of the most famous and confrontational environmental activists in the postwar United States, was deeply influenced by his experience as an officer in the 10th Mountain Division. Having entered the military as a California-based alpinist primarily acquainted with the peaks of his beloved Sierra Nevada mountains, Brower's experience of the war broadened his understanding of the educational and political possibilities of recreation in nature. As a climbing trainer, he first encountered his talent for introducing the unfamiliar to wild nature through the technical mastery of recreational equipment and techniques. The war itself brought Brower into contact with new environments in the eastern United States and Europe, encouraging Brower to recognize the value of nature beyond the recreational landscapes in which he spent his prewar life. The universality of Brower's commitment to environmental preservation became a hallmark of his work as the Executive Director of the Sierra Club and an important tenet of environmental preservationist thinking.

However, the centrality of recreation to the American experience of nature which the war helped propagate also played an important role in how controversies over wilderness preservation and winter sports development played out. Struggles concerning the construction of resort skiing infrastructure in undeveloped mountain landscapes pitted veterans of the Division on either side. Each appealed to the lessons learned over the course of the war and the claimed the legacy of the Division as their proper inheritance and the justification for their positions in these battles. According to the historian and climber Joseph Taylor III, writing in the context of Sierra Club ski mountaineers in the mountain troops, together, "Sport and war were central to

shifting attitudes toward nature and our place in it,” and crucial to the “generational shift” in the Club and its political stance towards all American wildernesses.²⁶ This chapter covers the Division’s origins as the node through which recreational skill and knowledge entered the military and was disseminated to the wider public, its experience of nature in war, and its afterlife in the preservationist disputes of the postwar period to form a complete understanding of its importance to ideas about the uses and responsibilities of the human relationship to wild lands.

On December 6, 2020, President Donald Trump signed the Accelerating Veterans Recovery Outdoors Act (AVRO) into law. The bill, along with the Veterans COMPACT Act of 2020 of which it was a part, were examples of an increasingly rare bipartisanship in Washington. The legislation, which passed quickly and unanimously through Congress, required the Secretary of Veterans Affairs “to establish an interagency task force on the use of public lands to provide medical treatment and therapy to veterans through outdoor recreation.” AVRO was embraced by veterans’ advocacy organizations and environmentalist groups alike, with the Sierra Club hailing it as “a victory for veterans and public lands” which would “provide critical therapeutic and healing benefits for veterans by making it easier for them to access a specific but powerful therapy — the healing power of nature.” Attempts to provide formalized federal support for veteran nature therapy have proved popular among members of Congress. AVRO echoed earlier legislation such as the Recreation Not Red-Tape Act, the Veterans Eagle Pass Park Act, and the Wounded Veterans Recreation Act and has been followed by more proposed bills such as the

²⁶ Joseph E. Taylor III, *Pilgrims of the Vertical: Yosemite Rock Climbers & Nature at Risk*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 91-106.

Military and Veterans in Parks (MVP) Act, the Get Rewarding Outdoor Work for our Veterans (GROW) Act, and the Veterans Outdoor Rehabilitation Act.²⁷

The academic response to such bills has been more mixed than that of politicians, advocacy groups and the general public. According to veterans' historian David Kieran, many popular representations of these programs make promises about their efficacy that are still controversial and “mobilize ideas about nature, rehabilitation, and masculinity...to construct a narrative that supports the endurance of American empire and the wars that enable it.” Their popularity, Kieran argues, though attributable in part to their physical and psychological benefits and the genuine enjoyment of the outdoors shared by veterans and civilians alike, stems from the promise they offer of cheap, easy, and politically popular solutions to otherwise disquieting social problems around veteran reintegration. They function “by promising veterans’ uncomplicated recuperation from the wounds of war, asserting that civilians bear no responsibility for facilitating that rehabilitation or engaging with the realities of the event that caused it, and normalizing military culture as an indelible component of American culture.”²⁸ Political scientist Benjamin Schrader sees more genuine political value in these programs, noting that the “neoliberal discourse...which allows for businesses to exploit the land, is being contested by” the enlistment of “the patriotism and reputation of veterans as a tool...of land stewardship.” Yet, even Schrader admits that veteran nature rehabilitation can deepen the divide between ex-servicemembers and civilians, noting that some of its popularity among veterans comes not from its facilitation of reintegration but by allowing them to avoid the stresses of

²⁷ Accelerating Veterans Recovery Outdoors Act, H.R. 2435, 116th Cong. (2019); Rob Vessels, “AVRO Is a Victory for Veterans and Public Lands,” November 16, 2020, <https://www.sierraclub.org/articles/2020/11/avro-victory-for-veterans-and-public-lands> (accessed April 22, 2026).

²⁸ David Kieran, “‘The First Step in Curing the Postwar Blues Is a Return to Nature:’ Veterans’ Outdoor Rehabilitation Programs and the Normalization of Empire,” in *Imperial Benevolence: U.S. Foreign and American Popular Culture Since 9/11*, ed. Scott Laderman and Tim Gruenewald (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 71-96, 72.

everyday life. “In nature,” Schrader says, “there are no questions from ignorant civilians.”²⁹ The chapters which follow offer useful examples of veterans of the past working their way back into American life through nature. That they did so in many ways aside from the standard story of healthful recreation and almost always by working with the explicit goal of drawing themselves closer to their civilian counterparts by protecting and cultivating nature in the name of the public good and the American nation as a whole was not coincidental to their success.

²⁹ Benjamin Schrader, *Fight to Live, Live to Fight: Veteran Activism after War* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), 95-99.

Chapter 1: SEMPERVIRENS and SEMPER FIDELES: John Roberts White and the Role of Military Service in the Development of the National Park Service, 1919-1947

When John Roberts White joined the National Park Service in 1919, he did so with “visions...of ranging and riding through the pines and pinyons” and rescuing grateful female hikers in his mind. Life as a ranger at Grand Canyon National Park quickly dispelled these charming expectations. The work was both more mundane and more taxing than he had anticipated. In addition to making dinner for his fellow rangers and mucking out a stable, White recorded in his diary that on his first day at work that he had “skinned a hawk, typed a telegram and some orders, helped clean out the office and fix up a storeroom, stabled a horse and made a halter from a new rope.”¹ However, neither the unglamorous labor nor the meager pay of the job (\$100 per month) dissuaded White from pursuing his new career. He had a purpose in becoming a park ranger that went beyond monetary compensation or any form of social prestige: he intended to use the position to restore himself to health after more than two decades of military service around the world.

White’s first “colorful career” as a soldier, “compared to which the experiences of many a hero of fiction would seem tame,” one observer later wrote, was thrilling but had left him physically and mentally depleted. He had gone to war in Greece, served in the American colonial administration in the Philippines and reenlisted to join the American Expeditionary Force in France before entering civilian life. As he later summarized the legacy of his military life, “I collected two wounds, an assortment of malaria, typhoid, dysentery, and other tropical

¹ John Roberts White Journal Entry, October 19, 1919, 3, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 18, folder 2, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

diseases...and after over ten years in the tropics began to run down in health.”² Though advised that park ranger was not a job, “for a man of his experience,” he “entered the Park Service because I felt that out-of-doors work in the West was the only way to regain health.”³

The task was substantial. According to William Cameron Forbes, the former Governor-General of the Philippines, White had “lost his health so completely in the service of his country that he has broken down repeatedly and is now, nervously totally exhausted.”⁴ His own wife worried that he was too fragile for his new duties, “as a ranger has to spend hours in the saddle and the slightest physical or mental effort exhausts him,” but deferred to a physician’s warning that “he must get to the woods as soon as possible.”⁵ Even before his “breakdown” in France, White was a believer in the rehabilitative force of nature. After his return from the Philippines in 1913 and recuperating at an Army hospital in New Mexico, he wrote that his “disability...has yielded to a few months residence and outdoor life in a good climate.”⁶ Despite the rusticity of Grand Canyon, his assumptions were quickly confirmed. “The wind fairly whistles though cracks in [the] floor and walls,” he wrote in his diary in his first week there, “but...the open air life is just what I need.”⁷ His own recovery through work in nature, in concert with his earlier experiences as a soldier motivated many of the decisions John White made in the following 28 years he spent in the National Park Service. “It’s a long way from the silent depths of the Grand

²John Roberts White, “T.B. – A Soldier’s Experience,” in *Sunbeams: For Better Health in Virginia* Vol. 16, No. 4 (August 1934), 4, 23, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 6, folder 5, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

³John Roberts White, “A Scenic Interlude”, n.d., 1, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 18, folder 2, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

⁴W. Cameron Forbes to Alvan T. Fuller, September 17, 1919, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 19, folder 4, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

⁵Fay White to General Leonard Wood, September 12, 1919, 1-2, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 19, folder 4, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

⁶John Roberts White to “Chief, Bureau of Insular Affairs,” September 2, 1915, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 2, folder 7, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

⁷John Roberts White Journal Entry, October 24, 1919, 5-7, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 18, folder 2, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

Canyon to a battlefield in Belgium; from the placidity of painted erosion to the roaring guns, airplanes and bombs over Flanders,” he wrote in a later autobiographical sketch.⁸

For all of the glamour and daring of John White’s military careers – in 1928 *The Washington Star* declared White, the “most romantic man in government service” for his picaresque life⁹ – his work in the NPS was dedicated to bringing the benefits and appreciation of nature to as many Americans as possible. Rather than leading him to assert a unique or irreplicable relationship between the nation’s wild lands and its veterans, White’s service provided him with certain principles which he then used to seek a balance between the use and protection of nature, which was the primary struggle of the burgeoning NPS during his lifetime. Despite his undeniable exceptionality as a historical character, the lesson of his life lies not in how he approached nature as a man who had experienced combat, but in how that experience ultimately motivated him to protect American nature so that all citizens might receive the same gifts from it as he did.

John White entered the Park Service at a time when he was granted the administrative flexibility with which to implement practical policy guidelines within an organization which had not yet had the time to cultivate them. According to the historian Rick Hydrick, John White was crucial to the formative development of Sequoia National Park because he was both an “archetypical ‘Mather man’ – a follower of the first NPS Director Stephen T. Mather and his doctrines of efficiency, prudent economic management, and who demonstrated “a strong, honest, and forthright personality and a positive outlook bordering on arrogance” – and because he had the time and ability to enact his own personal beliefs concerning the centrality of ecological

⁸ White, “A Scenic Interlude,” 7.

⁹ “White to Lecture on Trees Tonight,” *The Washington Star*, September 27, 1928, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 1, folder 2, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

thinking to the NPS mission. For Hydrick, the New Deal Era through which White served as Superintendent was one in which the preservationist ideals that White came to champion within the Park Service were subsumed by the conservationist resource management embodied in organizations such as the Civilian Conservation Corps. White's practical and in-depth knowledge of his Park, which he always endeavored to share with as many visitors as possible, was said to have heralded an entire shift in the ideology of Park management. "Through th[e] close study of the entire park... White was groping his way past- what [NPS historian Alfred] Runte has deemed 'the enduring obstacle' to sound ecological management in the parks: overattention to 'scenic wonders,'" Hydrick argued. "Having gained a long and intimate appreciation for his park, White pioneered in substituting environmentalism for romanticism."¹⁰

Hydrick is correct that John White's management of Sequoia National Park offers a microcosm of changing NPS ideas of personnel management, environmentalism, resource conservation, and visitor accommodation. However, this chapter will use the entirety of White's personal and professional biography to argue that the early cohort of National Park Service rangers and superintendents which he represents were influenced by a wide range of sources. The importance of White's ecological vision does not lie simply in its force as a symbol of the triumph of what Hydrick terms the Mather tradition, "a legacy of freedom and discovery... a pioneer enterprise that initiated the evolution of modern environmental thought."¹¹ Rather, White's long career in Europe, Alaska, the Philippines, and California, represents multiple strands of thought that fused into a useful management style, a romantic vision of health and

¹⁰ Rick Hydrick, "The Genesis of National Park Management: John Roberts White and Sequoia National Park, 1920-1947," in *Journal of Forest History*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (April 1984), 68-81, 80; Geoffrey P. Kida, "Colonel John Roberts White and Sustainable Management from the Philippines to Sequoia National Park," (M.A. Thesis, California State University, Northridge, 2011).

¹¹ *Ibid.* at 81.

fitness to be discovered through nature, and, above all, in a bone-deep and unshakable belief in principles of democratic access and ownership of American public nature that placed White and the rest of the Park Service at the very heart of the New Deal's recalibration of the place of nature in American political and cultural life. Hydrick devotes the entirety of his article to White's career within the Park Service, and this, in my estimation, creates an unnecessarily limited understanding of how and why NPS policy and institutional culture developed in the way in which it did.¹² For White, the drive towards a mission-oriented career in civilian service, which combined his beliefs in democratic idealism, American exceptionalism, and his own experience of recovery from war trauma in the out of doors, came directly from his life in the military and contributed to his turn towards ecological preservation as both a public good and a means of public education.

The biographical details of White's youth, seemingly too idiosyncratic and picaresque to offer much in the way of insight in the operation of American National Parks policy, actually present a window into the practical Romanticism that characterized early NPS rangers and superintendents. Born in Reading, England in 1879, into a respectable middle-class family,

¹² Like Hydrick, many historians of the creation and development of the National Park Service have emphasized the role of Stephen Mather and its other early Directors and the top-down influence they exerted on their subordinates. See, Horace M. Albright and Frank Taylor, *Oh, Ranger!: A Book About the National Parks*, (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1928); Horace M. Albright and Robert Cahn, *The Birth of the National Park Service: The Founding Years, 1913-1933*, (Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers, 1985); John Ise, *Our National Park Policy: A Critical History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1961); Ronald Foresta, *America's National Parks and Their Keepers* (Washington, D.C.: Resources for the Future, 1984); National Parks historian Alfred Runte has more expansively focused on both the larger cultural attitudes embedded in the protection and use of public lands and the details of administration on the ground in his two major works *National Parks: The American Experience*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 3rd ed. and *Yosemite: The Embattled Wilderness*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1990) but pays little attention to the influence of pre-NPS experiences on the careers of rangers and superintendents. More recent work has explored both the importance of the U.S. Army's role in pre-NPS conservation efforts and the role of national parks in the formation of American political and cultural identity, but these ideas have not been synthesized. See, Harvey Meyerson, *Nature's Army: When Soldiers Fought for Yosemite*, (Lawrence, KS: The University Press of Kansas, 2001), Adam M. Sowards, *Making America's Public Lands: The Contested History of Conservation on Federal Lands* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2022), and Mary E. Stuckey, *For the Enjoyment of the People: The Creation of National Identity in American Public Lands* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2023).

precisely “that [part] of the middle class from which,” he wrote in a later autobiographical sketch, quoting the similarly positioned Rudyard Kipling, “the Empire drew her best servants.”¹³ His Victorian boyhood armed him with several of the crucial elements of his future career and personality: abstract notions of patriotic public service, the tension between individual initiative and life within the strictures of hierarchical and bureaucratic institutions, a love of nature mediated through the expression of martial masculinity, and a belief in the ability of both work and recreation in nature to physically, politically and morally transform individuals for the better. From the vantage of adulthood, White would reinterpret his Victorian upbringing in Berkshire, “so happy and so full of outdoor life,” as the training ground for the American man he would become after “the Red Gods called him to the far places of the world.” In his reminiscences even the most serene and beautiful engagements with English nature foreshadow his military career in American service and the grandeur of the landscapes he would encounter in the American West. White was an avid hiker and an even more avid collector of bird’s eggs. This led him all across “a semi-feudal land with vast estates where fences, keepers and no-trespassing signs deterred all but the most adventurous.” His hikes, “thirty and forty miles, across country, over hedge and stream,” were “fine preparation for hard hikes in Alaska or the Philippines,” while his experience dodging unfriendly gamekeepers was “doubtless good training in later years when I followed the trails of Moro and of Babaylan in the southern Philippines.”¹⁴ These memories, though not “erased by arctic cold or tropical fevers” still put him in mind of even greater sights in the California. Remembering that blooming English furze of his youth had allegedly led Carl Linnaeus to fall to his knees “emulatively reminded” White of “when I see here in California the

¹³ John Roberts White, “Every Swan a Goose,” handwritten n.d., 2, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 1, folder 1, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

¹⁴ John Roberts White, “Autochthonous,” n.d., 4-5, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 1, folder 1, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

glory of the foothill poppies or brodiaea, the scented wild lilac of the chaparral, or the purple lupine lying like a carpet below the snow on Franklin Pass in the High Sierra.”¹⁵ The rest of his autobiographical sketches are peppered with comparisons of British and California nature, most of which emphasize the greater size, vibrancy, and wildness of the American version. Addressing a veteran welfare board in 1927, White wrote that he had been “an American since boyhood,” and only became a naturalized citizen in 1913 because his long residence in the Philippines had made the bureaucratic process impossible.¹⁶ Rhetorically, White’s retelling of his youth served to constantly reiterate and universalize the connection between Americans and their environments. In this recounting it was unsurprising that the English boy could become the American man; all nature lovers were at least a little American.¹⁷

White’s youth also embodied an ongoing conflict in his personality between the Romantic, adventurous impulses of the individual and the staid practicality and convention of organization. In multiple phases of his professional life, he chafed against familial and social expectations in favor of personal fulfilment only to find himself within ever more regimented institutions. Following a boyhood love of Lord Byron’s *Don Juan*, which he, “lapped...as a kitten laps milk,” White left Oxford University and a brief post obtained for him by his father within the British Civil Service. Having “emerged from a clerical grub in the Home Office chrysalis to try my wings as a butterfly,” he joined the Greek Foreign Legion and fought in that

¹⁵Ibid., at 3.

¹⁶John Roberts White to California Veterans Welfare Board, January 7, 1927, 1, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 2, folder 9, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

¹⁷ White later mined reminiscences of his English childhood to emphasize his personal attachment to the Sequoias he was charged with protecting for the NPS. One of the memories he returned to time and again was accompanying his father when a business matter took him to Stratfield Saye House, the Hampshire County estate of the Dukes of Wellington. While most Victorian boys would have been excited to see the home gifted by the British state to one of its great military and political figures, White most clearly recalled “the fine avenue of ‘Sequoia Gigantea’” which lined the approach to the manor house. John Roberts White to L.F. Cook, July 9, 1943, 1, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 1, folder 8, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

nation's disastrous 1897 war with the Ottoman Empire. Despite contracting malaria and being wounded in battle, White always recalled the time fondly for it melded two themes which characterized the rest of his professional life: adventurous service and the experience of beautiful and rejuvenating nature. "That was about the last of the nice little picturesque wars," he wrote wistfully of his time in Greece; those wars "that preceded smokeless powder, high explosives, gas, airplanes and the many other modern inventions which have tended to make war less interesting, at least for the infantryman."¹⁸ His nostalgia was inseparable from the personal transformations he attributed to his experience of combat. It was "just enough of a nice little old-fashioned black-powder war" to make a professional soldier of him for life. It was equally notable in his memory as his first step towards conservation and therefore recovery from the traumas of the experience. He recalled his retreat from the Battle of Domokos as "a lightsome journey over the plains and mountains of Greece," through, as he would later tell one interviewer, "scenery comparable even with that of a national park."¹⁹ Though almost always respected for his conduct as a soldier his individualistic streak will later cause him trouble within the hierarchy of the NPS. Despite Hydrick's correct characterization of White as devoted to the mission of the Park Service, "the archetypical Mather Man" repeatedly butted heads with both Mather and his top lieutenants. According to Mather's assistant and successor Horace M. Albright, White's occasional insubordination, usually concerning his attachment to certain eccentricities of military dress and comportment, caused Director Mather to actually fire the stubborn Colonel on multiple occasions before always being convinced to change his mind.²⁰

¹⁸ John Roberts White, "In the Greek Foreign Legion," n.d., 13, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 1, folder 1, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

¹⁹ White, "Autochthonous," 6-7, 13; Transcript of N.B.C. Radio Broadcast, Chicago, March 24, 1934, 1-2, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 18, folder 3, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

²⁰ If this was the case, no record of the multiple dismissals appears in either White's personal papers or those of Sequoia National Park.

White's tendency to submit reports his NPS superiors which were "splendidly written and very interesting,"²¹ but failed to meet with the organization's written requirements vexed his superiors. Acting Director Arno Cammerer forwarded the NPS' 1920 Circular dictating report guidelines to White on multiple occasions.²² Albright became exasperated by White's reluctance to be hemmed in by directives from above. Writing to White in 1936 after his retirement as Director, Albright summed up the Colonel's independent streak as one of the "rough spots which I tried to polish off...and which brought us into conflict."²³

White's subsequent experience travelling across Canada for further adventure in the goldfields of the Yukon and Alaska further solidified his belief in both the value of Romantic adventure and the positive physical and moral influence of life in the outdoors. He arrived in North America, "“with a revolver at [his] hip,” still instructed by pulp novels and word of mouth to believe, “the woods were full of dangerous Indians.”²⁴ The difficulties of life in frontier Alaska fit as easily into White's subsequent ideological commitment to the educational value of nature as his time at war in Greece. Manual labor during the Klondike Gold Rush, which could be as dangerous and industrialized as any late-nineteenth century factory work,²⁵ was “hard steady physical work...good for me, physically and mentally; it toughened my eighteen year old body, and it gave me the point of view of the man who works with his hands.” It didn't matter

²¹Horace M. Albright to John Roberts White, September 23, 1920, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks Archives, Ax 720/PH 01, box 3, folder 18, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California-Merced Library, Merced, California.

²²Arno B. Cammerer to John Roberts White, August 4, 1920, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks Archives, Ax 720/PH 01, box 3, folder 18, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California-Merced Library, Merced, California.

²³Horace M. Albright to John Roberts White, March 6, 1936, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 1, folder 12, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

²⁴John Roberts White to “Peter,” May 26, 1953, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 4, folder 7, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

²⁵ See, Kathryn Morse, *The Nature of Gold: An Environmental History of the Klondike Gold Rush*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 14, 92.

that this work and his time in the Alaskan salmon fisheries involved the sort of wasteful killing and dismissive attitude toward wildlife he would come to deride as a park ranger and superintendent. He shot the dog seals that tangled his nets, the osprey that took dead or dying salmon, and, once, a beaver for no stated reason and still summed up the time as “on the whole...a pleasant life.”²⁶

Later in life, John White was adept at mining the adventures of his youth for lessons which he continually applied to his work as a park administrator. Both his time in combat and at work in nature were subsequently reimagined as powerful influences on how one should approach interactions with the natural world and on the power of that interaction to inspire new thinking. This is most clearly seen in the development of White’s ideas about predator control and wildlife management with the parks. “In my youth I was as feral as the average male,” he stated in a public lecture given to the conservation section of the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco in 1937 titled “Wildlife in the National Parks,” seeing in his boyhood self the French author Max O’Rell’s description of the typical Englishman’s attitude: “It is a fine day. Let’s go out and kill something.” He recalled the times that his work in Alaska and the Philippines had involved shooting wildlife with some shame. Yet, there was an implicit hierarchy by which shooting at some living creatures more than others was justified. The osprey in Alaska needed to be killed on economic grounds and the birds of Philippines were legitimate targets of scientific interest. War was, of course, the ultimate exercise in excusable killing as the enemy could shoot back. “I had to shoot a lot of men at one time or another,” White said of his time in the tropics, “but I could never bring myself to kill a timid, inoffensive, gentle-eyed deer.”²⁷

²⁶John White, “Autochthonous,” 30-34.

²⁷John Roberts White, Transcript of Lecture, “Wildlife in the National Parks,” San Francisco, California, June 1, 1937, 3, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 18, folder 14, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

Predator control was, at least initially, seen as similar to combat due to the supposed manliness and danger involved. According to Sequoia's ranger manual for 1928, coyotes, wolves, mountain lions, bobcats and lynx "will be killed wherever and whenever found." Doing so was a matter of park defense. "[S]hould work of this kind neglected in the Park, it would be only a short time till it would... result in the almost complete extermination of our small game."²⁸ Predator control was sufficiently uncontroversial that rangers, superintendents, and even NPS Directors would engage in what amounted to sport hunting

In 1921, White organized a mountain lion hunt for Stephen Mather and a group of friends, which the Colonel later admitted was decidedly not "part of a well considered and absolutely necessary policy of control."²⁹ A year earlier, the superintendent requested the purchase of specially bred lion hunting dogs. The animals were necessary as "[a]ll employees of this park feel that the extermination of the predatory animals within the park is their duty *as it would be their pleasure*"³⁰ (emphasis added).

Despite the centrality of predator eradication to the ranger's understanding of their mission, such actions were subject to debate and modification through both the collective and individual actions of rangers and superintendents. These debates were not always dictated by the growing attention being paid by NPS personnel to the science of ecology and wildlife management but drew heavily from moral notions which bordered on the chivalric. John White

²⁸Transcript of "Sequoia National Park Ranger Manual, 1926," n.d., 8, Sequoia National Park, n.d., Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks Archives, Ax 720/PH 01, box 181, folder 35, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California-Merced Library, Merced, California.

²⁹White, "Wildlife in the National Parks," 3.

³⁰John Roberts White, "Monthly Report of Sequoia National Park for November 1920," n.d., 2, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks Archives, Ax 720/PH 01, box 1, folder 2, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California-Merced Library, Merced, California; In 1943, reviewing his report, White was moved to add a hand-written note alongside this comment noting just how dramatically things had changed within the NPS in the intervening quarter century.

was especially sensitive to how ungentlemanly these efforts could be, even when he considered them his responsibility. Predator control needed to become a necessary evil at best, and one handled with a minimum of cruelty. In his early days as superintendent he introduced a ban, only imperfectly enforced, on trapping predators rather than shooting them, and made Sequoia the first national park to ban steel traps entirely. As early as 1925, hunting culture was so anathema to his understanding of the park's mission and ideal image of rangerhood that he began to phase out even traces of it from Sequoia. At the Mesa Verde superintendents conference, White told his colleagues that he had completely banned the eating of venison in the park, forbid those camping within the park to hunt outside of it, and totally barred his rangers from hunting, even while off duty. The decline of hunting and predator control within the NPS and the U.S. Forest Service is frequently thought of as a triumph of ecological thinking and rational management. However, these early debates show how little science played a role for some rangers and administrators. When the question of how to classify the marten arose, the superintendents quickly decided that the popular and charismatic animal should not be considered a predator, a decision that made little scientific sense then or now.³¹ It was not any new understanding of science that had changed policies within the parks; rather, the act of preserving nature had changed the men doing the protecting. Observing animals in close proximity made one "lose the lust to kill which is atavistic in all of us," White stated in a radio address in 1932. "Before I came to this national park game in 1919 I was very fond of hunting...but you can't shoot things when you become their friends and their protectors."³² This bled into the way the park presented its wildlife to the

³¹"Minutes of the Eighth National Parks Conference," Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado, 1925, 109, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks Archives, Ax 720/PH 01, box 63, folder 14, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California-Merced Library, Merced, California.

³²Transcript of Radio Broadcast, John Roberts White, "The American Legion and Conservation," KECA, Los Angeles, California, August 12, 1932, 6-7, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 18, folder 3, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon; White here was reinterpreting his own past to emphasize the change in wildlife policies of the Park Service. He had hunted before, during, and after he saw combat

public. In one case, White personally edited a guide to the animals of Sequoia to alter the possessive pronouns used from the generic “its” to the more anthropomorphic “theirs.”³³

Aside from the National Park Service, the institution with which he would feel most closely aligned for the remainder of his life was the Philippine Constabulary, the police force established by the United States colonial administration following the American assumption of control of the Philippines after the Spanish-American War. White’s experience in the Philippines, to which he would continuously return in his thoughts and correspondence, were crucial to the development of his ideas about how to manage subordinates, the role of nature in physical and moral rehabilitation, and how climate was tied to national character, as well as in providing him with a network of veteran and colonial compatriots who eased his transition to civilian government service, some of whom served directly alongside White as park administrators.

At first sight, White’s work as a colonial administrator and soldier seems radically different from his bureaucratic positions with the NPS. For instance, the authority he wielded over his subordinates as an essentially as an imperial functionary was racialized and harsher than anything he was called upon to do in the United States. The supposed stresses of life in a tropical climate and among alien races were thought to threaten the health of white Americans. According to White himself life in the Philippine climate was accompanied by a “softening of physical and moral fibers,” and “[a]fter a few years in the islands a man is enervated,” he warned, “less strenuous physically, less enquiring and quick of mind - in every way less exacting

in both Greece and the Philippines (as have countless other combat veterans) and did not register any distaste for it at the time. It was only after he began to see the protection of wildlife as his direct mission as a superintendent that he characterized NPS policy as a reflection of his own thoughts. The relevant piece here is that he did so through his identity as a soldier rather than as a public servant.

³³“General Park Information Bulletin for National Park Rangers,” Sequoia National Park, n.d., Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks Archives, Ax 720/PH 01, box 181, folder 4, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California-Merced Library, Merced, California.

of the code and ethics of the north.”³⁴ As the Governor-General of the Philippines, William Cameron Forbes later described White’s burden as Governor of Agusan Province on the island of Mindinao, “he had untamed savages to cope with and rule,” and who were partially to blame for the ailments that “so sapped his vitality.”³⁵ The persistent note of Romantic adventurism was White’s explanation for why so many white Americans were willing to take such risks. It was what he termed, “The Call of the East,” the orientalist attraction to the exoticism and adventure of Asia, needed to judge its power to overcome the justified fear of climatic incompatibility. Later, as the influence of imperial habits of mind and racial chauvinism diminished within him, White would retain his ideas about the influences of environmental conditions; as his own recovery in nature took place, the wholesomeness of nature replaced its dangers in his thinking.³⁶

White’s time in the Philippines also sharpened his thinking about Americanness and the use environments served to advance the construction of communities of national identity. Americanness, nature, and service were all drawn together in White’s mind; the mixture was not something he picked up within the National Park Service when he began his civilian government career in 1919, but something he brought with him into that position. It was not only a boyhood love of nature that White felt had marked him out as somehow American despite being English. His experience in the colonial administration of the Philippines had further sharpened his sense of Americanness. The crudest way in which he learned to draw identitarian distinctions was racial. The importance of his national distinctiveness from his fellow soldiers diminished as soon as he landed in Manila. “By becoming a member of the American community in the

³⁴ John Robert White, Manuscript of “The Call of the East: A Partial Analysis,” n.d., 1-3, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 16, folder11, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

³⁵ W. Cameron Forbes to Alvan T. Fuller, September 17, 1919, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 19, folder 4, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

³⁶ White, “The Call of the East,” 3.

Philippines,” he later wrote, “man is embraced in that brotherhood unconsciously...wherever a small band of aliens is found in the midst of an indigenous race.”³⁷

In the Philippines itself, and then again in White’s memories of the Philippines, foreign environments paradoxically naturalized “Anglo-Saxon” Americans to their Pacific surroundings. As they poured money, time, and labor into their new colonial outpost, Americans would naturally come to see it as a legitimate possession. “The more we sanitize and organize in the good old Anglo-Saxon way,” White wrote, “the more pathetic headstones that appear in the *Cementerio del Norte* with American names engraved thereon the more we shall feel that this country belongs to us and the less shall we feel like abandoning it.”³⁸ These changing attitudes were, White saw, reflected in how Americans changed Filipino environments to suit their tastes in ways that had nothing to do with military necessity or economic development. The investigation and collection of native plants and animals occupied many Americans.³⁹ This included White himself, who, even years later, rarely mentioned the subject of taxidermy without noting that he had shot over 600 tropical birds in the Philippines which he donated to the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.

Recreation and consumption were also crucial to how environments could sharpen identity and advance conservationist sentiment at once. In a 1914 letter to an acquaintance, the Colonel noted that he was preoccupied with the thought of some “genuine American black bass” he intended to take from the Trinidad River on the island of Negros. The fish, “imported by the

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ John Roberts White to “Treat,” July 2, 1914, 1, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 22, folder 8, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

³⁹ The Philippines became a crucial space for the American exploration of tropical nature and “heightened links between environments and imperial work” through reinterpretation of the “words used to describe American environments and opportunities to enjoy them” practiced by American soldiers in the Pacific. Amy Kohout, *Taking the Field: Soldiers, Nature, and Empire on American Frontiers*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2023), 1-17.

Republican administration, like the rest of us,” offered White the casual opportunity to reflect on themes of national boundaries, belonging, and conservation. He joked that the “proper thing” to do with these American fish was to “remove them from their exotic surroundings on an American rod and tackle and place them in a home like an American stomach.”⁴⁰ Here we see White’s proto-environmentalism informed early on by his racialized encounter with unregulated resource consumption. “I feel like moralizing about these black bass,” he wrote. White was not worried about the consequences of introducing non-native species to a delicate island ecosystem. Instead, his concerns reflected the same longstanding suspicions elite conservationists harbored against the supposedly profligate and destructive consumption practices of Native Americans and immigrant market hunters.⁴¹ American officers like White were required to pay ten pesos for a license to catch no more than three 10-inch fish in a day. Without such regulations he “wonder[ed] how many of them will be left a few months after *independencia*.”⁴²

White’s Philippines service also offered him the opportunity to experiment with the management of men which he would later employ in the management of rangers for the NPS. In a public talk entitled “Care of Constabulary,” White outlined his methodology of command. It was directed, first and foremost by the modern discipline of psychology, “the science of the human and its operations.” A decade and a half in the tropics had taught him a fundamental lesson that many of his American colleagues found unpalatable: Filipino and American soldiers were psychologically similar, differing only in “some minor but very important details.” Proper leadership, of either Anglos or Filipinos, required a “quiet manner, low voice, and self-control.”

⁴⁰John Roberts White to “Treat,” July 2, 1914, 1-2.

⁴¹ On the attitudes of conservationist sportsmen and NPS rangers at the turn of the twentieth century toward market-oriented immigrant hunters and Native Americans see, Louis Warren, *The Hunter’s Game: Poachers and Conservationists in Twentieth Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 13-15, 58, 102-103, 126-151; Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 125-138.

⁴²*Ibid.* at 2.

Punishments needed to be measured, appropriate, and fairly administered. Anger in an officer was merely a manifestation of cowardice which “[t]he soldier sees thru [sic]...every time.”

However, White could not escape the racist assumptions that underpinned so much of both American and European colonial institutions. With Filipino soldiers it was necessary, he thought, “to be somewhat paternal in your attitude.” He meant this in a nearly literal manner. “Be a father to your company and you will have little trouble,” he advised other Americans; “In many ways they are light-hearted children, easily pleased and easily grieved...[p]raise is a powerful tonic to them.” They were more likely than Anglo soldiers to grow sullen or mutinous do to harsh treatment, and occasionally needed to be handled with “gentle ridicule” that white soldiers would have found insulting. Shorn of its racial element, White later applied a similar paternalism to his management of many of the younger, non-veteran rangers he led at Grand Canyon and Sequoia National Parks. The natural world also played an important role in White’s strategy as a leader in the Philippines. A reliable soldier was the product of a well-ordered environment. “Encourage [your men] to keep neat gardens” at their posts, he counseled, “and to economise in their household affairs by keeping pigs and chickens.”⁴³

Such policies were so promising that White came to believe they could help rehabilitate the otherwise burdensome insurgents the Constabulary fought. While recovering from a gunshot wound he suffered at the Battle of Bud Dajo, White was appointed the commandant of the Iwahig Penal Colony on the remote island of Palawan, a “dolorous settlement,” which he found “steeped in disease and misery.” Though White had a reputation amongst the convicts and his Constabulary superiors as a seasoned “warrior,” his first superintendency in government service

⁴³John Roberts White, Manuscript of Public Address, “Care of Constabulary,” n.d., 1-5, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 18, folder 14, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

was marked by the paternalism familiar from his time in the Constabulary. He sought to maintain discipline “by moral rather than physical force.” The only firearm permitted within the colony was “the sixteen-gauge shot-gun which [White] used for shooting the *balud* pigeon and yellow-crested cockatoos which abounded in jungle clearings,” and which he later donated to the American Museum of Natural History. The success of Iwahig White credited to two factors, his moderately progressive racial attitudes and his developing ideas about nature as a tool for personal and social improvement.⁴⁴ White counted the environment surrounding the colony among his greatest assets. Work divisions, organized under a series of Filipino convict-foremen, treated Iwahig as much as an agricultural settlement as a penal colony. They included sections devoted to “Farming, Forestry, Health, Serving...Fishing, Carpentry, [and] Gardening.” His description “[o]f the progress we made at Iwahig” was almost entirely agricultural, and included “the long avenue of acacias we planted, the flower gardens and the orchid house, the vegetable gardens where we grew nearly every kind of tropical fruit and vegetable, as well as many from the temperate zone, the coffee, cacao, tobacco, tree cotton, papaya, and other plantations.” He proved his own devotion to this cause by making independent “trips to Borneo and to Japan and c[oming] back laden with seeds and cuttings,” turning “a disease-bearing swamp...into a little paradise.” The formula was clear: when treated with dignity and fairness and rehabilitated by mission-oriented labor in nature, even hardened criminals offered “less anxiety and feeling of responsibility than is experienced by the average kindergarten teacher.”⁴⁵

What White termed, “The Iwahig Experiment,” foreshadowed the elements of his later conception of how work in nature would benefit men such as his early park rangers. The variety

⁴⁴John Roberts White, *Bullets and Bolos: Fifteen Years in the Philippine Islands*, (New York: The Century Co., 1928), 321-328.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, at 329-337.

of nature and the purpose to which the labor was directed were crucial factors. While he was occasionally prone to rhapsodizing about the mental and physical benefits of wilderness as such, that term, so resonant in the American context, was not applicable in the Philippines. In the tropics it maintained an air of awe and terror. One of the reasons that Iwahig did not require a jail structure is that there was essentially nowhere for escaped convicts to go on remote and rugged Palawan. The single escape that did occur at Iwahig during White's tenure ended after the escapee "had an unhappy existence among the 'wild' Tagbanua tribes in the mountain jungle for a few weeks" before voluntarily returning "to the home comforts of Iwahig." The key to rest, rehabilitation, and recovery lay not in primordial wilderness but the synthesis of nature and such "home comforts." The same thing held true for convicts at Iwahig and visitors to Sequoia National Park's Giant Forest; interventions in the environment to produce a well-ordered and controlled interaction with wild nature were both permissible and necessary. Even in a penal colony these could take the form of wildlife protection and environmental reclamation. When White arrived at Iwahig the colony was suffering through recurrent bouts of malaria. He ended the convict practice of netting the small creeks around Iwahig's central plaza, which was "destroying the fish which preyed on the mosquito larvae." The natural tidal movements of the Iwahig River also left "left pools of fresh or slightly brackish water in which mosquito wigglers were found," so White "put scores of prisoners to raking the shores smooth and draining the pools." Conditions could thus be improved by making the environment of the camp more or less natural depending on the circumstances. It also mattered to White that the management of nature by the convicts achieved the proper orderliness. When he first arrived, "a mushroom growth of huts" stretched behind the convicts barracks, creating "a perfect hiding place where convicts with sufficient confidence or 'pull' might ignore the calls to work or sleep." White conclude that he

needed to “raze the excrescent growth,” but was hesitant because it was “overgrown by climbing vines and flowering plants,” which made up “the solitary refining influence in their lives.”⁴⁶

Hydrick’s analysis of John White treats him as something of a blank slate, ready and willing to imbibe Stephen Mather’s theories of park management upon joining the NPS in 1919. However, his service in the Philippines and the First World War reveals the ongoing influence of others who were responsible for easing his way into civilian service and to whom he was far more likely to credit for his approach to park administration and personnel management. White’s service brought him into contact with several figures of national fame. From his assumption of NPS duties in 1919 until his death in 1961, he frequently credited the inspiration of three prominent generals, John Pershing, James G. Harbord and Leonard Wood, as the examples he sought to emulate as a superintendent. His description of Pershing in a short reminiscence titled “Three Generals” reflects what, in other places, White listed as the ideal characteristics of an NPS leader; “that complete poise that is a mark of complete self-confidence; a physical appearance which was the perfection of a military figure; a capacity to delegate authority...a firmness of will which amounted to obstinacy...and an ability to let the little matters slide and save himself for the big occasion which amounted to genius.”⁴⁷

White attributed the efficiency of his fiscal management of Sequoia to these generals in a short lecture delivered after his retirement in 1947 entitled “How I Saved the U.S. Government \$15,000,000.” “It happens that as superintendent of the park I had to make certain decisions,” he told his audience, “[a]nd it also happens that...I had had the good fortune to serve in the Philippines and in France under two great Americans (Pershing and Harbord) who were

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* at 325.

⁴⁷ John Roberts White, “Three Generals,” n.d., 9-10, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 16, folder 11, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

exponents of the art of saying ‘No.’” It was the lesson of these “exponents of the negative” that White claimed allowed him to withstand the various pressures to which all superintendents were subject. He even ascribed some of the choices which others would cite as his innovative prioritization of ecological preservation to these lessons in frugality. Despite “pressure” to accept a \$50,000 appropriation for the construction of a park highway extension in the 1920s, White allowed the money to go “to some more fortunate, if perhaps less obstinate superintendent,” based entirely on cost rather than aesthetics environmentalism. “I must not rhapsodize upon the beauties it was proposed to destroy and vandalize by this new highway,” White vowed. “Let me stick to the cold, hard financial facts.” Such concerns guided his thinking long before his “landscape sense” developed.⁴⁸

These generals also changed how White facilitated the experiences of park visitors and give us insight into his ongoing romanticism and political and historical didacticism in structuring their encounters with nature. In some instances, this meant enlisting nature to repay the men to whom White felt indebted. Though White did not invent the practice, he was among the greatest proponents within the Park Service of renaming Giant Sequoias after notable Americans. In 1926, he named one of the twenty largest trees in the world after General Pershing. Indicating how personally meaningful this was for White, is his inscription on a photo of the event calling it “one of [his] proudest days.” Even more obviously motivated by private gratitude was White’s choice that same year to name a nearby tree the General Harbord after James G. Harbord, his friend and mentor since the Philippines. Harbord had been Pershing’s Chief of Staff in the A.E.F., a position that earned him some public notoriety, but hardly earned

⁴⁸John Roberts White, Manuscript of Public Address “How I Saved the U.S. Government \$15,000,000,” n.d., 2-5, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 16, folder 2, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

him White's promise to transform a Sequoia into "his imperishable mausoleum, or should I say, monument;" one that would be "more permanent than the pyramids."⁴⁹ White gave out these accolades even when doing so brought him directly into conflict with NPS officials. When White suggested to Stephen Mather that a Sequoia be named after recently deceased former Interior Secretary Franklin Lane in 1921, the Director used it as an opportunity to lay out his opposition, not only to the naming of trees after individuals, but to the naming of trees at all. "[F]rankly I am opposed to giving trees individual names except in rare instances." While Mather saw the publicity value of White's proposals, thought it was only open up a proposition that we have been working to get away from for some years." In Yosemite's famous Mariposa Grove, the policy of the NPS was to actively deindividualize previously named Sequoias, "except the outstanding trees like the Grizzly Giant."⁵⁰ In some cases, White appealed to his former superiors to meet the NPS' need to satisfy visitors. In 1930, White enlisted Harbord to entertain nightly campfire gatherings at Sequoia's Giant Forest. Harbord told "the campfire audience something about the time he commanded the Marine Brigade at Belleaux Woods and the second division at Soissons that time he broke the point of the German spear that was so near the heart of Paris."

One of the ways in which superintendents developed policies concerning the day-to-day management of the park was through a process of consultation that took place between men whose relationships were established in military service before their NPS careers began. From 1929 to 1937, White worked closely with the superintendent of nearby Yosemite National Park, with much of their compatibility stemming from their earlier acquaintance in the Philippines and

⁴⁹ John Roberts White to Philip J. Van Blon, October 3, 1931, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 16, folder 11, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon; John Roberts White to William C. Rivers, June 30, 1924, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 6, folder 19, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

⁵⁰ Stephen T. Mather to John Roberts White, August 1, 1921, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 6, folder 6, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

Europe. Charles Goff Thomason had been the sort of logistically gifted and independently driven Army officers that Park Service administrators frequently advanced to positions of authority within the Parks. He had been commended for his organizational skill in the Remount Service, the branch of the Quartermaster Corps providing horses and mules to the Army. As a Colonel at Lux, France in 1918, he had been charged with keeping the American First and Third Armies supplied with fresh mounts and draft animals. In the Philippines, he had served as the head of Constabulary prisons in Manila while White was in charge of the Iwahig Penal Colony, and the two had collaborated closely on a series of prisoner transfers. As superintendents their collaboration continued. In 1936, Thomason was faced with the question of what to do with Yosemite's "Old Village," the hotels, mills, and cabins built in the nineteenth century. "It involve[d]," he wrote, "more potential park values than any other problem faced here in several years." To White, Thomson explicated an entire theory about purpose of the Park Service, its relation to American history, and the principles which needed to guide park management. "What is a historical building?...What control is vital in Yosemite?" Within the bounds of a park like Yosemite, history needed to be made subservient to nature. Even the most important man-made structures in valley were "ruins cluttering up one of the world's most scenic masterpieces." All was to be made secondary to natural beauty and serenity, not for its own sake, but for the American people. "Here," Thomson wrote to White, "considerations of history *or any other park necessities* must not impair the perfect picture" (emphasis added). Other superintendents would need to decisions suited to their "major purpose, [the] one vital control to which all other conflicting interests, however important, must concede."⁵¹ Even as NPS leaders like Mather and

⁵¹Charles Goff Thomson, "Memorandum on the Historical Values of the Old Village," September 29, 1936, 1-4, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks Archives, Ax 720/PH 01, box 69, folder 15, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California-Merced Library, Merced, California.

Albright were pressing hard for the expansion of tourist infrastructure and amenities, the men overseeing individual parks were coming to their own understanding of how to balance these demands with their political values.

White and Thomson's shared mission of protecting Giant Sequoias relied even more directly on both the knowledge and ideological commitments the men had each developed in the tropics. Thomason famously drew on infantry tactics of static defense to prevent vandalism and souvenir hunting. For two years he had struggled to prevent tourists from staging photo opportunities which left signs nailed to trunks and root systems unsustainably trampled at the famed Grizzly Giant. In 1929 White softly admonished Thomson after White saw one such photo. Thomson promised the "restoration of an appropriate atmosphere in our three Big Tree groves."⁵² His solution required balancing nature protection and tourist facilitation as Thomson sought to induce this atmosphere without "impos[ing] unsightly fences...into the foreground." Eventually, "out of a vivid memory of my time in France," he triumphantly reported to NPS Director Horace Albright in 1930, "I finally hit upon the scheme of putting in a low parapet wire entanglement" surrounding the tree in a maze twenty feet distant from the trunk. The barrier was "the low German type with long triple-barbed wire strung crisscross between steel posts" one foot off of the ground. Encircling the Grizzly Giant, it essentially created a large machine gun nest without the machine gun. Lest this alienate visitors, the barbed wire was covered in azalea,

⁵²John Roberts White to Charle Goff Thomson, October 21, 1929 and Charles Goff Thomson to John Roberts White, October 26, 1929, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks Archives, Ax 720/PH 01, box 69, folder 15, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California-Merced Library, Merced, California; Their shared background is evident in the form of their letters as much as in the content. Each man addressed the other as "Colonel" and signed himself off as "Superintendent." When Thomson wrote to White to dissuade him from resigning from the NPS, he did so with appeals to patriotism – their work was "helping build up something that will be...vastly important to the country a century from now" – and their shared experience in the Philippines since park superintendency was the only job to adequately utilize their "varied experiences in the Islands." Charles Goff Thomson to John Roberts White, May 16, 1927, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks Archives, Ax 720/PH 01, box 615, folder 2, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California-Merced Library, Merced, California.

California lilac, ferns, and dogwood to disguise it.⁵³ The entanglement was a uniquely colorful example of what national parks historian Alfred Runte identified as “[t]he pursuit of technical solutions to biological and social problems” that were popular in the early years of the NPS and at which former military officers accustomed to handling complex administrative and management problems but given space in a looser civilian command structure excelled.⁵⁴

Once White joined the NPS, he found himself working alongside other men with whom he shared little but military experience. This status eased their integration into their new pseudo-military employer. “Everyone is new to his job,” White wrote, “making it the easier for me to fit in.”⁵⁵ Military hierarchies often reasserted themselves in the NPS as veterans were represented from the lowest ranger to the highest administrators. The Superintendent of Grand Canyon, W.H. Peters, had been an officer in the Army Air Service, while a young, naturalized Frenchman named Marbois, who shared White’s romantic notions about rangers, had been a “buck private in the rear rank.” However, previous distinctions of rank were secondary to cultivating the communication and flexibility to respond to circumstances in the new civilian service. Victor Endersby, the engineer for the park had been a Captain in the AEF. But when he and White, then Acting Superintendent, were stranded in the desert due to mechanical trouble, neither instance of White’s superior rank mattered. “I was older than Endersby. I had held higher rank in the A.E.F.” he wrote, yet “he had a confident way with machinery that led me readily to subordination.”⁵⁶

⁵³Charles Goff Thomson to Horace M. Albright, November 11, 1930, quoted in Runte, *Yosemite*, 163-165.

⁵⁴Runte, *Yosemite*, 165, 167-170.

⁵⁵John Roberts White Journal Entry, October 16, 1919, 1-9, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 18, folder 2, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

⁵⁶ John Roberts White Journal Entry, October 24, 1919, 15-19.

In many instances NPS officials were forced to permit their employees to work issues out on their own, leaving them free to draw on their own military experience. This was most clear in matters of dress, leading to the standardization of a quasi-military appearance among rangers. Some heated debates at the first Chief Rangers Conference concerned uniform regulations, during which rangers appealed to wartime experience as a guide. When the Conference chairman expression argued the regulations offered too wide a variety of footwear, others offered “considerable opposition” to a prohibition on the wearing of puttees, the bandage-like lower leg coverings which had become immensely popular with frontline soldiers during the Great War with which many had been intimately familiar. Nothing inspired quite as much or as heated debate as the ranger’s hat. In other instances, military dress was adopted in spite of its practical limitations because it projected an image of competence and masculinity. Some derided the stiff campaign hat, now an iconic part of the ranger’s uniform, as “an impediment to a ranger while at work...worse than useless” It was still adopted on the grounds that less imposing alternatives could “hardly be used to bring out the best effect of the uniform.”⁵⁷

While the influence of military service on the work of ranger and superintendent work in the NPS was most superficially evident in the outward appearance of personnel, it also expressed itself in policy, as well as more abstract notions of healthful nature and its place within a functioning democratic society. Veterans among the first generation of rangers and superintendents who worked to implement or design conservation policy in the parks appealed to their own wartime experiences for metaphorical and practical inspiration. By conflating combat

⁵⁷ *Report of the First Chief Rangers’ Conference, National Park Service, Department of Interior, Sequoia National Park, January 15-19, 1926, 31-33, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks Archives, Ax 720/PH 01, box 184, folder 27, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California-Merced Library, Merced, California.*

and conservation, they sometimes made the ranger and the soldier perfectly overlapping figures whether or not the ranger in question had been in the military. In his second Annual Report as Superintendent of Sequoia in 1921, White couched his requests for a larger and better-funded ranger force in direct military comparisons. “We train our army and navy to fight a hypothetical enemy,” he wrote to his superiors. “[H]ow much more should we train our rangers to fight the ever-devouring forest fires and protect the treasures of these parks?” War and conservation work afflicted men’s bodies in similar ways. White appealed for improved ranger retirement plans by referencing two ranger firefighters who suffered from tuberculosis “incurred, be it noticed, in the line of duty.” “We look after men who were gassed in France,” he noted. “[W]hy not look after those who were smoked in Montana or elsewhere?” Men “weakened in service” had a special claim on the resources of the nation. In a line that could have come from the American Legion appeal White’s closed his plea, “[f]or God’s sake, gentlemen of Congress, take steps to preserve and care for those who have served America well!”⁵⁸

The promotion of physical and emotional health has been an underrated feature of the early NPS, and the role of military veterans and the Great War even more so with in that history.⁵⁹ John White serves as an excellent case study in these respects as the recovery of his

⁵⁸ John Roberts White, “Annual Report for Sequoia and General Grant National Parks for 1921,” October 1, 1921, 5-6, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks Archives, Ax 720/PH 01, box 3, folder 18, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California-Merced Library, Merced, California.

⁵⁹ In some ways, public health predated nature protection as a part of the National Parks mission. In 1832, medicinal hot springs in central Arkansas became the first piece of federally protected land as the Hot Springs Reservation. During a bout of exhaustion in 1915, Director Stephen Mather travelled to Hot Springs and “became almost addicted to their recuperative effect, which included the importation of popular European nature cures such as the Oertel System. Horace M. Albright and Marian Albright Schenck, *Creating the National Park Service: The Missing Years*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 113-116; William H. Deadrick, “Oertel System of Graduated Exercises at Hot Springs,” in *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 46, No. 8, (1916), 532-533; Adam Rosenbaum, “Grounded Modernity in the Bavarian Alps: The Reichenhall Spa Culture at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” in *Central European History*, Vol. 47, No. 1, (March 2014), 30, 35-40. In the 1870s, both the protection of Yellowstone and Mackinac National Parks were supported by many explicitly for the “salubrity of the[ir] atmosphere” and the “health, comfort, and pleasure,” of the American people. “The Yellowstone Park Bill,” *The New York Times*, February 29, 1872; Sellers, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks*, 27.

health in nature became primary theme in his life and its public presentation on behalf of the NPS. Even as he was first applying for civilian government service, he credited physical activity in the outdoors for the improvement of his war damaged health. “You may have the idea that I am an invalid,” he wrote to one acquaintance after his return from the Philippines. “Let me say that I have just returned from the mountains where I packed 40 lbs. over 3000 feet up...I have walked and chilled the bugs out.”⁶⁰ As White’s reputation grew within the Park Service, his public profile rose as well carrying forward a story of restoration. A profile in the magazine *American Forests*, emphasized both environmental healing and White military toughness. ““He lost his health in the Army and regained it in the National Park Service,”” it began. “After a stirring career with the [Philippines Constabulary] Colonel White...retired for physical disability incurred in the line of duty. *But he refused to stay disabled.*” (emphasis added).⁶¹

Throughout his career, White maintained an interest in the use of nature for veterans and servicemembers. He continued to offer the hospitality of the parks to men who shared his experience in the Philippines whether or not they were personally known to him. After receiving a letter from a Pasadena builder named L.J. Mygatt who had briefly served in the Philippines, White invite him to enjoy the benefits of Sequoia’s since “the latch-string is always hanging out here under the Big Tree for ex-Filipinos.”⁶² During the Second World War he attempted to commit the park to veteran’s health in a more organized manner. When NPS administrators sought housing for war workers within Sequoia itself in 1943, White, by then back in his superintendency, responded that such a policy would hurt the park’s ability to meet the future

⁶⁰ John Roberts White to W. Cameron Forbes, August, 1915, 1, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 2, folder 7, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

⁶¹ “Veteran Soldier-Ranger,” in *American Forests and Forest Life*, Vol. 35 No. 8, (August 1929), 530-531, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 6, folder 5, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

⁶² John Roberts White to L.J. Mygatt, May 14, 1934, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 6, folder 5, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

war need of accommodating the many war workers “who expect to come to the park this summer for the purpose of obtaining relief from the continuous grind of war factories in Southern California...”⁶³ In March, 1945 White was still defending his policy of not charging admission for soldiers and sailors, even as the NPS urged its discontinuation.⁶⁴ In February, 1944, White even signed on to an unsuccessful attempt to establish a “convalescent hospital” in Sequoia “natural advantages” would “help to restore to health the sick bodies and shaken nerves of disabled veterans.” Having met White at the park Elliott knew how to solicit his support for what he considered a “monument to humanitarianism.” “I derived great benefit myself from residence in this magnificent climate,” he wrote in support of the project, “in fact I cannot very well live anywhere else.”⁶⁵

However, it is very important to recognize that despite his personal identification with disabled servicemembers and veterans, as a superintendent White drew no distinctions between these men and civilians when it came to their entitlement or ability to benefit from the gifts of healthful nature. Public health through outdoor recreation was a fundamental goal of White’s dedication to nature preservation. In one his early annual reports as superintendent of Sequoia,

⁶³ John Roberts White, “Memorandum for the Regional Director, Region Four, April 26, 1943, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 66, folder 17, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

⁶⁴ Such policies were successful. Use of the park by service members and war workers rose steadily through the War. By June 1945, even White needed to inform nearby Army commanders that feeding and housing visiting soldiers, who were now coming in large numbers even in winter, “has now become a burden.” He never considered the possibility of limiting uniformed visitors, instead soliciting Army commanders to assist in the construction of additional camp sites for the soldiers, devoted as ever to the task of enabling “the many soldiers in the Valley waiting to go overseas to see a little of the finest scenery of America and get a complete change before the arduous work ahead of them.” John Roberts White to Commanding Officer Lemoore Air Force Base, June 18, 1945, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 66, folder 21, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

⁶⁵ Robert M. Elliott to John Roberts White, February 16, 1944 and John Roberts White to Robert M. Elliott, February 18, 1944, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 66, folder 21, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon; “Sierra Hotel for Soldiers,” *The Long Beach Press-Telegram*, February 15, 1944, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 66, folder 21, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

White declared 1923 a successful year as he felt that the park had “fulfilled its purpose as one of the great breathing places of the nation,” which had contributed to “the mental and physical refreshment...of many thousands of American citizens from every state and every walk in life.”⁶⁶ As late as 1945, by which time White had developed a reputation for placing the health of the Big Trees above all other concerns, he defended the popular winter sports facilities that rangers had constructed at the Giant Forest, initially on their own initiative, since the 1920s. When Dr. Emilio Meinecke, a plant pathologist for the Park and Forest Services and the designer of the iconic loop campground system, criticized the popular skating rink as unpleasant and antithetical to park values, White defended it on the grounds that, “thousands of men, women, youths, and children have enjoyed winter use, have profited physically and mentally by the sunshine on the pines and mountains.” If its condemnation was to “result in park policy, then the parks might [as well] be closed in both summer and winter.”⁶⁷ Military service may have wrecked White’s health and made him aware of the ameliorative effect of nature, but the mission of the NPS was to extend this beneficence to the general public. Health through nature became a recurrent theme in all aspects of the park’s attempts to educate visitors. Its indigenous history was reinterpreted to foreshadow the subject. Hospital Rock, a popular hiking destination featuring Native pictographs and archeological sites was presented as “the house of the chiefs and medicine men of the tribe, where councils were held marriage ceremonies solemnized and funeral rites given. *It was here*

⁶⁶ John Roberts White, “Annual Report for Sequoia National Park for 1923,” October 1, 1923, 3, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks Archives, Ax 720/PH 01, box 3, folder 18, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California-Merced Library, Merced, California.

⁶⁷ John Roberts White, “Memorandum for the Director,” January, 23, 1945, 1-4, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 1, folder 9, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

that the men of the tribe returned from long hunting expeditions to rest and recuperate.”
(emphasis added).⁶⁸

Another major element of John White’s philosophy of park management which was his commitment to the use of nature as a medium for the promotion of national pride and the extension of democratic ideals. Hydrick notes White’s interest in inculcating such ideals through nature but does not locate the origins of this impulse in any particular aspect of his biography or personality.⁶⁹ While Matherism stressed this idea for the earliest rangers and superintendents in the NPS, White was clearly primed to embrace such ideas because they complemented ideas he already had developed as a soldier. White was a believer in a long tradition which saw military service as a way to assert Americanness.⁷⁰ When he attempted to reenlist in the Army in 1943 at the age of 63, he claimed his citizenship through “naturalization by Army Service,” adding “first papers at Seattle, Wash. Apri. 29, 1899,” the day of his first enlistment in the U.S. 4th Infantry despite his naturalization not becoming official until 1913 due to his long residence in the Philippines.⁷¹

Alongside the promotion of public health and the protection of the nation’s material and aesthetic resources, White saw fostering political unity as a major goal of the NPS. In part, this

⁶⁸ Walter Fry, “Hospital Rock in Sequoia National Park,” in *Sequoia Nature News Notes* No. 5 (February 17, 1925), 3-4, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 22, folder 6, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

⁶⁹ Hydrick, “The Genesis of National Park Management,” 79.

⁷⁰ There is a massive historiography on the legal and ideological connection between military service, American citizenship, and belonging. See, Christian G. Samito, *Becoming American Under Fire: Irish Americans, African Americans, and the Politics of Citizenship during the Civil War Era*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Candice Bredbenner, “A Duty to Defend? The Evolution of Aliens’ Military Obligations to the United States, 1792 to 1946,” in *Journal of Policy History*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (April, 2012), 224-262; Nancy Gentile Ford, *Americans All!: Foreign-Born Soldiers in World War I* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2011); James Burk, “Citizenship Status and Military Service: The Quest for Inclusion by Minorities and Conscientious Objectors,” *Armed Forces & Society* Vol. 21, No. 4, (July, 1995), 503-529.

⁷¹ “Citizenship Denied Fighter For the Flag,” *The San Francisco Call*, November 18, 1911; Biographical Questionnaire, John Roberts White, February 8, 1943, 1, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 19, folder 7, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

came directly from Mather. The parks were sold to the people of the West, the Director told his superintendents in 1925, on the assumption that “people with worth-while incomes are coming out to enjoy the parks and perhaps can be made to become citizens of this Western country.” But the ultimate aspiration was “to cement the country together, and make the different sections realize that they are dependent upon the others.”⁷² This was an idea that White had anticipated early in his civilian career. “This is a national park and must be maintained and improved along national lines,” he wrote in an extraordinary paragraph of his annual report for 1922. He thought it impossible to overestimate the parks’ “effect in molding national character and in perpetuating American ideals founded on the outdoor life and the conquest of wilderness...” Nature, and Americans’ “splendid instinct” to “turn to the wild places for physical and no less...spiritual refreshment,” were inseparable from national character and the ideals for which American soldiers fought.⁷³ The Giant Forest was an ideal site of healing not because it allowed its visitors retreat from society, but also because men and women “around the campfires have shared the spirit of democracy as well as the great peace which pervades the Mightiest Forest in the world.”⁷⁴

America’s political exceptionalism was mirrored in White’s mind by the exceptional nature he was now charged with protecting. In a speech from the 1930s on “The National Parks Idea,” White framed the National Parks as a synecdoche for all the progress and achievements “of which we may be justly proud.” They distinguished the nation from all other societies. “You may search in history for the national parks of ancient Greece or Rome, or even of France, of

⁷²Minutes of the Eighth National Parks Conference,” Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado, 1925, 4.

⁷³ John Roberts White, “Annual Report for Sequoia National Parks For Period October 1, 1921 to September 30, 1922,” October 1, 1922, 3, 5, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks Archives, Ax 720/PH 01, box 3, folder 18, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California-Merced Library, Merced, California.

⁷⁴John Roberts White, “Annual Report for Sequoia National Parks For Period October 1, 1922 to September 30, 1923,” October 1, 1923, 2-3, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks Archives, Ax 720/PH 01, box 3, folder 18, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California-Merced Library, Merced, California.

Germany or England,” he claimed. “You, will find ‘King’s Forests’, ‘Grand Dukes Preserves’, ‘Emperors parks’, but never a national park until America gave the idea to the world.”⁷⁵

The Giant Sequoias made the connection between nature and political exceptionalism manifest as the Big Trees were exclusively American and nothing else matched them in size or (it was believed at the time) age. They were the “one bit of nature’s handiwork that cannot elsewhere be duplicated,” as White wrote in a 1922 issue of *Western Magazine*.⁷⁶ Early in his superintendency, White began to collect information on notable foreign visitors to the park, foresters among them. In January 1927 an assistant district forester from New Zealand named A.N. Perham spent two days in the Giant Forest and “surprised [the rangers] with tales of kauri pine trees...larger than our sugar pines.” White was impressed but went on to extract Perham’s “confess[ion] that the Big Trees were supreme.” When the superintendent of Canada’s Banff National Park visited a decade later, he “expressed many comparisons between the Canadian and American national park systems, all” he assured his superiors in Washington, “favorable to the latter.” Similar stories played out with foresters from Mexico, Germany, and Australia.⁷⁷

The rhetorical connection between nature, health, political principle, history, and military service was not simply a holdover from White’s earlier career which would fade over time as he embraced Mather’s philosophy and developed his ecological thinking. Rather, he continued to develop his thinking along these lines throughout his superintendency. The legacy of the Great War was especially useful in his public promotion of the NPS mission. At a 1936 Armistice Day

⁷⁵Transcript of Radio Broadcast, John Roberts White, “The National Park Idea,” n.d., 3, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 18, folder 7, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

⁷⁶John Roberts White, “The Mightiest Forest in the World,” in *Western Magazine*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (November 1921), 114-115.

⁷⁷ John Roberts White, “Monthly Report of Sequoia National Park for January 1927,” February 5, 1927, 7, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks Archives, Ax 720/PH 01, box 1, folder 9, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California-Merced Library, Merced, California.

celebration in Selma, California, White posited war as an aspect of human nature and conservation as one of its most promising potential replacements. “War may be bloody, it may be bestial, it may be brutal,” he reminded his audience, “but it is other things as well... War calls for sacrifice; it lifts men above themselves... makes them live and live more abundantly.” Without a substitute, he feared, “we shall need war as a catharsis for the body politic just as a man may need a spring tonic after a cold winter.”⁷⁸ It was in the light of War’s memory that White most clearly saw the moral and social value of preservation. “We see our people and our problems more clearly,” he said, “by reason of the great light which burned over the world during 1914-18.”⁷⁹ For veterans, work in the NPS could simply replace military service. After reminding the crowd of the eighty-million acres of devastated forest lands across America, he urged them to “[t]hink of those figures, you ex-A.E.F.ers; and then let your memories wander back to those carefully tended forests of France and Germany,” which contributed to their nations and did “not menac[e] the national welfare as do our fire-hazard denuded millions of acres.” White carefully avoided treating employment in the parks as a form of repayment of the debt owed to veterans. He conceptualized these damaged forests as a stand-in for the nation itself and their restoration as the “practical as well as a sentimental debt of gratitude” which the veterans themselves owed. Conservation work served to “provide training of the very best type

⁷⁸ John Roberts White, “Address to Fresno County Armistice Day Celebration, Selma, California, November 11, 1936, 7, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 18, folder 14, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

⁷⁹ In both speeches, White cited philosopher and psychologist William James’ 1910 call for “a moral equivalent of war;” the cultivation of “[s]trenuous honor and disinterestedness” to solve the social of industrial life. However, where James saw the control of nature as a mark of national progress and sought to enlist young men to serve as “a part of the army enlisted against Nature,” White stressed how they might be “physically and morally regenerated by the healthy out-of-door life and work.” William James, “The Moral Equivalent of War,” Lecture 11 in *Memories and Studies*, (New York: Longman Green and Co., 1911), 290-291.

for young American manhood,” which might rehabilitate disabled or unemployed veterans, but only as a side effect of their primary undertaking of preserving nature for all Americans.⁸⁰

The Sequoias of the Giant Forest gave White a uniquely useful piece of nature to bring together the themes of service, citizenship, history, and health, that ran through his idiosyncratic life. The environmental historian Jared Farmer has written extensively about how the Big Trees became useful tools for thinking across timescales. “Living sequoias,” he writes “became mental objects for thinking about geological time, while eviscerated sequoias...served historical time.”⁸¹ As dendrologists began to understand the utility of tree rings as repositories of climactic data, the Giant Sequoia became arboreal maps of the past. White immediately grasped the Sequoia’s value as a tool of both park promotion and public education. In 1923 he began to provide slabs of downed trees to schools, museums, public expositions, and scientists free of charge (less the cost of shipping each ton-and-a-half cross-section). Interpretive instructions were included, along with a chronological list of events the display might choose to note, linking the viewer with grand moments of American and World history. The choice of events in a big-tree timeline, what Farmer calls “a material attempt to permanentize a pedagogy of historical thinking,” would change depending on the preferences and interests of the display and proved unstable as those changed over the course of the twentieth century.⁸² White linked the trees to military history. Among the most common dated events on publicly displayed slabs in the first half of the century were the American Revolution, the Battle of Hastings, the Crusades, the American Civil War and the fall of Rome. The final marker before the death of the tree itself, was usually the “World War

⁸⁰ John Roberts White, “The Great American War of the Conquest of the Wilderness,” n.d., 1-7, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 18, folder 14, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

⁸¹ Jared Farmer, *Elderflora: A Modern History of Ancient Trees*, (New York City: Basic Books, 2022), 179.

⁸² *Ibid.* at 203-212.

Armistice” of 1918. His duty protect the Big Trees was even more sacralized than the work of other superintendents because of these historical resonances.

For American veterans the timelines constructed out of Sequoia slabs could do more than merely place them in the grand chronology of battles; they also served as a wistful counterpoint to all that bloodshed and a symbol of the pacific alternative to war that might be found in nature. One relatively young specimen (just two-thousand-years old at its death) went only as far as Fresno, where the members American Legion Post No. 218 of Woodlake, Lemon Cove, and Three Rivers, California, used it as the centerpiece in their float for the city’s 1935 Armistice Day Parade. Mounted vertically on the flatbed of a truck, the slab was labelled with seven dates ranging from 44 A.D. to 1917. Each year was matched by a corresponding Legionnaire in the period dress of a soldier from the past. A Roman centurion represented the Germanic Wars of the first century, followed by a crusader, a plumed knight, and American soldiers from the Revolutionary, Civil, Spanish-American, and First World Wars. The tree loomed over the men in death just as it had silently witnessed each of their wars in life. A banner on the truck, itself obscured by mounds of conifer needles, counterpoised the martial bearing of the men and the passive stoicism of the Sequoia. “Thru the Ages of Man’s Conflicts,” it read in heavy gothic script, “God’s Trees Peacefully Endure.”⁸³

White maintained an close relationship with the legionnaires of Post No. 218, universally known as the Big Tree Post. He was both a founding member and a popular speaker at both its meetings. Though he was accustomed to traveling widely on behalf of the Park Service, White more commonly served as the Big Tree Post’s host than he did as its guest. The Legion Post was

⁸³ This was not a one-off event. By the time White approved the Sequoia slab float, the park had been involved with such celebrations for over a decade. In 1925 an SNP firefighting truck was used as a float in nearby Visalia, California’s Armistice Day Parade.

just one of the many civic groups, social clubs, churches, and professional organizations which used the Sequoias as part of their ritual or institutional gatherings. Flag ceremonies were popular with Legionnaires, who would come from around California and from neighboring states to “pay homage to Big Trees” as White wrote on the back of an undated photograph of one such occasion, where he stands alongside visitors with his usual khaki park ranger campaign hat replaced by his blue American Legion cap. In 1923, White actively presided over the Big Tree Post’s initiation ceremony for new members under the General Sherman Tree.

The alleged healing properties of the trees themselves tied together their individual and political value. They *represented* American history and identity; the *purpose* that justified their preservation was the health of physically or psychologically injured veterans and sickly denizens of the industrial American city alike. White identified the Big Tree’s benefits as the product of a long and consciously cultivated relationship. The “Big Trees have, perhaps, a deeper significance for me and other park men than they do for those visitors who count them...merely another ‘tourist show,’” he wrote in one newspaper editorial on “What the Big Trees Mean to Me.” But that was only based on having spent nearly two decades in the park. Once the requisite familiarity had been achieved all could expect their burdens to be eased. “Beneath and around them there is a healing atmosphere,” he promised, “their branches are like cooling hands placed on the harassed brows of hurried men.” Their gift was knowledge of oneself and the ability to understand one’s experiences in the grand and eternal struggle of living in the world. And help “men rise on ‘stepping stones of their dead selves.’”⁸⁴ Sequoias also contributed to the post-Reconstruction mania for political reconciliation. A Sequoia in the General Grant Grove was The

⁸⁴John Roberts White, “What the Big Trees Mean to Me,” newspaper clipping, September 15, 1937, 6, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 17, folder 10, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

Robert E. Lee tree in the General Grant Grove, named for the Confederate General in 1875, was used by local chapter of the Daughters of the Confederacy as the American Legionnaires used the General Sherman. The Big Trees thus served not only as sites for the worship of a unified national civic identity, but also as another battleground in the fraught debates over whose historical memories are celebrated and whose are forgotten.

White's interest in the political valence of nature protection and its links to public health and social cohesion also drew him ideologically closer to the New Deal, despite his conservative personal temperament and lifelong identification as a Progressive Republican. Rick Hydrick argues that John White was gripped by "apprehension" about the invasiveness and wastefulness of New Deal programs, "conditioned by his fondness for the military's rigid chain of command" and nostalgia for an earlier period of individualized superintendent control of the parks. As an example, he points to the Civilian Conservation Corps units assigned to Sequoia National Park and Death Valley National Monument, over which White also exercised administrative oversight. Hydrick correctly notes that White expressed concern about lax discipline in CCC camps and the bureaucratic red tape associated with the program.⁸⁵ However, a closer look at White's relationship to the camps shows that he severely underestimated White's ability to use his experience commanding men, both in the military and the NPS, to integrate CCC enrollees into the management of the parks. Though somewhat awkwardly attached to the NPS administratively (most camps were operated directly by the U.S. Army while those within national parks were directed by the Army and NPS jointly), the CCC camps provide an excellent case study of how White thought about the relationship between the military and quasi-military organizations, as well as his ideas about how labor in nature improve and even heal individuals

⁸⁵ Hydrick, "The Genesis of National Park Management," 75-77.

physically and American society politically. Around the country, the Army officers placed in command of CCC frequently struggled to maintain levels of military order among their civilian charges. White's unique position as a civilian with as much or more military credibility than most of the junior Army officers who commanded the camps offered him the ability to project a more different form of authority.

Enrollees had more natural affinity for the rangers around them than their military commanders. Rangers did similar work to the enrollees. By 1934, White's reports were claiming that enrollees were so integrated into regular park operations that "we could not possibly run the park at its appropriate standard without CCC assistance." In 1937 he hardly mentioned the CCC at all, but claimed that this was because "no separate mention of their work need be made as they function as part of the regular park organization and practically every matter touched upon in this report has had its share of CCC participation."⁸⁶ White and other park employees reported that it quickly became apparent that CCC enrollees were adopting elements of their own style from ranger uniforms and gear; they were especially keen on getting their hands on ranger footwear. This closeness allowed the NPS to enforce camp regulations with less resistance than the Army could alone. "We have supplemented Army discipline by strict control on the part of the Ranger force," White wrote in one report, "and feel that stiff enforcement on the part of the civil authorities has a more beneficial effect than the authorized Army discipline." The distance between individual enrollees and the park superintendent, in age, experience, and authority, was such that White was able to maintain a fatherly relationships with his charges. Almost all CCC administrators shared the rhetorical tic of referring to the enrollees as "boys" rather than "men,"

⁸⁶John Roberts White, "Annual Report of Sequoia National Park for 1937," n.d., 19, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks Archives, Ax 720/PH 01, box 3, folder 20, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California-Merced Library, Merced, California.

and in this instance White's reasoning was literal. "[W]e are now getting boys obviously only 14 or 15, no matter what their official age may be."⁸⁷ White enjoyed the instructive element of his CCC duties. He made the camps a frequent stop on his frequent lecture tours, instructing them on poetry, history, his time in the Philippines, and, of course, the redemptive and curative power of nature. White's paternalism sometimes went so far as to make him measure the success of the camps almost purely in terms of the personal improvement of the enrollees rather than the work they accomplished. Whenever possible he spared men, even from important park work, for other duties so long as they were "considered important from a morale standpoint." He even claimed that many of the NPS employees managing the enrollees were too dedicated to quantifiable measure of material production instead of the "conservation of youth." If the government placed a "drum and fife corps in every district headquarters...then the CCC would be of still greater assistance in building up the morale and the patriotism of young America."⁸⁸ In this White was deeply aligned with the stated goals of the CCC as a New Deal program, which stressed the education, rehabilitation, and moral training of its young charges.⁸⁹

Hydrick further argues that the Directorship of preservationist Newton Drury and American entry into the Second World War signaled "a period of retrenchment, largely around

⁸⁷ John Roberts White, "Monthly Report of Sequoia National Park for April 1936," May 8, 1936, 1, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks Archives, Ax 720/PH 01, box 3, folder 21, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California-Merced Library, Merced, California.

⁸⁸ John Roberts White, "Address to Fresno County Armistice Day Celebration, Selma, California, November 11, 1936, 7, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 18, folder 14, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

⁸⁹ Despite the seemingly utilitarian attitude toward nature occasionally displayed by elements of the New Deal state, its commitment to democracy and experimentation helped innovative ideas about the role of the environment in people's lives. According to the environmental historian Neil Maher, programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps "transformed conservation during the Great Depression in ways that helped environmentalism blossom after World War II," broadening conservation to include "concern for human health through outdoor recreation, for wilderness preservation and for ecological balance." And while wilderness advocates such as Robert Marshall openly criticized CCC work such as road and trail construction as destructive, John White was never one of them. Neil Maher, *Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9-15.

fundamental Park Service principles,” reversing a New Deal Era focus on park development. However, once again missing from the analysis is the role played by military concerns. We have already seen how White and the NPS sought to maximize servicemembers’ recreational use of the parks during the war. The exigencies of the war were of paramount concern to NPS officials during the conflict, structuring its approach to protection of park resources. The NPS needed to find ways in which to bind its own work of environmental protection to the successful prosecution of the War. In response to what Drury called, “the normal impulse to make all [federal] possessions available for war at once,” the Service “cannot yield...but must preserve its resources as long as possible and must seek to make the wisdom of this policy understood by all...above all by a not always understanding public.” White himself further stressed the rationality of the NPS’ desire to safeguard its peacetime prerogatives. “To my way of thinking, this program [of preservation] is very far from placing Sequoia National Park in the attitude of being unrealistic with reference to a total war effort” he wrote during the War. “Per contra, it represents a realistic readjustment to meet long-term war conditions.” The protection of the nation’s environmental resources, even from the nation’s military itself, became couched in terms of military preparedness.⁹⁰

In order justify the continuation of preservationist work during the Second World War, the NPS appealed to the lessons of the First, arguing that national security dictated that the park’s peacetime conservation mission not be deprioritized as it once had. The chaotic nature of planning for that war, which had begun less than a year after the founding of the NPS, had resulted in massive environmental damage, sometimes with benefit to military readiness. In a

⁹⁰ Newton P. Drury, Unpublished Report, “National Park Service War Work,” June 30, 1944, 1, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks Archives, Ax 720/PH 01, box 5, folder 32, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California-Merced Library, Merced, California.

radio address delivered on March 12, 1941 on the American Legion and Conservation, E.T. Scoyen, an acolyte of White's who briefly served as Sequoia's superintendent when White was rotated to serve as a regional director, conjured up memories of 1918 In Sequoia, "the range was open to 2,100 head of cattle," which he doubted "amounted to one-hundreth of one percent of the total [beef production] in the United States at the time." Though assured that the grazing would be permitted only for the duration of the war, it had taken over a decade to fully eliminate the practice. The high meadows of Sequoia, he warned, had still not recovered more than twenty years after "this mistaken defense project." Another instance in which thousands of Alaskan Sitka Spruces had been felled for airplane production but left to rot for want of an economical way to transport them was repeatedly referenced by Scoyen and others as well. It was this sort of waste that conservationists instinctively associated with war, and which would help transform their priorities from conservation and visitor facilitation to preservation and ecological protection.⁹¹

White and the NPS most directly contributed to the war effort to the detriment of their preservationist mission by encouraging the enlistment of park service rangers into the U.S. military. Where once the experience of soldiers had informed the practice of conservation, now the experiences of the rangers were gifted back to the military. At least 23 Sequoia employees had enlisted by the spring of 1943. Frank Been, one of the earliest ranger-naturalists at Sequoia was commissioned as a Captain in the Army and was stationed in Alaska where, a park news bulletin assured his colleagues, "[h]is forestry and miscellaneous training will help the cause." Rangers thought themselves more naturally suited soldiers than others. Ranger Gordon Wallace

⁹¹ Transcript of Radio Broadcast, E.T. Scoyen, "The American Legion and Conservation," KTKC, Visalia, California, March 12, 1941, 5-6, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 18, folder 7, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

reported that his “Park Service training and experience have made his training easier.”⁹² Fellow rangers still at the park, and even the park visitors, thought of their own rationing efforts as a service to their enlisted friends. Both were drafted to collect as much scrap metal as possible early in the War, which Scoyen reported with pride. “[I]t can be assumed,” he wrote in one report, “that our contribution has already found its way into the ammunition belts of the intrepid men of our own Service whose careers are interrupted by the greater need.”⁹³

John Roberts White is correctly associated with the proto-environmentalist ideas he developed over the long course of his career as the superintendent of Sequoia. He repeatedly identified the protection of the Big Trees as the great mission of his life. Their size, age, aesthetic power, and rarity provided a backdrop worthy of White’s ambitions as a superintendent. While in charge of Sequoia, White became as knowledgeable about the life cycle and natural history of the park’s namesake tree as any layman in the country. In 1930, White teamed with Judge Walter Fry, his predecessor as superintendent, to write *Big Trees*, a popular introduction to *Sequoiadendron giganteum*, which NPS chief naturalist and historian William Tweed has called “the first enduring sequoia classic since Muir,” and “the defining work for the public

⁹² Unsigned, “New Bulletin No. 2 from Sequoia,” March 18, 1943, 2-3, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 3, folder 2, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

⁹³ E.T. Scoyen, “Memorandum for Director,” November 12, 1942, 2, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks Archives, Ax 720/PH 01, box 6, folder 42, Special Collections and University Archives, University of California-Merced Library, Merced, California. As noted, White tried to reenlist in his 60s, being turned away due to age and health, with one Army officer and fellow forester attributing his rejection to “the number of annular rings on your trunk.” Roger S. Fitch to John Roberts White, March 18, 1943, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 3, folder 2, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon; Ultimately designated a “foreign expert” on the Far East by the Army, he worked on operational maps of the Philippines in the run up to the U.S. invasion of the archipelago. When the American landings were moved from Mindanao to Leyte, White expressed some personal disappointment and not proving as helpful as he wished. John Roberts White to Captain Norman F. D’Evelyn, June 24, 1944, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 3, folder 2, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

understanding” of the Big Trees of the twentieth century.”⁹⁴ However, when proper attention is paid to the entire arc of White’s fascinating life, the direct link between military service, rehabilitation through nature, democratic idealism and the development of those ideas and the entire NPS bureaucracy becomes clear. This was captured in many of the congratulations White received on the occasion of his retirement from the Service in 1947. Amid the references to White’s love of the Giant Sequoias and his “far-sightedness and strength which have kept the park natural,” were acknowledgements of these other themes of his life and work. One local couple praised his work to “convert the park from what the Oldtimers, such as ourselves, thought belonged to us, into a park for the nation.” Another underscored the inseparability of White’s identities as a soldier and a protector of nature, closing his letter by stating that “on the eve of your departure I would append the words SEMPERVIRENS and SEMPER FIDELES to your name.”⁹⁵

⁹⁴William C. Tweed, *King Sequoia: The Tree That Inspired a Nation, Created Our National Park System, and Changed the Way We Think About Nature*, (Berkeley and Rocklin, CA: Heyday and Sierra College Press, 2016), 173-178.

⁹⁵Frank Kitteridge to John Roberts White, September 22, 1947, 1, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 4, folder 1, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon; Mr. and Mrs. Ray Buckman to John Roberts White, September 26, 1947, 1, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 4, folder 1, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon; Leonard Hohl to John Roberts White, October 8, 1947, 1, John R. White papers, Ax 192/PH 295, box 4, folder 1, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

Chapter 2: At Home on the High Desert: The Great War Veteran Homesteaders of Twentynine Palms, California

The Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center in Twentynine Palms, California is infamous among American servicemembers as a difficult and undesirable appointment. Military personnel are prone to ranking bases around the country and abroad for their amenities and facilities. By most metrics, “29 Palms” – known colloquially as “29 Stumps” receives fair to middling assessments on online military fora and review aggregation websites. The food, housing, and entertainment on the base are virtually identical to that found on any other Marine Corps base in the United States. What sets Twentynine Palms apart is its environment. Located in the Morongo Basin in the southern Mojave Desert, conditions at the base are hot, arid, windy, and frequently monotonous even by the regimented standards of military life. Amid complaints about yipping coyotes and sandstorms and triple-digit temperatures, Marines on the base have developed a mock affection for the Stumps. It is, “the best resort the desert has to offer,” according to one online reviewer. “Next to a prestigious lake (the base’s extensive wastewater treatment plant),” it delivers “perfect conditions for the most basic form of primitive camping,” with the distant backdrop of the San Bernardino Mountains making it a “place where snow can be seen from hell.”¹ As with other aspects of military life, the relative deprivations serve to boost unit cohesion through shared suffering.

A century before that comment, and three decades before the construction of the Marine Base, Twentynine Palms was the site of a very different attempt to form a community out of servicemembers drawn together by the Mojave. Rather than ordered to the desert by the U.S.

¹ Michael Murphy, comment, January 21, 2021, on “29 Palms MCCA EGA,” *Local Guides World*, accessed September 6, 2013, <https://localguidesworld.com/places/286652/29-palms-mcca-ega>.

government, several hundred veterans of the First World War arrived in the Twentynine Palms Valley to claim 160-acre parcels of public land under the Homestead and Desert Land Acts. Brought low by a variety of respiratory ailments associated with their service, they hoped that the clean air, elevation, and near constant sun of the desert would offer physical and psychological relief. Homesteads also offered the emotional benefit of independence through private property ownership to men caught up in the postwar recession. Even on barely productive desert lands, homesteads enlisted Great War veterans into a lauded American tradition of frontier settlement that was thought to address social contagion just as the desert air eased the symptoms of the tuberculosis bacillus that had driven many of the veterans there. According to the great scholar of American self-mythology, Richard Slotkin, the Homestead Acts were meant to “purge American society of those nagging disorders that had plagued it,” from the Indian Question to Southern race relations and, especially, poverty and overcrowding in the urban East.² The township of Twentynine Palms which grew out of the semi-organized migration of veterans thus serves as a useful case study of changing ideas about health, nature, and recovery, the deployment of veteran status as a distinct political and social identity, the persistence of the frontier myth into the twentieth century, and how public memory works to recast the past into something valuable and relevant in the present and future. In the process of creating their own narrative of their homesteading of a harsh desert environment, they tapped into a larger themes of American historical identity such as (adopted) indigeneity, frontier pioneering, and economic boosterism, which were held together but not dictated by a unifying theme of health in nature which they claimed as veterans but which functionally included civilians.

² Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 284-85.

Historically, the founders of a community have often established themselves as a symbol to embody the spirit or values that they wish to define communal life, such as the *oikistes* of newly settled ancient Greek colonies. Joe Davis, one of two figures who serve this function for the town of Twentynine Palms, did so without intent. By the early 1920s, Navy service in the Spanish-American and First World Wars had left the Pasadena native unable to deal with his hometown's increasingly polluted air.³ As the first Commander of the Pasadena's American Legion Post 13, Davis knew he was not suffering alone. Many fellow Legionnaires – tubercular, asthmatic, or disabled by wartime gas attacks – could no longer live and work comfortably. Davis's personal physician, Dr. James Luckie, a Post 13 member and former officer in the U.S. Army Medical Corps, was tired of sending such men to the Veterans Bureau's Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers in the nearby Sawtelle neighborhood of Los Angeles, whose damp air and proximity to the Pacific Ocean seemed to exacerbate their respiratory conditions. Although the immaculately maintained and manicured Sawtelle was still on the cutting edge of Army medicine's transition from a focus on acute treatment and disease prevention to rehabilitative care, Luckie thought it more suited to amputees than his patients. The doctor accompanied Davis on trips across the desert Southwest to find a climate "ideally suited" for veteran patients "to prolong their lives in regained health and vigor." After several years the pair settled on Twentynine Palms, an unincorporated and barely populated stretch of the Mojave Desert where, "the air was warm and dry and so clear that it sparkled."⁴

³ Ironically demonstrating the fact that more than climate dictated how environments became associated with the care of invalids, Pasadena had itself been a haven for tuberculosis patients since the late nineteenth century. See, Emily K. Abel, *Suffering in the Land of Sunshine: A California Illness Narrative* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

⁴ Twentynine Palms Hospital District Resolution Honoring Dr. James B. Luckie, undated, Twentynine Palms Historical Society Library, Twentynine Palms, CA; Pat Rimmington, "DR. James B. Luckie. Father of 29P.," undated, Twentynine Palms Historical Society Library, Twentynine Palms, CA.

In 1924, a caravan of Legionnaires loaded with construction material braved the rutted desert roads between Pasadena and the Mojave to build Davis a small cabin on the 160-acres of public land on which he had filed a homestead claim. Though Davis quickly felt revived by the desert air, a sudden rainstorm drove him from his uncompleted home to the town of Banning. Several days later Davis died there of pneumonia, never having perfected his homestead claim by the necessary “proving up.” Other groups of veterans followed to engage in the same sort of communal homestead construction, matching the camaraderie of the first project, though usually with the same level of fanfare.

Despite the tragedy, hundreds of veterans followed his example. Dr. Luckie, who lived long enough to be retrospectively enshrined as “the Father of Twentynine Palms” by community members, continued to evangelize for the town, eventually directing nearly 300 veteran patients to the Land Office in Los Angeles to file claims. Without access to such subsidized land ownership, few of the men would have been able to afford to purchase land, even unproductive and climatically inhospitable desert parcels. Most were suffering under the conditions of a postwar economic recession, and many lived almost entirely off of government pensions and disability payments. These men hoped to recuperate in “golden sun and peaceful quiet, the best of nature doing its appointed work.”⁵ The Davis land, claimed and improved by fellow veteran Frank Mathys, became the civic heart of Twentynine Palms while Davis and Luckie became the universally acknowledged town fathers. A 40-acre portion of Mathys’ property was gifted to Luckie, who returned it for the construction of a new American Legion post. It is now home to the towns’ only municipal green space, Luckie Park on Joe Davis Drive.

⁵ “Last Frontier,” *Desert Trail*, date missing, Twentynine Palms Historical Society Library, Twentynine Palms, CA.

Thusly, veteran rehabilitation through nature became enshrined as the central organizing theme in the early history of Twentynine Palms. Military service continues to sit at the heart of the narrative of its historical identity in the present day. Similar rural communes of Great War veterans in California, such as Delhi and Durham in the state's Central Valley flourished and failed in the interwar years despite more centralized planning, private financing, and productive soil.⁶ Even with a significantly less hospitable climate, Twentynine Palms persisted and continues to memorialize its founders. Even by the nostalgic and self-mythologizing standards of small-town America, it is a community that celebrates its own history to an extraordinary degree. Driving through the town's small downtown, visitors are confronted by a series of large public murals depicting scenes of desert life and nature alongside important moments from local history. Three are dedicated to early veteran homesteading families while another commemorates Dr. Luckie's work in bringing them to the Valley. The 1952 construction of the Marine Corps base, the nation's largest, solidified the town's martial identity, and made active duty servicemembers a vital part of the local economy. Over time and mirroring a larger trend of growing cultural distance between civilians and servicemembers/veterans, the base has become so self-contained that the "very combative and moody" locals are now another frequent Marine grievance.⁷

The placement of both military service and environmentally derived physical and mental health as the primary and eternally twinned themes of the town's history must be treated as a conscious decision made by the town's early residents. Unlike in those communities which were

⁶ Adriana Farley, *Stanford Ranch Durham, Butte County, California* (Chico, CA: ANCR 2001); Adon Poli, "What Happened at Delhi and Durham," in *The Journal of Land & Public Utility Economics*, Vol. 22, No. 2, (May, 1946) 182-190.

⁷ Michael Murphy, comment, January 21, 2021, on "29 Palms MCCS EGA," *Local Guides World*, accessed September 6, 2013, <https://localguidesworld.com/places/286652/29-palms-mccs-ega>.

self-consciously founded by and exclusively for former soldiers, the veteran homesteaders of Twentynine Palms built up their political and social institutions, their local networks of mutual aid, and the larger historical narrative of their town in retrospect. They did so as citizens who had returned entirely to civilian life and in conjunction with other members of the community, many of whom predated them, who did not share their backgrounds. And though they embraced a rhetorical move which linked American nature and veterans' health by casting land as a fitting form of compensation for service, they were hardly alone in attempting to base either their economy or public notoriety on the perception that the desert was a place of health, recuperation, and incipient (if occasionally austere) prosperity. Similar and nearby claimants ranged from Palm Springs, which offered an ever more glamorous and wealthier version of desert health, to the town of Zzyzx, renamed by its lone resident in 1944 to be "the last word in health."

The connections between health and nature which the town positioned itself to embody were based on much older ideas. The notion of wild nature as wholesome and restorative had been expressed by thinkers over millennia, from the Old Testament to Virgil's *Georgics* to John Muir. The severity of desert nature was thought especially conducive to acts of personal redemption and rehabilitation. "[I]ts harsh and forbidding character," wrote the environmental historian Roderick Nash of scriptural invocations of wilderness, allowed it to serve as "a place for rededication and refuge." Apocalyptic groups like the Essenes of the Near East saw the desert's "purity and simplicity" as the means to seek the spiritual perfection necessary to call forth the Messiah and God's kingdom on Earth.⁸ By the late nineteenth century Americans came to fear what urbanization, bureaucratization, and industrialization did to their bodies, minds, and spirits. Some believed that the ancient promise of wild nature could address the specific threats

⁸ Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 5th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 14-18.

posed by industrial modernity. For some, the cure for the diseases of overwork – variously called neurasthenia, overcivilization, or “Americanitis” – could be found in the semi-supervised reversal of social development. Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, who had developed his neurological theories while treating nervous conditions among Civil War soldiers, thought that while “our naked ancestors” maybe not have lived longer than modern men, they certainly “did not have overtaxed nerves.” It was commonsense, he argued, that “[t]he surest remedy to the ills of civilized life is to be found in some form of return to barbarism...Civilization has hurt – barbarism shall heal.” Mitchell may have thought his treatments commonsensical, but they were hardly timeless. The “camp cure” was intended to treat paternalistic Victorian fathers and husbands, rehabilitating them for their modern economic, social, and familial obligations. Mitchell is now more famous as the pioneer of the “rest cure” which confined Victorian women to isolated rooms, interminable bed-rest, and high-fat diets to remedy the gendered but equally modern condition of “hysteria.”⁹ Hardship in nature was, for men, not simply a way to demonstrate health and vitality, but to actively restore the “weary brains” whose energies were sapped by the “atmosphere of exaction and haste and endless perplexity” demanded by modern city life.¹⁰

Though the idea of curative nature was theoretically available and claimed in practice by communities around the world and in different environments, it lent itself well to late nineteenth and early twentieth-century California’s developed senses of exceptionalism, destiny, and economic boosterism. When John Muir famously wrote in 1901 that, “[t]housands of tired, nerve-shaken, overcivilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity” he was not explicitly speaking of his beloved adopted home

⁹ Silas Weir Mitchell, *Nurse and Patient, And Camp Cure* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1877), 44-45.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

state. “To the sane and free,” he wrote, “it will hardly seem necessary to cross the continent in search of wild beauty.” The problem, however, was that “[f]ew in these hot, dim strenuous times are quite sane or free.” The mania for money which had left so many men “choked with care like clocks full of dust,” had already sufficiently despoiled the great Eastern wildernesses and left the parks of the West the only accessible option for those “seeking escape from care and dust and early death.”¹¹ California itself stood in as a useful synecdoche for rehabilitation in nature. The journalist and Navy veteran Charles Nordhoff opened his 1872 travel guide to the state, *California for Health, Pleasure, and Residence*, by asking American readers to consider the delights of California before embarking on the popular Grand Tour of the Old World or an exotic excursion to the tropics. “California is our own... the first tropical land which our race has thoroughly mastered and made itself at home in,” he wrote. “There, and there only, on this planet, the traveller [*sic*] and resident may enjoy...a mild climate, not enervating, but healthful and health-restoring.”¹² Nordhoff even included a short chapter, “Southern California for invalids,” to pitch the state as a destination for consumptives who might otherwise have sought care on the French Riviera. “[T]he air of California makes exercise pleasant and easy,” he promised, while “the climate of the southern part of the State invites to a free outdoor life at all seasons.”¹³ The booster was especially fond of the desert around San Bernardino, which had allegedly cured a consumptive friend beyond recognition. Even as the alluring prospect of a California gold strike dimmed, the promise of the state for recuperation and reinvention gained strength.¹⁴

¹¹ John Muir, *Our National Parks* (Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 2018), 1-11.

¹² Charles Nordhoff, *California for Health, Pleasure, and Residence: A Book for Travellers and Settlers* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1872), 11.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

The town's accepted narrative of its own founding was thus not a fabrication, but a self-conscious act performed after the town was firmly established in order to provide a retroactively more coherent version of events which could be imbued with more overtly laudable aims and a clear connection to important national ideas surrounding nature, health, and service. By the time that this standard narrative completely took hold in the 1960s, local residents were much more ambivalent about what had much more clearly served as the main organizing principle of life in Twentynine Palms during the 20s and 30s, namely, the rapid economic and social development of the town and the surrounding Morongo Basin. In the very first issue of local American Legion newsletter, *The Outpost*, which later developed into the town's first and still-active newspaper, *The Desert Trail*, veterans announced their intention to attract new settlers at all costs. Publicizing their aim to enter the region's "public activities," they asserted that "[f]irst, last, and all the time, we propose to boost the Valley." Any submission offered to further that goal would be welcome for publication so long as it did not "contain personalities of a nature to cause damage or hard feeling."¹⁵ The centerpiece of the first issue was one such appeal, simply titled "Opportunity." It offered "a most wonderful place for health, and for the treatment of many disorders," attributing the local benefits not only to the natural features of light, air, and altitude but the manmade conveniences and comforts that followed the construction of the Legion Hall, garage, and swimming pool.¹⁶ As later residents began to fear the prospects of increased pollution, density, traffic, noise, resource use, and cost, a less developmentalist and more Romantic and naturally healthful origin of the town became more appealing.

Veteran homesteaders deployed multiple thematic elements in their conscious efforts to craft a coherent narrative of their arrival and a shared identity which would allow them to fit into

¹⁵ "Our Bow," *The Outpost*, Vol. 1 No. 1, June 16, 1932, 1.

¹⁶ "Opportunity," *The Outpost*, Vol. 1 No. 1, June 16, 1932, 4.

their new homes. Some of these elements related to the climate and ecology of the desert with which most were unfamiliar; others drew on military service to justify and expedite both their legal and rhetorical claims to public land; and yet others situated the veterans in relation to other groups, historical and contemporary, who were as inseparable from the story of Twentynine Palms as the veterans themselves. These categories could overlap with one another. Piecing together these different elements reveals how the veterans thought about desert nature and its role in their recovery from the traumas of the First World War. In the worldview which they constructed for themselves nature was passive. It served as the backdrop for their recovery. Due to certain qualities of the desert – its clean air, pure (if hardly abundant) water, altitude, isolation, and the quality of its light – the physical components of recuperation seemed to function almost automatically, permitting the men to focus on the construction of homes, businesses, and civic institutions. Crucially, though nature and health were important elements of the town's identity immediately after the First World War, they were almost always deployed in ways which avoided in practice any claims that veterans held any exclusive or unique claims to the benefits of desert nature. The actual process of successful veteran rehabilitation and reintegration followed from attempts to universalize such connections between the desert and health.

In fact, the non-veteran thematic elements which made up the distinct identity of Twentynine Palms – and which included the adoption of and association with local Native American history and lore, the national myth of the homesteading pioneer who uneasily embodied both the rugged individualism and mutual aid of an earlier frontier era, the tradition of wilderness health seeking, and the equally long tradition of local development boosterism – each tended to connect veteran homesteaders either practically or rhetorically to non-veterans, be they their non-veteran neighbors, their indigenous predecessors on the land, or other civilian

Americans who might desire to come to the desert as homesteaders, health seekers, or recreational tourists.

The actual role played in practice by the military service of homesteaders in the settlement of the Morongo Basin was in the facilitation of the land claim process through certain relatively minor advantages for veterans built in to the system under the Homestead Acts and as the basis of networks of mutual aid and trust that played out in the filing of homestead claims, the development of economic opportunities, and the use of veteran social networks as an early form of civic infrastructure. In hindsight, veteran status achieved its status as the primary element of the town's identity because it distinguished Twentynine Palms from other similar places such as Palm Springs, provided continuity with the ongoing military nature of the town after the founding of the Marine Base, and because it was compatible with the subsequent anxieties about overdevelopment.

The study of the early history of Twentynine Palms offers a case study that is relevant to multiple different strands of historiography. There is a substantial literature on the development of the Desert Southwest and Southern California as a site of tourist culture and its connection to both natural beauty and physical health. The city of Palm Springs in particular serves as a well-studied example against which the unique features of Twentynine Palms stand out in greater detail. According to the historian Lawrence Culver, the growth of Palms Springs from a small oasis in the Coachella Valley to a complex of resorts, golf courses, and tasteful, expensive homes "played a central role in the democratization of American leisure...and the formation of American suburbia."¹⁷ It was life in the desert, Culver argues, that brought nature out of the realms of aesthetics and philosophy and into mass consumer culture. In their comparison, the

¹⁷ Lawrence Culver, *The Frontier of Leisure: Southern California and the Making of Modern America*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 9-12.

stories of Palm Springs and Twentynine Palms demonstrate the importance that slight differences in timing, ecology, and community background can have in the local perception of these crucial ideas about work, recreation, belonging, and development. Founded earlier and on more stable and abundant natural water resources, Palms Springs was moving toward a more expensive and glamorous vision of abundant health and leisure by the time veteran homesteaders started claiming land in the Morongo Basin. Both were part of what California journalist and social critic Carey McWilliams as well as other observers saw as “the desert for invalids.”¹⁸ As Great War veterans returned with their lung ailments, Palm Springs was already too expensive and in the process of disassociating itself from associations with the treatment of poor health in favor of ideas of positive and natural health, a shift symbolized by the town’s primary visitor accommodation being sold and renamed from the Desert Sanatorium to the Desert Inn, with a policy of no longer permitted tubercular guests.¹⁹ In various guises from the 1920 to the 1950s, Twentynine Palms attempted to mirror this development, promising visitors “a second Palm Springs” on the cheap. However, though this resort atmosphere persists in Twentynine Palms, the historical memory of the town was developed in a way to reject the suburban trappings of Palm Springs because of the greater long-term percentage of residents made up of disabled veterans, the unavailability of money for development during the Great Depression, its less

¹⁸ Carey McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land*, (Layton, UT: Peregrine Smith, 1980 org. 1946), 98.

¹⁹ For more on the historical changes in Palm Springs see Katherine Ainsworth, *The McCallum Saga: The Story of the Founding of Palm Springs* (Palm Springs, CA: Palm Springs Desert Museum, 1973); Peter Wild, *Tipping the Dream: A Brief History of Palm Springs* (Johannesburg, CA: Shady Myrick Research Project, 2007); Marjorie Belle Bright, *Nellie’s Boardinghouse: A Dual Biography of Nellie Coffman and Palm Springs* (Palm Springs, CA: ECAT, 1981); J. Smeaton Chase, *Our Araby: Palm Springs and the Garden of the Sun*, (Pasadena, CA: Star-News, 1920); and Ryan M. Kray, “The Path to Paradise: Expropriation, Exodus, and Exclusion in the Making of Palm Springs,” in *Pacific Historical Review* Vol. 72, No. 1, (February, 2004), 85-126. For more on how communities around the American West developed due to the growth of recreational tourism see, Hal K. Rothman, *Devil’s Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West*, (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998); and David M. Wrobel, *Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West*, (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

agreeable environmental position, and the full embrace of the protection of the surrounding desert in the form of the Joshua Tree National Monument in 1936.

The stories of homesteading veterans also contribute to the growing literature on physical health and environmental knowledge in the settlement of the American West. In the encounter between white settlers and unfamiliar climates, environments, and ecologies, newly arrived immigrants to the American West found profound insights and challenges to their conceptions of health, both the environmental health of the land and the physical health of their own bodies. According to the environmental historian Conevery Bolton Valenčius, in these first contacts between land and settler and entire ideology was formed around ideas of “sickly” or “salubrious” countryside, illuminating and lost world “when the human body was understood differently and its functioning was believed to be linked in intricate and intimate ways with the similar balances of the surrounding world.” Where a family of settlers moved was tied to notions of fitness, value, ability and the relationship between humans and nature. Though Valenčius posits this as something of a lost idea, “a surprising holism” which was eventually blotted out by rapid industrialization and cultural homogenization.²⁰ I argue that these processes were not purely a phenomenon of the nineteenth century. Though very different in time, place, and cultural attitudes, the homesteaders of the early twentieth century California desert placed themselves in a similar relationship to the natural world around them. The cultural shifts had made the desert less a place of waste and degradation and punishment, but it still spoke to their visions of the possibility of physical and social transformation to be made through the work of living and working in a new environment. Disabled veterans were uniquely attuned to the limits and deficiencies of their own bodies. Therefore, when the desert air brought relief to their suffering,

²⁰ Conevery Bolton Valenčius, *The Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves and Their Land*, (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 1-14.

they were as willing to attribute greater meaning to the desert as any nineteenth century settler in Missouri or Arkansas. Gassed in the War and afflicted with ulcers and breathing problems, Arthur Strickler's doctors in Long Beach estimated that he would live for two years. After a single night in the desert on Dr. Luckie's recommendation produced "the first [real] night's sleep he had had for just ages," he filed his homestead claim and lived there for five decades more.²¹ Nature and survival in it was crucial to community self-identification. They became a "Legion of the Undaunted," who "came to die and yet lived on;" a condition many considered providential. They framed their recoveries as "miraculous," demonstrating that the human willingness to implicitly link their bodies and surroundings was far more persistent than many might assume.²²

This chapter is also relevant to specific debates concerning the peculiarities of so-called "Late Homesteading," the filing of claims and perfection of title which occurred in the twentieth century. Though remembered as something of a totem of nineteenth century Manifest Destiny, the majority of land claims under the Homestead Acts were filed after 1900. A final surge in claims filed took place during and immediately after the First World War, before collapsing into an irreversible decline through the next decades. According to National Park Service historian Robert Marcell of the Homestead National Historical Park, the subsidies extended to veterans after the First World War were responsible for a modest but clear post-war spike in homestead claims and that the amount of time and energy public officials put into such legislation was "indicative of the importance homesteading played in the planning process of Congressional representatives" and marked a transition in how "the way government thought about rewarding

²¹ Dorothy Strickler Porter, interview by Pat Rimmington, January 22, 1981, 1.

²² For more on the environmental history of the intersection of nature, health, and place see, Billy M. Jones, *Health-Seekers in the Southwest, 1817-1900* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967); Sheila Rothman, *Living in the Shadow of Death: Tuberculosis and the Social Experience of Illness in American History*, (New York: Basic Books, 1994); and Susan Jane Edwards, "Nature as Healer: Denver, Colorado's Social and Built Landscapes of Health, 1880-1930," (PhD diss., University of Colorado, 1994).

military service before, during, and after World War I” from a model of direct compensation to one of providing “opportunity for soldiers returning from war to reintegrate into society in a meaningful way doing meaningful work.”²³ Marcell is almost certainly correct that the greater ease afforded to the many returning veterans contributed to the brief growth in homesteading rates, though as he admits, in the absence of firmer data on how many prewar homesteaders joined the military and how many military veterans filed homestead claims, it is very difficult to accurately weigh the influence of these benefits against the promise of high agricultural commodity prices, which declined precipitously after the war, alongside plunging homestead occupancy rates. As a region in which little to no agriculture could be undertaken, the Morongo Basin offers a useful case study in some of the non-monetary motivations of veteran homesteaders and the less material uses to which they put their own narratives of service. In the context of Twentynine Palms at least, it would be incorrect to follow Marcell in so thoroughly centering veterans as a special class of land claimant. Marcell argues that the trend of the government’s thinking on veteran homesteading was evident in proposals, most clearly articulated by Secretary of the Interior Franklin K. Lane, “advocating the creation of multiple farm settlements or “colonies” of soldiers-turned-farmers... over having soldiers settle as individuals throughout the country (that is, mixed in with non-veteran neighbors, which would actually be the settlement pattern that predominately occurred).” The failure of these schemes, which were never enacted as the so-called “Lane Plan,” but were attempted in several states, is generally attributed to the agricultural recession, however, the survival of Twentynine Palms

²³ Robert Marcell, “World War I and the Homestead Act of 1862: When Farmers Fought and Soldiers Farmed for America’s Homestead States,” available at <https://www.nps.gov/articles/upload/World-War-I-and-the-Homestead-Act-of-1862.pdf>, 3-4, 21-24, 33-36.

helps illuminate the value of the surrounding non-veteran community in the process of veteran social and economic reintegration.²⁴

One major thematic element of local identity explored here, the Native American history and culture of the Morongo Basin, highlights how veteran homesteaders actively worked through such history in order to extract its components most useful in naturalizing and justifying their own presence and providing economic and academic for themselves while successfully deemphasizing some of the more recent Native history they might have found incompatible with their desired understanding of the past. As the community grew in the 1920s and 30s, its interest in local history extended beyond the story of community members' own arrival. They began to seek precedents for their own use of the desert which would naturalize their presence and demonstrate their fitness for making independent claims on public land. Great War veterans were hardly the first to seek the salubriousness of the desert, or even their specific patch of it. The Indigenous peoples of the Twentynine Palms Valley – the Serrano, Chemehuevi, and Paiute whose migrations and lifeways would only prove of occasional interest to the homesteaders – settled into small villages around the Oasis of Mara, the site of the possibly apocryphal (or miscounted) titular twenty-nine palm trees. They knew the Valley as a place of abundance, intertribal peace, and, above all, rest on arduous desert crossings. They also knew the desert through their own modifications of the environment. As ethnoecologist M. Kat Anderson recounts in *Tending the Wild*, her history of Native American ecological management practices in California, oases of desert fan palm (*Washingtonia filifera*) like the Oases of Mara, “may be

²⁴ For more on the “Lane Plan” and other proposals for the settlement of First World War veterans see, Bill G. Reid, “Franklin K. Lane’s Idea for Veterans’ Colonization, 1918-1921,” in *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 33 No. 4 (November 1964), 447-461; Bill G. Reid, “Colonies for Disabled Veterans in Minnesota,” in *Minnesota History*, Vol. 39 No. 6 (Summer, 1965), 241-251.

an artifact of planting and fire management by indigenous people.” While native to California, recent genetic and paleoethnobotanical research suggest that Native intervention, “likely maintained the palms in far greater numbers than would have occurred under natural conditions.” Like the emptied settlement sites Europeans encountered on the coast of seventeenth-century New England, these oases were less the product of the beneficence of Providence new settlers assumed, than they were the remnants of a Native legacy rendered invisible by disease and displacement.²⁵ After decades of sporadic use and settlement a band of the culturally Southern Paiute Chemehuevi took up permanent residence at the Oasis in the late nineteenth century, preferring “this place to any other on Earth.”²⁶

Veteran homesteaders maintained a strong interest in the displaced and dispossessed Native communities of the Morongo Valley in which they came to settle. Such interest ranged from genuinely groundbreaking paleoarcheological research into the deep past of the Desert Southwest, to inaccurate and occasionally lurid retellings of Native lore and history, to the symbolic process of local mythmaking and identity creation in which disparate and recently arrived outsiders recast themselves as new “Natives,” fit to take the place of the indigenous peoples they had, imaginatively though not personally, displaced. They were engaging in a form of playing Indian, “a persistent tradition in American culture” whereby white American men (most commonly) adopted the garb, manners, and assumed virtues of Indigenous peoples to position “themselves imaginatively and symbolically in the position of [Native] subject,” to further “a mytho-historical construction of American identity” and “negotiate social struggles

²⁵ M. Kat Anderson, *Tending the Wild: Native American Knowledge and the Management of California's Natural Resources* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 193-195.

²⁶ Clifford Trafzer, *A Chemehuevi Song: The Resilience of a Southern Paiute Tribe* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015), 129.

within white society.”²⁷ Unlike organized groups that made their identity play explicit by taking on Indian names, dress, and supposed habits, such as the Boy Scouts, the Woodcraft Indians, or the Improved Order of Red Men, Twentynine Palmers were subtle in their appropriations. They imagined an indigeneity which they could use to make themselves “native” to their new homes. Rather than pantomime Indianness, the homesteaders focused on cultivating an inwardly “Native” identity. “Native” was, in fact, the crucial watchword of the project. Everything from desert driving habits to individual adaptations to the climate were described as the attributes of “Natives” It was at least as commonly used a descriptor as “local,” which did not always draw a satisfactorily sharp distinction between community members and outsiders.²⁸

The supposedly “vanished” Indigenous communities of the Valley were enlisted as a set of forerunners for and by those veterans who arrived after the Great War. They did not have to work particularly hard to notice the remnants of earlier cultures (though they seemed to go out of their way to recognize its persistence). Memoirs and oral histories of homesteading life in the Valley are replete with fond recollections of collecting pottery, arrowheads, and other artifacts of Indigenous material culture. Such items were apparently abundant enough that many Twentynine Palmers found them incidentally, without actively seeking them out, though taking children, “up to the [Joshua Tree National] Monument...over to hunt Indian things” was a common way for parents to address the boredom and monotony of desert homesteading.²⁹ Writing in the 1940s, one local author made the newcomers self-conception as the inheritors of a Native past unequivocal. “In this land where once thousands of ‘first Americans’ lived, loved, bred, hunted

²⁷ Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 7-8, 187-191.

²⁸ Nelle Godwin Struck, interview by Reino Clark, January 19, 1975, 7-8.

²⁹ Lida Donnell, interview by Cheryl Erickson, October 2, 1974, 12.

and died,” wrote Jean Jacques, modern man moves ever forward in their footprints – in the footprints of the Shoshone, the first Twentynine Palmers.”³⁰

In one instance, the Indigenous history of the Valley provided a pair of homesteaders with their lives’ work. William Campbell, a Los Angeles native, and his wife Elizabeth arrived in Twentynine Palms in 1924. William had served as an ambulance driver on the Italian Front, where he and his ambulance corps were gassed just two days before the Armistice was signed in November 1918. The couple followed the prototypical narrative arc of most early arrivals. William’s lungs left him desperate and unable to work before a cross-country move from New York to back home to Pasadena brought him to the American Legion and Dr. Luckie’s recommendation of the desert. The pair lived out of their car and camped under a surplus tent at the Oasis of Mara before moving to a small adobe hut adjacent to the Palms. Fortunate enough to see William’s health seemingly recover in a matter of weeks, they decided to file a claim and live in the desert permanently. Their eventual homestead claim north of town was soon the site of a wooden shack Elizabeth described as “a one car garage with a window on either side.”³¹ The inheritance she received on her father’s death in 1926 allowed them to replace it with a charming home of desert stone.

The responsibilities of homestead management gave the Campbells their first awareness of the Native past. Elizabeth’s curiosity about it grew as she collected arrowheads and pottery shards on walks to gather water and firewood. Their interest, sometimes described as an

³⁰ Jean Jacques, “In the Footprints of the Shoshone,” undated, Twentynine Palms Historical Society Library, Twentynine Palms, CA, 30; Jacques was perpetuating a misunderstanding of the Native history of the Twentynine Palms region. As we shall see, the area had been (and remains) populated by Cahuilla and Chemehuevi peoples. Confusion or disinterest in the accuracy of more recent Native patterns of occupation and land use allowed homesteaders to make rhetorical use of Native history in whichever ways best facilitated their ideological and emotional connections to their new homes.

³¹ Elizabeth Warder Crozer Campbell, *The Desert Was Home: Adventures and Tribulations of a Desert Homesteader* (Los Angeles: Westernlore Press, 1961), 38-39.

almost desperate search for “an intellectual pursuit” to occupy their time, grew with the collection, supported by the same trust that had funded the stone house.³² They soon became pioneers in a new sense as they were some of the first to conduct formal archaeological surveys of their corner of the Mojave. With the encouragement of Charles Amsden, the curator of archaeology at the Southwest Museum in Los Angeles, William and Elizabeth expanded the scope and depth of their fieldwork, venturing on longer and longer excursions in the same car they had driven into town, the vehicle now rechristened “the Ship of the Desert.” By 1936 they had amassed enough objects to establish a Desert Branch of the Southwest Museum and a laboratory in Twentynine Palms to replace the exhibits of artifacts they displayed to the public at their home, “every day but Sunday.” After William tragically drowned in Lake Tahoe in 1944, Elizabeth, academically uncredentialed but boasting a near encyclopedic regional knowledge, continued their work and became a founder of environmental and landscape archaeology and a prominent expert on the human history of the entire Desert Southwest and Great Basin.³³

However, in order for homesteaders to fully adopt their own “native” connection to the land they had to ignore certain important facts about the Indigenous peoples of the Valley. As the Campbells taught their neighbors about the ancient human history of the desert, its more recent past became paradoxically less well-defined in comparison. The absence of earlier inhabitants, the Indians of Twentynine Palms, was frequently noted but rarely explained. Accounts from the 20s and 30s, which formed the basis for later public memory, claimed the Serrano and Chemehuevi tribes had removed themselves in the wake of an infamous double-murder. In 1909 a young Chemehuevi man known as Willie Boy killed a tribal elder named William Mike

³² Claude N. Warren and Joan S. Schneider, *Purple Hummingbird: A Biography of Elizabeth Warder Crozer Campbell* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2017), 49, 54.

³³ *Ibid.*, 57-65.

(known as Mike Boniface to whites) and absconded with William's daughter Carlota. An 11-day manhunt ended with Willie Boy's suicide, though there remains some controversy over whether Willie Boy or the posse chasing him was responsible for Carlota's death. Lurid details were exaggerated or invented as the "affair" became a matter of Mojave folklore. It is famous among Chemehuevi today as both a tragedy and a classic case of Native history "that few white people get right."³⁴ Regionally, the incident became famous as, "the West's last manhunt," but in Twentynine Palms it also explained the Native absence, since the tribes allegedly left the Morongo Valley portion of their Reservation, "fearing the vindictive nature of the white man."³⁵ This is not entirely incorrect. According to historian Clifford Trafzer, the affair, "brought about the Indigenous abandonment of Twentynine Palms...and caused a diaspora of the Chemehuevi people into Banning, Palm Springs, Coachella, Indio, San Jacinto, and other towns in California..."³⁶

However, this was only the finale of a much longer history of death and displacement that non-Indian locals either forgot or never learned. The larger context of Native removal from the Oasis could have negative implications for the town's self-conception as site of recuperation and reinvention. The Chemehuevi and Serrano populations had been slowly whittled down for decades by disease. Smallpox outbreaks in the 1860s were followed by decades of frequent and devastating waves of tuberculosis. The most plausible explanation for the recurrence of TB was the theory that it had been introduced by the consumptive health seekers who preceded the veteran homesteaders to the Valley. The disease tore through isolated Native communities in the 1890s and continued to do so, unnoticed or unmentioned by Twentynine Palmers, into the 1920s.

³⁴ Trafzer, *A Chemehuevi Song*, 207.

³⁵ Carl Yetzer, "County's Smallest Reservation Has No Indians Living On It," *San Bernardino County Sun*, January 2, 1984, 3.

³⁶ Trafzer, *A Chemehuevi Song*, 207.

Recognizing the role of respiratory ailments in the devastation of these societies would have undercut the town's plans for health-based economic development.

Native absence was a prerequisite for the perfection the chain of ownership leading to the veterans. By flattening them into the caricature of “a warlike race turned settler,” the new arrivals integrated the Chemehuevi into a logical myth of frontier development that culminated in the veteran homesteaders. “First the Indians, then Spaniards-seeking gold and conquest-then the Indians again, the Forty-Niners,” listed one *Los Angeles Examiner* writer in 1934, “and now veterans of our own wars.”³⁷ Twentynine Palmers sometimes tried to narrow the distance between themselves and Native Americans to emphasize their closeness to the physical reality of the desert. “Now, the trail we travelled was made by the Indians,” veteran Robert McCown recalled at a celebration commemorating the Bagley family's twenty-ninth year in Twentynine Palms. “Our background here is purely Indian, purely. The trail we travelled was sort of a three rut trail, the third rut was made by the Indian's pony that jogged down the road as we came in.” Unable to eliminate the prospectors from the timeline (having known and befriended many), they discounted the Spanish legacy of the region to accomplish their identification with the Chemehuevi instead. “This area has positively no Spanish background of record,” McCown exaggerated, “other than being owned by Spain at one time possibly.”³⁸ By the late 20th century this identification had become so firmly established in public memory that it folded in on itself, with the Chemehuevi remembered not only as the “first Americans” but the “first pioneers” as well.³⁹

³⁷ John H.C. Stingle, “349-Mile Trip Offers Treat,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, April 8, 1934, 1.

³⁸ Robert McCown, “Remarks Introducing Dr. Luckie,” undated 1965, Twentynine Palms Historical Society Library, Twentynine Palms, CA, 9.

³⁹ Lucille Weight, “Oasis Was Home to First Pioneers,” *Desert Trail*, 1978, 10; [note on how incorrect they were about the state of the roads and their isolation.

The adoption of this facsimile of indigeneity relied on an assumed shared rusticity and a supposed harmony with the harsh desert environment which forced others to turn away. This was also a useful element of the Willie Boy story, whereby “authentic” outlaw infamy was associated with survival in the Mojave. His nearly successful escape from the posse pursuing him – many Chemehuevi maintain that he did escape to family in Nevada – clearly relied on intimate knowledge of the desert. In a celebration of the Bagley family, one neighbor praised Frank Bagley as “the second Willie Boy.” The exact nature of the comparison was unclear but likely referred to a near-death experience Bagley had suffered while hiking in the nearby Borrego Valley or the constant travel through the desert that his work as Twentynine Palms’ grocer required. According to cultural historian Philip Deloria, playing Indian was a form of performance “used to encounter the authentic amidst the anxiety of urban industrial and postindustrial life.” White Americans mined the “primitive” elements of their national and local histories to soften, as far as they could, the unaddressed “oppositions” of nobility and savagery that littered American culture and thereby give themselves “a jolt of self-creative power.”⁴⁰ Local indigenous history became a reference point for the town’s identity. Native use of the oases for relief reflected the homesteaders use of desert for health, and such lore and legend became part of a larger tourism economy. In a classic formulation of Indian play, the *idea* of the Indianness is enlisted to serve non-Indian identity formation while the reality of Native life is made dispensable.⁴¹ Even as Twentynine Palms used Native history to naturalize themselves to their corner of the Mojave, they were engaged in a process that white Americans from East to West undertook around the same time, and one that bore little relation to the eventually central theme of their identities as American military veterans.

⁴⁰ Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 7, 185.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, at 63-64, 187.

Expressing little to no notice of any contradiction, the post-Great War homesteaders also linked their identities and that of the town with an earlier generation of “pioneering” homesteaders. Starting a community essentially from scratch, one which lacked preexisting civic associations, municipal government institutions, or steady infrastructural or social links to the outside world also allowed them to fill various niches within the new society of the town, establishing themselves as a generation of town founders who would be remembered as such. They also paid very close attention to their new surroundings, both out of necessity and as a means of furthering their personal transformations from sickness to health and from itinerancy to rootedness. They became, in different ways and to varying degrees of seriousness, experts on their desert, its history, ecology, and climate. The ultimate synthesis of these identities found its fullest expression in their most ambitious, incomplete, and problematic communal transformation; from disparate outsiders to new “Natives” fit to take the place of the indigenous peoples they had, imaginatively though not personally, displaced. The “pioneer” homesteader had, by the early twentieth century, long since entered American mythology on a national scale. Consciously adopting this identity for themselves made sense for new desert residents, and not merely because they used the same legal mechanisms to obtain the same protections as their nineteenth century counterparts. Like those forerunners, Twentynine Palmers emphasized both the material and personal benefits of land ownership.⁴²

⁴² For more on the historical association between military veterans and land grants for agriculture See, P. A. Brunt, “The Army and the Land in the Roman Revolution,” in *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 52, Nos. 1 and 2, (1962), 69-86; Harold Hyman, *American Singularity: The 1787 Northwest Ordinance, the 1862 Homestead and Morrill Acts, and the 1944 G.I. Bill*, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 22-27; Paul W. Gates, *The Jeffersonian Dream: Studies in the History of American Land Development and Policy*, (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 48; Brian Cannon, *Reopening the Frontier: Homesteading in the Modern West*, (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 1-19; and Josh Sides, *Backyard Ghosts: California Homesteaders and the Making of a Dubious Dream*, (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2021), 86-98.

Twentynine Palms homesteaders saw themselves as an extension of the “pioneer” tradition for several reasons. For one, they saw their own lives in the desert as a reminder of the harshness and precarity of the lives of those who had come before them. Homesteading may have offered hope, but rarely offered ease. The common farmer “sodbusters” of public memory were hardly offered the full bounty of the American continent. The nation’s choicest public lands devolved to commercial interests like the railroads with homesteaders theoretically compensated for their relatively less productive land by the promise of future benefits from those very railroads. Though they lacked a similar scapegoat to blame for their own circumstances, Twentynine Palmers would have rejoiced at even the minimal abundance of the semi-arid Great Plains, despite the intervening decades of social and technological progress. New settlers gained title to ever more marginal and agriculturally unproductive lands, and though much of the California desert had been, and would continue to be, transformed into farm fields by large-scale irrigation projects, such schemes never came to the Morongo Basin. Twentynine Palmers were thus left with all of the psychological and cultural benefits of independent land ownership without the ability to enter into agricultural markets that had been one of the primary justifications for the Homestead Acts in the first place. This also allowed the homestead families to see themselves as the emotional or spiritual descendants of those who had faced similar conditions in the past. Most shared “first year stories” similar to those of one veteran, who described his first winter in the desert as “a frozen hell” and his first summer “a hell of more conventional temperature.”⁴³ Fittingly for ersatz “frontiersmen,” the veterans virtually reveled in their deprivations. At the dedication ceremony for Luckie Park in 1965, veteran homesteader and editor of the local *Desert Trail* newspaper Bill Underhill boasted that “old-timers” qualified for

⁴³ John Q. Copeland, “29 Palms: A Modern Western Frontier,” in *The California Highway Patrolman Magazine*, September 1973, 8.

“B.A. degrees since they were, ““Before Anything,”” including paved roads, electricity, gas, telephones, schools, television, radio, newspapers, running water, mail service, and “any form of entertainment.” Through four decades of nostalgia Underhill could call these, “the good old Before Anything days.”⁴⁴

Though Morongo Basin homesteaders, particularly those unable to work through disability, faced genuine hardship and extreme climatic conditions, descriptions emphasizing these conditions proliferated only in later accounts, such as the memoirs of Helen Bagley and Elizabeth Cambell, oral histories conducted by the National Park Services or Twentynine Palms Historical Society, and remarks such as Underhill’s given at community social events decades after the fact. In the 1930s, when many homesteaders primary goal was to attract additional homesteaders, descriptions of the region’s environmental conditions downplayed the difficulties new arrivals would face. *Outpost*’s earliest editions already included notices soliciting inquiries about the area as well as promising aid in organizing and preparing the paperwork required for future homestead applications. Concerned that longstanding fear or prejudice against the desert might frighten them away, *Outpost* notices challenged the curious to see for themselves. “Those of you who think the desert is too hot during the summer months,” one short note read, “should try a week-end at Twenty Nine Palms.”⁴⁵ On occasion, such boosterism approached outright fabrication. In the autumn of 1932, one of the newsletter’s frequent “open invitation” columns took advantage of the seasonal change to encourage more visitors. After boasting again of the local air quality “even in our warmest days,” the writer went on to claim that by September, “the summer heat, *never really extreme*, is gone.”⁴⁶ That summer heat in the Mojave was “never

⁴⁴ William Underhill, “Public Remarks at the Dedication of Luckie Park,” July 4, 1965, Twentynine Palms Historical Society Library, Twentynine Palms, CA.

⁴⁵ “Untitled,” *The Outpost*, Vol. 1 No. 1, June 16, 1932, 1.

⁴⁶ “An Open Invitation,” *The Outpost*, Vol. 1 No. 7, September 15, 1932, 1.

really extreme” would have come as quite a shock to those who had just lived through it. Aware that potential homestead claimants might worry about the productivity of desert agriculture, another anonymous writer suggested the curious or doubtful visit the ranch of veteran and homesteader Edmund Bixby, where admittedly “experimental” work had produced “good cantaloupes, muskmelons, watermelons, and onions.” Unmentioned in the article was the fact that Bixby’s Ranch was fortuitously situated on exceedingly rare naturally irrigated land. Before the construction of the American Legion swimming pool, occasionally flooded portions of the ranch had served the same function for the community.⁴⁷

Possibly wary of overpromising potential homesteaders and tourists about the unexpected mildness of the Mojave, the *Outpost* also included descriptions of extreme desert conditions but couched them in terms which continued to promise improved physical health, as well as independence from the deprivations and enervations of urban living, though notably a version emphasizing the advantages and comforts of proximity to cities. Along with inquiry notices, early *Outpost* issues published honest depictions of the Mojave’s climate, plants, and animals. The newsletter’s fourth installment included its first bylined article by a non-veteran. Walter Ketcham’s “Our Desert” urged potential homesteaders not to miss out on the dwindling, “number of desirable claims...still available in the outlying districts” of the town. Though it emphasized the available comforts of the town for tourists, unlike previous solicitations Ketcham’s leaned into some of the desert’s less civilized charms. The Valley, he assured those so inclined, “is still unsophisticated enough to furnish that atmosphere of the ‘wide open spaces’ so much sought after by the city dweller.”

⁴⁷ *The Outpost*, Vol 1. No. 4, July 29, 1932, 4.

In retrospective reconsiderations of their own pasts, after town boosterism had accomplished many of its goals, the nostalgia for pioneer authenticity was more directly emphasized. One of the many cases where a veteran homesteader drew on their own family history to emphasize a tradition of “pioneering,” was that of William Underhill. Asked how he ever came to such a place as Twentynine Palms, Underhill answered in a way that made pioneering sound nearly genetic. “I had to satisfy that undoubtedly inborn spirit and urge to pioneer,” he said. Underhill had been born on the homestead farm claimed by his paternal grandfather and namesake in Wisconsin. After passing the tract down to his children the elder Bill Underhill took up pioneering again during the California Gold Rush. Wounded at the battle of Château-Thierry, his grandson returned home to follow a string of short-term jobs across the country. Working as a newspaper typesetter he encountered a story about Twentynine Palms which rekindled his fascination with his family’s homesteading lineage. “Since grandpa was a ‘49-er,’” he thought, “why couldn’t another Bill Underhill be a ‘29-er.’” The desert placed limitations on the extent to which Underhill could replicate his forebearer’s experience. Unable to establish a working farm, he turned to sporadic mining ventures and manual labor before assuming the position as local newspaper editor which he would hold for the next five decades.

Veterans like Underhill focused on the less tangible or emotional benefits of a homesteading life. His own claim allowed him, he insisted, to seize, “a fine, healthy life...” one which, “taught a man self-reliance, hardihood...the virtues that ought to come from life in the open country.” Though scraggly and austere, the claim allowed Underhill a sense of psychological independence and even prestige that was otherwise unavailable. In the grand tradition of a patrician estate he named his homestead, his “pride and joy,” “Broadview,” after a Montana ranch he had worked on as a younger man. Underhill was struck with a growing

awareness that he could be a man of prominence in these new surroundings. He built Broadview at elevation, both for the expansive view and because he knew that “it would be seen for miles as there were few houses,” in the sparsely populated Valley.⁴⁸ However, this description of his experience and motivations came at the very end of his life, released as a biographical sketch only after his death. In life, Underhill had devoted himself the growth of the town and the introduction of many new features of town life which would make it less rustic in comparison to the homesteading world of his grandparents. The first issue of his *Desert Trail* newspaper promised to “do all within its power to foster and perpetuate harmony and be of mutual assistance as behooves any enterprise, especially in a practically new community such as this,” and promised that current residents would “watch Twentynine Palms grow,” further boasting that each early Twentynine Palmer “assumed the mantle of a one-man Chamber of Commerce to extol the virtues of this high desert.”⁴⁹ The early state of the town offered Underhill and other veterans plenty of opportunities, but growth was required to stabilize things. Bagley, another homesteader trained as a pilot, and a man who “didn’t know spinach from turnips,” became the town grocer when William Campbell approached the unemployed bank clerk and told him that the town needed a grocery store and that he should start one. His only qualification was a car and the willingness to use it to collect supplies from Riverside, initially a full days’ journey.⁵⁰ Underhill was especially illustrative of the new possibilities a blank slate of a town like Twentynine Palms offered. After starting and selling *The Desert Trail*, he introduced several modern firsts to the area: it’s first movie theater, first ice rink, and a successful icehouse.

⁴⁸ Lucille Weight, “Biography of William Underhill,” undated, Twentynine Palms Historical Society Library, Twentynine Palms, CA, 5.

⁴⁹ William Underhill, “Editorial,” *Desert Trail*, April 18, 1935, 1.

⁵⁰ Ben Benioff, interview by Cheryl Erickson and Art Kidwell, August 22, 1981, 4-5 Twentynine Palms Historical Society Library, Twentynine Palms, CA.

What the nature of homesteading and pioneer mythology did begin to accomplish from the establishment of the first post-World War I land claims was the drawing together of veteran and non-veteran settlers into a single coherent community. At some times this was based on their similar backgrounds in homesteading families, at others it relied on the very real experience of mutual aid required of such living. As the national mythic figure of the pioneer became a larger feature of the town's identity and narrative it became a final way of fusing neighbors together with no regard to military background" All were equally entitled to be considered community members by having gone through those years. As we have seen, homestead filing was as universally accessible as any government entitlement of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The hardship of the postwar recession may have hit unemployed or disabled veterans harder and earlier than the general workforce, but the early minority of civilian homesteaders had suffered as well. The demographic gap between the two communities narrowed again with the onset of the Great Depression. The family of Marjorie Emerson Brown joined other American internal migrants when they took all their belongings and "boiled it down to a little two-wheeled box trailer hooked on back of the Buick, and "started west" from Iowa in 1933. They came at the invitation of her father, a building contractor in Long Beach, California whose bleak job prospects and personal love for the desert motivated him to file a claim on 80 acres of dry lakebed north of Twentynine Palms.⁵¹ The new arrivals did not follow the exact pattern of their veteran predecessors – several days of rough living at the Oasis of Mara until parcels could be claimed and occupied – as the town was sufficiently built up by this time. Still, the conditions the family faced were as harsh as those of the previous decade. Marjorie Brown later recalled that when they arrived in town two weeks before Thanksgiving, they were gifted a hen by a neighbor

⁵¹ Marjorie Emerson Brown, Robert Michels, and Beulah Michels, interview by Cheryl Erickson, Jan 6, 1976, 1, Twentynine Palms Historical Society Library, Twentynine Palms, CA.

for their holiday meal. She never killed the bird as they could not afford to forgo the eggs it would lay. The neighbors had known the Brown's conditions were precarious when Majorie's son informed them of the family's plan to find and prepare a desert tortoise, something they subsequently tried and failed to do.⁵² Other non-veteran homesteading families in the region, such as the Kentucky-born Stoneciphers, shared similar familial links to a homesteading tradition of which they explicitly considered themselves a continuation. This was another feature of desertlife in the 1920 and 30s that were more likely to be dwelt upon long after they had taken place. "They were all like that. We all shared and shared alike," Marjorie Brown recalled in a 1976 oral history interview. They frequently returned from trips off the homestead to anonymous boxes of food and clothing from neighbors. The system was part charity and part barter economy. "It was a pioneer spirit that was really working."⁵³

Veteran homesteaders were sometimes considered cliquish but rarely rude. They more often came into conflict with the miners and ranchers that preceded them than the civilian homesteaders who followed them. A local cowboy named Lee Ross grouched that the wholesome climate was attracting the ill. "I'm tired of having all you people come out here every time you get a cold," he complained.⁵⁴ The worst of the actual violence recorded was a fight between a homesteader and a miner at the "Bucket of Blood" bar which ended when, "the miner got his ear bit off, the lower part of it."⁵⁵ Differences amongst homesteading families were easier to resolve. Bill Underhill was unambiguous about how mutual aid between families erased any distinctions based on service. "Many [homesteaders] were World War I buddies who came to

⁵² Ibid., 2-3.

⁵³ Ibid., 4.

⁵⁴ Win Shay, interview by Reino Clark, May 2, 1975, 3, Twentynine Palms Historical Society Library, Twentynine Palms, CA.

⁵⁵ Nelle Godwin Struck, interview by Reino Clark, January 19, 1975, 7, Twentynine Palms Historical Society Library, Twentynine Palms, CA.

seek improvement in their health,” he said, “but many... ‘just came to pioneer’ and we able-bodied men did whatever we could to make life more comfortable for the ailing neighbors and friends. You couldn’t be here without being a ‘friend.’” The merger of the two groups was even clearer after the Second World War, when the town’s annual celebration – an outgrowth of earlier American Legion functions – was renamed. At the first “Pioneer Days” in 1946, Underhill drove a prop covered wagon through town in a cowboy persona that eclipsed any veteran identity.⁵⁶ The distinctions became so porous that early residents internally organized themselves by relative hardship and calculated their place by arrival date rather than personal status. When a meeting of “Old Timers” was organized for Pioneer Days in 1966, the invitations were sent to anyone resident in town prior to 1935, “[f]or the reason that after then came roads, utilities and other conveniences which took the settlement out of the hardship class.”⁵⁷

The desire to move from disparate outsiders who did not seem to fit into desert life encouraged some to rely on even more constructed figures than the imagined nineteenth-century pioneers for their authenticity. *The Desert Trail* even invented a fictional composite character named “Coyote Pete,” to endorse the newcomers and sanctify their transformation. Speaking in the sort of prospector vernacular Mel Brooks would later call “authentic frontier gibberish,” Pete was an amalgam “of all the Desert Rats who have lived with the mysterious force of the open spaces.” Pete was a caricature of authenticity serving a real social purpose. With his approval, local grocer Frank Bagley went from an ailing city dweller to “an odd hombre...out here in the desert and likin’ [it] almost as much as I do; and him once a bank clerk in New York City.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶Harlow Jones, *Souvenir Photograph Pioneer May Day Celebration*, 1946, Twentynine Palms Historical Society Library, Twentynine Palms, CA.

⁵⁷Alma Steeg, “Oldtimers,” October 24, 1966, Twentynine Palms Historical Society Library, Twentynine Palms, CA.

⁵⁸*Coyote Pete: The Desert Rat* (Twentynine Palms, CA: undated), Twentynine Palms Historical Society Library, Twentynine Palms, CA, 4.

While pioneer imagery drew veterans and non-veterans into a single entity, it is understandable how the standard narrative of the town's founding has come to focus on veterans specifically and their rehabilitation in nature. There were many veteran homesteaders and the process by which they claimed title to their new homes rewarded their service in various ways. It is therefore important to understand what advantages veteran status actually provided and what it did not. Despite being accompanied by florid paeans to service, a staple of post-Civil War Congressional debate known as "waving the bloody shirt," the advantages granted exclusively to veterans under the first Homestead Act and its Reconstruction Era additions in the actual homesteading process basically consisted of the reduction of continuous occupancy requirements from five to three years and a waiver of the minimum age requirement of 21. A flurry of legislation followed the First World War with the intention of encouraging veterans' homesteading, though these two advantages and an additional 60-day window in which to file claims not yet offered to the general public remained by far the most important mechanisms available to veterans alone.⁵⁹ The occupancy reduction, though relatively minor, was important for many veterans in Twentynine Palms. In particular disabled veterans such as Frank Bagley and William Campbell credited the reduction for making their homesteads economically viable. The previously noted method of avoiding the agricultural requirements of homestead claims was more sustainable over three years than five, and it supplemented another advantage held by some veterans, disability pensions, on which families such as the Bagleys, Underhills, and Campbells each relied as their primary source of income immediately upon arriving in the desert.

There were other difficulties in the process which weighed more heavily upon the disabled, but the solutions which veterans employed to avoid them were not related to their

⁵⁹ In the case of Twentynine Palms, the land being claimed was so marginal and unsuited to agriculture that the 60-day window was largely irrelevant as there was more than enough vacant public land to meet all public demand.

service. One example of this can be seen in the many small desert gardens which homesteaders later remembered as another echo of pioneer imagery projected into the twentieth century. The Homestead Acts required that claimants not simply occupy their land but to “prove up” or improve it in some way that demonstrated a desire to dwell there permanently. In most contexts this meant attempting to plant a market crop of some commodity. For the most part, even those veteran homesteaders whose physical condition allowed for manual labor did not even attempt to grow crops in any significant amount. When they planted anything at all, it was usually in the form of small household vegetable gardens that could be supported by individually dug wells. Though occasionally helpful in making ends meet, virtually none of these gardens provided anything close to subsistence for a desert homestead. Even these were uncommon enough that, decades later, some homesteaders recalled them as curiosities worthy of mention in oral histories and memoirs. While some attempted to grow more drought tolerant commercial plants such as date palms, the most common version of a homestead garden in the Valley was a small patch of oats or other cheap cover crop. These rarely exceeded 10 acres of plantings. They served as a way to demonstrate a homesteader’s willingness to attempt to meet the legal “proving up” requirement. Most gardens planted in this manner were simply left to wither since harvesting them would ultimately prove useless.⁶⁰

Though aridity made commercial agriculture and even household gardening untenable in the absence of irrigation projects, it also worked paradoxically to ease a homesteader’s path to land ownership. By making farming impossible, the desert made the requirements of the law avoidable. In what became the standard process for perfecting a claim in Twentynine Palms, each homestead claimant filed the same two applications to the government’s General Land

⁶⁰ Bill Smith, interview by Reino Clark, January 17, 1975, 13, Twentynine Palms Historical Society Library, Twentynine Palms, CA.

Office. The first, nearly always granted, requested a reduction in the area required to be under cultivation. This impelled veterans to demonstrate their familiarity with their new environment. Most of the application asked for detailed descriptions of “the character of the soil,” the evenness of the surface, the variety of wild plant life, and altitude of the parcel. Applicants quickly learned that such requests needed little more than the phrase “desert in character” and references to common desert plants such as greasewood, bunch grass, and sagebrush.⁶¹ The second application, usually denied, asked the government to double a claim with adjoining land under the Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909. Such an application usually forced a homesteader to ignore their earlier exemption request since larger acreages were meant to increase agricultural production through “dry-farming techniques.”⁶² Veteran and non-veteran homesteaders alike used these strategies to perfect their claims.

Aside from the occasionally useful reduction in the occupancy requirement, the portion of the settlement process in which veteran-status seemed to play a significant practical role was in the final application. Each application required four witnesses to vouch that the applicant had in fact satisfied the occupancy requirement. By the late 1920s, witness lists containing no veterans were extremely uncommon, while those made up entirely of veterans were unexceptional, with especially prominent veterans like William Campbell, William Underhill, and Frank Bagley listed on dozens of entry notices. Entire genealogies were established as a dense network of veterans served as witnesses for one another. However, the great number of veterans involved does not say as much as it seems about the character of the town. It is simple

⁶¹ Robert Furniss to Louis Vanderhook, February 16, 1931, Twentynine Palms Historical Society Library, Twentynine Palms, CA.

⁶² Many of the details of how local homesteaders made their initial applications and their enlargement applications can be found in the appeal filed by homesteader Frank Roy Sanders against the initial denial of his enlargement application. “In the Matter of the Enlarged Homestead Application of Frank Roy Sanders, Serial Number 046679: An Appeal to the Secretary of the Interior from Decision of the Commissioner of the G.L.O., in Declining to Designate Land,” December 21, 1929, 1-3, Twentynine Palms Historical Society Library, Twentynine Palms, CA.

and tempting to read backwards into the homestead filings and see a network of veterans engaged in mutual support. This is obviously the case, but excessive emphasis on veteran witnesses obscures how the process as often as not forced veterans to rely on non-veterans in this process, especially in the early phase of veteran settlement. The initial wave of veteran homesteaders relied on whichever neighbors happened to live near them, usually miners and ranchers. William and Elizabeth Campbell for example, relied on William and Henry Smith, a pair of non-veteran brothers with adjoining cattle ranches, as their primary witnesses in 1924. The Smiths appeared as witnesses on many early claims, along with Bill McHaney, a gold prospector of exceptional local fame who had lived in the valley since the 1870s. William Smith in particular can be found on dozens of applications well into the 1930s. Though many veterans likely became aware of other applications through American Legion activities, other aspects of the town's development explain some of the patterns in the lists. Frank Bagley, though active in veteran social life was also the town's only notary public and his grocery store served as its first post office. In this capacity he processed and signed hundreds of applications for veterans and non-veterans alike.

From the perspective of both the U.S. government and the veteran homesteaders filing land claims after the First World War, the invocation of military service in relation to land distribution was primarily useful rhetorically and emotionally rather than as a practical justification or legal consideration in offering or acceptance of public lands. For the federal government, homesteading offered a potential solution to the ongoing political anxiety concerning the reintegration of soldiers and sailors returning from War. Access to land, after the American Revolution and Civil War, had seemed to offer the genuine opportunity for economic independence which might stave off the recurrent trend of veteran-led political unrest. Even as

lands available to be claimed became ever more marginal and less agriculturally viable, federal policy continued to see the settlement of the West as the great safety valve of American life, a function it continued to serve even as actual land to grant such veterans became of only marginal value.⁶³ As the American sociologist Willard Waller remembered the public anxieties around returning veterans of the First World War in the midst of the Second, “the veteran, so justly entitled to move us to pity and to shame, can also put us in fear. Destitute he may be...but weak he is not...[u]nless and until he can be renaturalized into his native land, the veteran is a threat to society.”⁶⁴ In some formulations American land became an abstract metaphorical symbol of safe veteran reintegration. Some scholars have placed even less emphasis on veterans as consideration in federal land policy, seeing the early twentieth-century “late homesteading” period as motivated by other concerns, including extinguishing the possibility of legal challenges from Native nations to their ongoing dispossession.⁶⁵

For the veteran homesteaders themselves, military service was more important personally than it was as either a motivating factor in their choice of homesteading as a means of

⁶³ The notion that the Western frontier served as a safety-valve for social tensions is widely associated with the work of Frederick Jackson Turner, who famously argued that, “in spite of environment, and in spite of custom, each frontier did indeed furnish a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past; and freshness, and confidence, and scorn of older society, impatience of its restraints and its ideas, and indifference to its lessons, have accompanied the frontier.”; Subsequent historians have debated both Turner’s centrality to the theory, which clearly existed before his popularization of it amongst academic historians and the general public, and its actual value in representing the actual push and pull factors of Westward settlement. The majority of homestead claims were filed after the 1890 census which Turner claimed marked the closing of the frontier. In California, the majority of claims were filed in the twentieth century. Contemporary historians such as Greg Grandin and Richard Slotkin have split the difference, noting that whatever that case may be, the inability of Americans to even pretend that a frontier exists which may serve this purpose has had profound psychological and ideological effects on national culture, the legacies of which are only now being made manifest. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt and Company, 1920), 38; see also, Ellen Van Nordorff, “The American Frontier as a Safety Valve: The Life, Death, Reincarnation, and Justification of a Theory,” in *Agricultural History*, Vol. 36, no. 3, (Jul. 1962), 123-142; Greg Grandin, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2019), 269-271; Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment*, 33-47, 116-117, 163, 284-285.

⁶⁴ Willard Waller, *The Veteran Comes Back* (New York: The Dryden Press, 1944), 13.

⁶⁵ Douglas Allen and Bryan Leonard, “Late Homesteading: Native Land Dispossession through Strategic Occupation,” in *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 119, No. 1, (February 2025), 56-70.

reintegration or a means of asserting a claim to American nature superior to those held by civilians. The primary benefit to be extracted from desert living was good health. The process of achieving such an outcome had several features that informed how the town developed in relation to its environment. Firstly, it was not something newly discovered; veterans were seeking something which they knew had already been found by non-veterans in other towns around their own. Secondly, it was something over which they had little to no control; good health came as product of the climate, the air and water and light, and not out of their own exertion or labor in such extreme nature. Finally, the time period in which the homesteaders sought to improve their health mattered immensely. Their activities coincided with a major shifts in public opinion which recharacterized the desert as worthwhile and the height of American distrust for the negative physical and emotional results of industrialized urban life.⁶⁶

Veteran homesteaders were hardly the first to retreat to the desert in search of health and they admitted as much. As well as playing up the restorative effect of local oases for Native peoples, they recognized that tuberculosis patients made up a substantial portion of their white predecessors in the immediate area. Rehabilitation through nature was always more central to the founding and growth of Twentynine Palms than any narrowing of that notion to veteran rehabilitation through nature. As time went on, a desert homestead became even less of a symbol of masculine yeoman independence. In 1938, after the scant Morongo Basin land suitable for any sort of cultivation had been claimed, the government began to offer 5-acre homestead tracts. The only conceivable use of the tracts were private residences for people with other employment, or

⁶⁶ For more on the growing appreciation of desert aesthetics and ecology in the first decades of the twentieth century, see, John C. Van Dyke, *The Desert: Further Studies in Natural Appearances*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901); Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Desert Passages: Encounters with the American Deserts*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985); David Teague and Peter Wild, "The Secret Life of John C. Van Dyke: Decalomania on the Desert," in *Journal of the Southwest*, Vol. 37, No. 1, (Spring, 1995) 1-52; Lary M. Dilsaver, "A National Park in the Wasteland," in *The Public Historian*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (November 2016), 38-55.

as vacation or retirement properties. These began a trend of small tract development that mirrored the development taking place in the rest of the United States. Prefabricated “jackrabbit homesteads” models were sold by catalogue, appropriating desert names for authenticity like suburban streets named after trees such as the Mesquite, the Cholla, and the Mesa.” The promoters of these homesteads were eager to attach themselves to the earlier generation of veteran homesteaders. Colonel E.B. Moore, a veteran and successful real estate agent after the Second World War, claimed to have introduced the idea of small-tract homesteads to an Office of Land Management agent named Paul Witmer in 1934 by inducing him to visit the region, where he found, “a race of hardy, happy people who gloried in their isolated surroundings and valued a sunset more than money and health more than the conveniences of city life.”⁶⁷

When the naturalist and travel writer J. Smeaton Chase arrived in Twentynine Palms on burro-back in 1915, he found two permanent residents. One a prospector, and “the other a consumptive from ‘inside’ who was sacrificing every comfort of life for the sake of the dry air of this lonely spot.” Neither could understand Chase’s romantic or scientific interest in touring the desert. The miner accused him of surreptitiously “lookin’ up mineral” (i.e. seeking to jump the prospector’s gold claim), while the sick man lamented that his condition forced him to endure a worthless landscape that did not even merit the term “country.” “They felt it an insult to their intelligence,” Chase recounted, “to be asked to believe that anyone would come to Twenty-nine Palms in July for the sake of seeing the country and ‘them old pa’ms.’” Watching “a sunset landscape that would have thrown Turner into a frenzy,” the consumptive declared it “nothing.”⁶⁸ Part of the reason Chase’s aesthetic sense clashed with the residents’ was that Chase himself was still working through the contradictions between beauty, terror, and austerity that

⁶⁷ Ed Ainsworth, *Five Acres of Heaven: Story of the Great American Desert* (Self-published, 1955), 7.

⁶⁸ J. Smeaton Chase, *California Desert Trails* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1919), 95.

infused late-nineteenth century thought about landscapes. The Joshua Tree was, to Chase, “a weird, menacing object, more like some conception of Poe’s or Dore’s than any work of wholesome Mother Nature,” which produced “a nightmare effect even in broad daylight.” The ocotillo was even more “emblematic expression of the desert’s intrinsic qualities, its haggardness and gray sterility, its cruelty of thorn and claw, its fierce, hot beauty.”⁶⁹ This awestruck ambivalence qualified Chase as a man whose love of the desert was downright bizarre. Yet, within a decade, Twentynine Palms was a growing community undergirded by a blend of the prospector’s industry, the consumptive’s physical convalescence, and less judgmental version of Chase’s aesthetics.

Military service inflected much of Twentynine Palms’ approach to healthcare as a feature of desert living, but crucially never actually placed a limit on access to either the land or physical benefits of local nature to veterans alone. Under the auspices of American Legion Post #334, which was founded within five years of Joe Davis’ death and instantly became known as the Desert Outpost, local veterans sought to establish veteran rehabilitation as the largest industry in town with the creation of the Joe Davis Memorial Rest Home, an asylum for veterans with lung ailments. Plans called for a well-manicured and state of the art medical facility with four dozen private cabins, a recreation center, a fully-staffed hospital, and a public memorial to Joe Davis. Veterans considered all of this part of the great chain of generosity which began with Davis’s initial sacrifice, since it was intended to fill another quarter-parcel (40 acres) of his land claim. The project was ultimately derailed by the Great Depression, but not before it gave the homesteading Legionnaires an occasion to emphasize the depth of the connection they drew between health and nature, as well as the importance of that connection to the town’s sense of

⁶⁹ Ibid., 37.

self. The “distinctive dry climate,” they asserted in funding proposals to the federal government, was the “prime asset” of the town. They made sure to further extoll the moderate altitude, water quality, perpetual sunshine, and cool nights.⁷⁰ They hardly exaggerated when they characterized the Rest Home as the town’s very reason for existing. “Virtually all the development of other enterprises in this locality,” they assured government administrators, “has been with a view to the exploitation of this arid region as a health center.” A large portion of the grounds were to be set aside as a vegetable garden or campground for recovering patients. To support the extensive decorative landscaping and privacy-insuring hedgerows, all planting was to be done with “native desert growth.”⁷¹ This would formalize and centralize the visits of health-seeking veterans that was already ongoing through individual initiative and the work of other advocacy groups such as The Disabled American Veterans. Ultimately, the little capital that was actually raised supplemented the construction of the swimming pool as well as a pair of tennis courts and six small cabins reserved for visiting veterans, several of whom eventually chose to homestead the desert as well. The quarter-parcel then became a part of the process of the transition towards an independent civil government. In 1940, when the Rest Home idea was well and truly dead, the Legion gifted the land to the newly established Twentynine Palms Park, Recreation, and Parkway District for maintenance and future development.⁷²

However, the creation of the Rest Home was never intended to address the issue of veteran rehabilitation alone, which may have been a subject close to the hearts of many homesteaders but never constituted a major goal or specific organizing principle of the entire

⁷⁰ The Legion Corporation of 29 Palms, California to The Administrator of Public Works, Division of Housing, January 12, 1934, Twentynine Palms Historical Society Library, Twentynine Palms, CA, 2.

⁷¹ *American Legion Property at Twentynine Palms Showing Proposed Building Program*, undated, Twentynine Palms Historical Society Library, Twentynine Palms, CA.

⁷² “Agreement,” undated 1940, Twentynine Palms Historical Society Library, Twentynine Palms, CA, 1.

community as such, despite later becoming a central part of local memory after the town had been firmly established. The Rest Home was intended to be one part of a large and modern development plan for Twentynine Palms. Where early homesteading veterans had come individually or as small families and worked out their own plans for rehabilitation, those arriving later were to be met by economic opportunity and purpose. “All the scenery, self-assurance and community spirit in the world will not take the place of bread,” admitted one later town booster. Incoming veterans needed to be given something to do when they arrived besides convalesce. A small, already built concrete blockhouse was the first solution. In a virtuous circle, the first veterans able enough to labor would produce the materials to construct the buildings for the men to follow. Segments of the property were to be reserved for future businesses to diversify veteran job prospects. Other elements of the town’s identity were to be integrated into the property as well. The Campbell’s home archaeology laboratory and exhibitions were to be housed on an adjacent property in a fully furnished branch of the Southwest Museum while an aviation field was proposed for another nearby parcel. Even the town’s most consistent and obviously idyllic belief, that country was superior to city, was flexible. “It is generally recognized locally that the prime asset of this district is its distinctive dry climate,” the Legionnaires wrote in a loan application for the Rest Home, “enhanced by its nearness to the metropolitan areas of Southern California (emphasis added).”⁷³ The point was not to retreat as far as possible from the modern urban world, but rather to find a place within it that balanced the human needs of health and sociability. Neither was this development presented as something for the exclusive benefit of veterans coming into the community. The proposed recreation center, plans made clear, were “FOR THE AMERICAN LEGION *AND THE VALLEY AS A WHOLE*.” Military service could

⁷³ The Legion Corporation of 29 Palms, California to The Administrator of Public Works, Division of Housing, January 12, 1934, Twentynine Palms Historical Society Library, Twentynine Palms, CA, 5.

facilitate access to the public lands around the town by relaxing some homestead requirements, the basic premise of the entitlement which they claimed was universal.

The presence of a large number of veterans alongside growing numbers of non-veteran settlers in first two decades after World War I distinguished Twentynine Palms from other desert resort towns, especially nearby Palm Springs. However, it is crucial to note that the replication of growth of Palm Springs remained an important part of early Twentynine Palms goals. Through the 1930s, boosterism was as prevalent in the region as ideas of veteran health. Its growth during the Depression was touted out of proportion with its impressiveness. One observer boasted in the mid-1930s that the town had “an authoritatively estimated 30% annual increase in population and in the mercantile field since 1925,” despite these figures roughly matching the rate of growth for the entire state of California over the same period of time.⁷⁴ When a Department of Commerce official declared the town “the first of any community on the [West] coast and among the first three or four in the United States, regardless of size or location, for growth and progress,” local boosters embraced it as a vindication of their mission.⁷⁵

What is most important to note here is that the character of local boosterism did not change substantially with the declining centrality of veteran homesteaders to the town’s population. After the Second World War, it continued to tout the healthful and restorative properties of desert nature. Tourist brochures of the era, like “29 Palms: Land of Sunshine and Health,” continued to promise, “the world’s most salubrious climate” but added man-made attractions like golf courses and restaurants to the broad promise of “fun in the sun.” The target audience of these appeals broadened from the disabled veterans of the 20s and 30s, but the

⁷⁴ Jean Jacques, “In the Footprints of the Shoshone,” undated manuscript, 13, Twentynine Palms Historical Society Library, Twentynine Palms, CA.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* at 8.

message changed little. Now senior citizens, families, and outdoor recreationists were guaranteed “escape from a busy community to peaceful quiet among members of their own age.” Healthful natural elements like an “abundance of the purest soft water,” the dry climate and sunsets were now marketed to “victims of arthritis, asthma, bronchitis, sinus and other afflictions” with no mention of military service. When the pamphlet touted Twentynine Palms’ “benefits for retired service personnel,” it mentioned the new Marine Base without any reference to the town’s veteran origins. While still proud of the boost it had given the entire desert health and recreation industry – the town now boasted that it had introduced the idea to towns across the Southwest – it vowed to provide visitors a “second Palm Springs” rather than the only Twentynine Palms.⁷⁶ Veteran status was still useful in this context but it was used to vouch for locals rather than appeal to outsiders. “To call this fantastic condition (the growth and popularity of an area which was for so long considered to be a trackless wasteland) a real estate “boom” would be a misnomer,” wrote a local named Stanley Jones. That the parcels changing hands at a blistering pace were usually built on rather than held as investments, was “testimony of the sincerity of real estate brokers and of the many people who have bought land through them.” The Twentynine Palms identity as a World War I commune was fading, but still strong enough to characterize the local real estate transactions as virtuous and trustworthy. “[A]ll our local real estate men,” Jones assured his readers were “themselves homesteaders, veterans and lovers of the desert, rather than fly-by-night-get-rich-quick promoters.”

That the idea of the universal access to the benefits of the desert was actually more important to the town than the idea of veteran -exclusive rehabilitation in nature was visible in every variety of interaction between homesteaders and their surroundings in Twentynine Palms.

⁷⁶ *29 Palms: Land of Sunshine and Health* (Twentynine Palms, California: publisher unknown, undated), Twentynine Palms Historical Society Library, Twentynine Palms.

Even the outsized role played by veterans in the establishment of local civic institutions and in the interpretation of the initial encounters between homesteaders and unfamiliar desert nature show how military service was an important factor in creation of Twentynine Palms, but one which was not as central as it was made to seem in the retrospective creation of the narrative of local historical memory. All of the strands of identity that played a part in the later self-conception of Twentynine Palms, Native, “pioneer,” and veteran, were considered with regard to the environmental realities of the desert. Each underscored their resilience, adaptability, and natural suitability for life in the Valley.

Knowledge of their conditions and the ability to endure them lent homesteaders a common experience that drew them together and defined them against outsiders, and these divisions never actually depended on previous service. Veterans, as men who were used to bonding over shared hardships, may have been slightly better prepared for this, but the possibility of becoming a part of the community was open to all. Crucially, such group formation based on mutual understanding was not, however, limited to veterans comparing themselves to civilians. Ketcham’s popular articles both taught and reflected other identitarian distinctions.

Chief among these was the clear line drawn between the city and the country. Readers immediately latched onto one of Ketcham’s most consistent refrains: that desert living separated men into urban and non-urban varieties. The denigration of city life was persistent in the town, as it was in large parts of American life in the early twentieth century. Cities were noisy, crowded, stifling places that damaged their citizens mentally, physically, and morally.⁷⁷ In Twentynine Palms, the line between city and desert dwellers was sharp yet permeable. The desert, through

⁷⁷ On Progressive and Interwar Era anti-urbanism see, T.J. Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: HarperCollins 2009), 135-140; Benjamin Heber Johnson, *Escaping the Dark, Gray City: Fear and Hope in Progressive-Era Conservation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 29-37, 188.

some vaguely defined mechanism could take a miserable city person and transfigure them into something happier. The Bagleys were self-proclaimed beneficiaries of that power. After meeting in Portland, Oregon, the couple found themselves in New York City when news of the Armistice rendered Frank's orders to embark for France moot. Frank's ill-health then forced their moves to Pasadena and then the Mojave. Even though they recalled New York fondly in later years, they also adopted a belief in the desert being a fundamentally different, and fundamentally better, sort of place. Helen made this obvious in a poem celebrating Music Valley. She wrote:

I too have learned to love this desert waste,
These men too restive for the city's yoke,
The men who fight for health, for very life,
The thwarted men, the humble struggling folk.

Here there is love and loyalty and hope,
And courage, always, in the desert lands.
And like the wind in rugged boulder heaps
These things are song to him who understands.⁷⁸

The Bagleys and their neighbors went to great pains to associate themselves with the traits and virtues embodied in the history and landscape of the desert. It was too ancient and wild to bend for them, so they would bend for it instead.

⁷⁸ Helen Bagley, "Music Valley," in Bagley, *Sand in My Shoe*, 94.

Ketcham's "Our Desert" also featured the town's first appeal to recreationists or "out-of-doors individual[s]" whose trips always culminated in the "desire and determination to come again."⁷⁹ The public pronouncements of the American Legion were thus based on more than just attracting more veterans to the community, but expanding its appeal to all who might enjoy and benefit from it. The short article marked a change in how desert nature was presented by, and to, the veteran community. Ketcham, a trained naturalist who would later become a Park Ranger in Joshua Tree National Monument, turned "Our Desert" into a recurring column more scientifically exact than a standard tourist advertisement. Despite his rigor, Ketcham attempted to boost the town's economic prospects and naturalize the homesteaders as true desert dwellers as he educated. His effusive writing about desert flora and fauna was meant to instill a love of the Valley that would fundamentally change its residents' relationship to its environment, what the contemporary ecologist and philosopher Aldo Leopold would call a community's "land ethic."⁸⁰ The assumption that the desert was "nothing but sun, sky, and hot sand" was one that could only be held by "a city bred individual," or locals "who have given the matter little or no attention." Affection and respect for the Mojave's plants and animals were presented as *requirements* of such an identity. A "true desert lover," could not exist absent the ethic of conservation. Such a person, Ketcham asserted, "ALWAYS has a warm spot for the creatures that share their desert home with him, and will never destroy one of them except for good and sufficient reasons." A connection to wildlife was as much personal and moral as it was biological. More than sharing

⁷⁹ Walter Ketcham, "Our Desert," *The Outpost*, Vol 1. No. 4, July 29, 1932, 1.

⁸⁰ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949); "The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land"

physical proximity, animals were “neighbors” that offered “companionship,” though several needed to be “entirely disqualified from intimate friendship.”⁸¹

Descriptions of the Twentynine Palms’ environment which centered its extremes became more and more common as the town achieved stability. Even its dangers and deficiencies became familiar or even lovable. Early on, *Outpost* writers might have been willing to bend the truth for outsiders but could not do so for long with new residents. Rather than needing to downplay the heat, isolation, and the complete absence of paved roads to attract newcomers, boosters now used reinterpreted these qualities as things one could take pride in overcoming or growing to admire. Months after claiming otherwise, the *Outpost* stopped trying to convince distant readers that summer was never especially hot. After a rare snowstorm struck the Valley in December 1932, Ketcham freely and casually told his readers that memories and photographs of the event, “will give pleasure when the thermometer once more stands at 120 degrees in the shade,” though he also made sure to tie the snow to more pleasant natural occurrences such as the springtime wildflower blooms it would make possible.⁸² In a column on changes brought to the desert by the oncoming spring, he acknowledged annoyances such as “the pestiferous ant and the obnoxious fly,” but assured the wary that, “the pleasant phases of desert life many times balance the disagreeable.” All the rugged severity of the desert, he was coming to acknowledge with frequency, was a price worth paying for the health and beauty that came along with it.⁸³ The definition of a true desert lover never relied on a connection to previous military service.

Desert beauty was found in the grotesque or stunted as well as the hazardous. In 1943, the Twentynine Palms Women’s Club held its first annual Weed Show, a floral arrangement

⁸¹ Walter Ketcham, “Our Desert,” *The Outpost*, Vol. 1 No. 7, September 15, 1932, 2-3

⁸² Walter Ketcham “Our desert,” *The Outpost*, Vol. 1 No. 14, December 21, 1932, 3-4.

⁸³ Walter Ketcham, “Our Desert,” *The Outpost*, Vol. 1 No. 20, March 30, 1933, 4-5.

competition and exhibition intend to compensate for the region's "dearth of rose petals and camelia blossoms" in a "display of the best that can be done with nature's worst." This seemingly "futile undertaking of arranging "lowly" weeds, grasses, cacti, and flowers was meant to "dispel...all such illusions" that "the desert was a waterless region, void of plant and animal life." Environmental defects were thus reinterpreted as opportunities to show one's love and knowledge of the desert and the ability to make do with available resources that was such a common aspect of the "pioneering" life.⁸⁴ Even the inability of most homesteaders to harvest any sort of commercially viable crop became a source of fond memories in the future even though it almost killed the town in its infancy. Maud Martin, whose husband Tom was an early Commander of the Desert Outpost, remembered that attempts to comply with the homestead law's agricultural requirements yielded nothing marketable, but did have pleasant results. "There didn't anybody grow anything because there was no water," she asserted. "But the flowers--the desert marigolds bloomed so beautifully that first year or two... I suppose it was where the ground had been stirred up. It was just yellow like gold all over the fields."⁸⁵ One couple remembered deciding to come to Twentynine Palms after reading a local newspaper article in Texas recounting the (almost certainly apocryphal) story of Pasadena Legionnaires flying over the outskirts of the town throwing wildflower seeds from their plane in the hopes that veterans would be greeted by a massive bloom of color as they arrived.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ "Weed Show Makes 'Best of the Worst,'" *Los Angeles Times*, undated 1948.

⁸⁵ Maud Martin, interview by Cheryl Erickson, August 1974, Twentynine Palms Historical Society Library, Twentynine Palms, CA, 2.

⁸⁶ Kathryn Malone, Sarah Krushat, and Hilda Graham, interview by Cheryl Erickson and Harold Weight, October 20, 1977, 2.

A misconception that the veteran homesteaders disapproved of the town's development into a recreational tourist hub defined by its proximity to Joshua Tree National Monument eventually crept into public memory. Veterans slowly gained a reputation for conservatism and clannishness. A 1973 magazine article looking back at the "frontier" days argued that "[t]he homesteaders had little time for the Joshua Monument wonderland with its 230 species of birds, coyotes and formations of Pinto gneiss." Time had allegedly softened them to point that now "the pioneers themselves join their children and descendants to enjoy along with the tourists the beauties now available for all."⁸⁷ This was utterly erroneous. Homesteaders in the 20s and 30s had made extensive use of the future Monument. Many of the most popular camping and hiking locations in today's Joshua Tree National Park were set up by homesteading families rather than the National Park Service. Large communal picnicks and family gatherings were held under especially impressive rock formations, with the only change being the replacement of the original picnic tables. Furthermore, the town itself had explicitly lobbied for the government to preserve the desert in general and to establish the Monument in particular. Its promised blend of health, nature, and tourist revenue fit as perfectly within the town's governing ethos as is possible. The Park Service employees who came to the Monument were not separate from the town at all. In many cases they were the townspeople. Walter Ketcham continued his educational work as a ranger-naturalist in the Monument and a recognized expert on the desert's Kangaroo Rat. Les Earenfight, a veteran of both World Wars and a mechanical engineer who at first had dreaded the boredom of the desert, worked for the Park Service for a quarter century, retiring as the Monument's chief ranger in 1963. The final link to the earliest bonds of the homesteaders, town, and Park was Dr. Luckie's daughter Susan Luckie Reilly, who worked a seasonal

⁸⁷ Copeland, "Modern Western Frontier," 49.

naturalist and remained a beloved local environmental activist until her death in 2017 at the age of 101. Homestead ownership could involve the development of some stereotypically conservative views on property and taxation. In the 1980s Les Earenfight. was outraged about the \$900 property tax bill on his 50-year-old homestead and thanked California's conservative Proposition 13 for keeping it under \$2,000. Yet none of this influenced his attitude towards the Monument, which was as much a part of his personal and communal identity was any piece of pioneer mythology.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Les Earenfight, interview by Cheryl Erickson, April 29, 1981, Twentynine Palms Historical Society Library, Twentynine Palms, CA, 6.

Chapter 3: Life Begins at Forty: The Reintegration of Military Veterans through the Civilian
Conservation Corps

On October 1, 1935, President Franklin Roosevelt visited Los Angeles before touring the Southern California coast and beginning an extended western vacation. Nearly 1,000,000 Angelenos lined the streets to view his motorcade as he circled the city, stopping to make remarks at a handful of high schools, the University of California-Los Angeles, and a veterans' hospital. He closed the evening by extolling his recovery programs to 75,000 spectators at the Los Angeles Coliseum. Nearly lost in the excitement of the occasion was the President's brief stop at the camp of Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) Company No. 1917 in Griffith Park. Roosevelt was greeted warmly by the camp's enrollees and cheered as he told them they were "doing a splendid piece of work" in the park. He then dedicated a 10-foot-tall bronze depicting "an ideal C.C.C. worker...holding an ax."¹ The striking Art Deco style of the statue, designed by Finnish-American Works Progress Administration sculptor John Palo-Kangas and named "Spirit of the CCC," imbued its subject with a sense of vigorous masculine fitness and determination, his shirtless torso rippling with muscle. Media coverage of the event emphasized how the work "typif[ied] the C.C.C. youth of the nation." The plinth on which the shining figure stood was emblazoned with phrases including "YOUTH REBUILDS" and "CONSERVE THE YOUTH."

The nation's understanding of the purpose and success of the CCC has largely been guided by this concentration on youthfulness. Limiting enrollment to unemployed and unmarried young men between the ages of 18 and 25 bought the program political support as doing so would minimize any economic effect on the older male heads of households to whom most other

¹ "Statue of C.C.C. Youth to be Unveiled Today," *The Los Angeles Times*, October 1, 1935, 6.

New Deal recovery programs were tailored. It also allowed the Corps' mission to address the specific widespread public fear that "impressionable, idle, and frustrated young men" lacking employment would strain relief rolls and local law enforcement agencies. Its material benefits: tens of thousands of miles of trails blazed, roads built, canals dug; billions of trees planted; and massive anti-erosion efforts; all relied on strenuous manual labor thought to be suited for the young. Furthermore, the physical, intellectual, and moral transformations of young men through outdoor labor were unmistakable and a vital component of the CCC's stunning popularity. As one Pennsylvania youth reported in a letter representative of a feeling common among enrollees, after six months of conservation work, "I was a different boy, in fact I was really becoming a man." For most Americans at the time, the sentiment could have functioned as a slogan for the Corps as a whole.²

Such sentiments are vital as well to the present-day public's understanding of the CCC's historical legacy, and color our ideas about the prototypical enrollee. One 2021 article on the New Deal's legacy in Los Angeles noted that Roosevelt's speech that day, though just three sentences long, must have delighted the "hundreds of poor kids bivouacked in Griffith Park — gainfully employed for the first time, out in the fresh air all day, camping at night with new friends under then-visible stars."³ Yet despite the obvious symbolic intent of the statue, a closer look at the creation of "Spirit of the CCC" complicates these assumptions about how an "ideal" CCC worker was meant to look. The enrollees in Company 1917 were not "poor kids," and every one of them had held a job before enlisting. All 161 of the men who cheered the President's

² Neil Maher, *Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 93-100.

³ David Kipen, "How the New Deal Continues to Shape L.A. 90 Years On" *PBSSocal*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.pbssocal.org/shows/artbound/how-the-new-deal-continues-to-shape-l-a-90-years-on> (accessed February 10, 2026).

remarks were veterans of the First World War. Neither was the model on whom Palo-Kangas based his statue the “brawny youth” described in local newspapers. Robert J. Pauley was a 35-year-old Navy veteran who had served at the Pauillac Naval Air Station in France in 1918. While a shirtless Pauley appeared reasonably fit in a 1934 photo of enrollees at work, his physique hardly matched either the Olympian form of “Spirit of the CCC” or the tanned and muscular young men who tended to be used in the publicity photos produced by “junior” camps made up of younger men. The other veterans alongside Pauley looked even more like the middle-aged men they were.⁴

Company 1917⁵, was one of nearly 300 CCC camps set up to put World War veterans to work like their younger counterparts. Though the circumstances under which these separate, veteran-only camps were established made them highly visible politically in the very earliest days of the New Deal, they have received very little concentrated study separate from the broader Civilian Conservation Corps. The most recent and thorough monograph on the CCC as a national organization, Neil Maher’s *Nature’s New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement*, dispenses with the veteran camps in a single sentence, only noting them alongside Native American enrollees and so-called “Local Experienced Men” as groups exempt from the standard age and unmarried status requirements.⁶ Most histories of the Corps follow suit, noting the existence of veteran companies as an administrative anomaly and moving on. When granted any substantial role in the wider narrative of CCC history, it is generally as an impediment to the government’s efforts to efficiently

⁴ “Griffith Park CCC...Camp Site Clearing...Preparation Rushed,” *Los Angeles Evening Citizen-News* (Hollywood, CA), April 23, 1934, 1.

⁵ Though Veteran camps occasionally had patriotically and militarily resonant Company numbers such as 1917, 1918, and 1776, these appear to be entirely coincidental.

⁶ Maher, *Nature’s New Deal*, 82.

employ younger men, as when historian Joseph M. Speakman noted that plans to integrate veteran and “junior” camps had to be abandoned out of fears “that the older men would slow down the work projects and add a heavier odor of militarism to the program.”⁷

The veteran camps have also served as a cautionary counterpoint to the regular CCC’s wild popularity and success as both a tool of economic recovery and environmental restoration. Like other historians, Speakman argued that older war veterans tended to engage in less and lighter work, to stay enrolled in the Corps longer, and to have a worse reputation with local communities than their junior counterparts. Historian Robert Allen Ermentrout, himself a company commander in charge of a junior CCC camp in the 1930s, remembered the conditions of the veteran camps with derision. “They had not the spirit and willingness to perform that was the rule in junior camps,” he wrote. In educational and athletic participation, willingness to work, and especially sobriety, Ermentrout recalled veterans as deficient in comparison to junior enrollees in every instance. A veteran “camp commander, his lieutenants, and enrollee leaders usually spent the evening and night of payday...searching the ditches along the road for passed-out drunks.”⁸ Other historians, lacking Ermentrout’s personal animosity, were kinder to the veterans. John A. Salmond’s *The Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942: A New Deal Case Study*, long the standard administrative history of the subject, characterized their conservation work as similar to junior enrollees’ but by necessity “modified to suit their age and physical condition,” and that they took advantage of camp educational and medical programs making the CCC “a rehabilitation center...where they could regain health and self-respect.”⁹

⁷ Joseph M. Speakman, “Into the Woods: The First Year of the Civilian Conservation Corps,” in *Prologue Magazine* Vol. 38, No. 3 (Fall 2006).

⁸ Robert Allen Ermentrout, *Forgotten Men: The Civilian Conservation Corps*, (Smithtown, NY: Exposition Press, 1982), 17-19.

⁹ John A. Salmond, *The Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942: A New Deal Case Study*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1967), 35-37.

All historians of the CCC agree on two things about the veteran camps: they were a secondary concern for the administration and their inclusion in the program was primarily a matter of political expediency rather than a systematic effort to support struggling Great War veterans. The only accomplishment of the veteran companies that Ermentrout acknowledged was their role in cooling “a critical national situation...by enrolling a great part of those veterans inclined to be agitative,” and preventing them from undertaking a “march to Washington or some equally futile nuisance action.” Though sympathetic to the veterans, Salmond ultimately agreed that the enrollment of the first 25,000 veterans in May, 1933 was foremost an example of the CCC being “used to resolve a troublesome situation” and “was peripheral to the main task” of mobilizing “250,000 young men” by July.¹⁰

In many ways, these men self-consciously attempted to position themselves not as an appendage to the larger CCC created solely to address a political crisis, but as a committed unit who embodied collectively the CCC’s ideals of dedication, service, self-improvement, and recovery in nature. Though their need for rehabilitation may have been more acute than junior enrollees, they crucially asserted that restorative nature was available to all, and that their work in conservation mirrored their work as soldiers. They had fought for democracy for all Americans and now fought to conserve the nation’s resources and beauty for future generations. Like veteran National Park Service rangers and superintendents and veteran homesteaders before them, veterans in the CCC saw their reintegration into peacetime society as their primary goal. This was to be accomplished in all these cases by immersing themselves in nature, protecting it and even restoring it when possible. Though they frequently referred to their wartime experience as an asset in this endeavor, the process was always focused on the public good and helping to

¹⁰ *Ibid.* at 36.

make nature's benefits more available and accessible to all Americans regardless of their past service.

The decision to exempt some veterans from enrollment requirements responded to the persistent American fear the demobilized soldiers were a threat to political and social stability. This had been sharply exacerbated by the Depression and the move followed logically from the justification for the CCC as a whole. If idle young men were a threat to social order, middle-aged men trained to kill and similarly unemployed posed an existential threat to the entire Republic. Such fears came to a head in 1932, when 17,000 veterans encamped in Washington to demand the immediate redemption of a promised The World War Adjusted Compensation Act, commonly known as the Bonus Bill, was passed by Congress in 1924 and issued World War veterans an Adjusted Service Certificate based on the length and location of their service. The Certificates functioned as twenty-year life insurance policies, payable on the veterans' birthday in 1945 or to his estate on his death. Calls by veterans and their advocacy organizations for early redemption began almost immediately but grew loused with the onset of the Great Depression.¹¹ This "Bonus Expeditionary Force" was violently cleared by the Army and contributed to Franklin Roosevelt's election victory. Though Roosevelt was as firmly opposed to immediate redemption as Hoover, the violent dispersal of the BEF's encampment proved wildly unpopular. FDR used a second smaller Bonus March to both boost the popularity of his reform program and defuse the crisis without signing off on the bonus. When he issued the executive order creating the veteran CCC companies, the demonstrator's camp was receptive. While one marcher refused, crying "to hell with reforestation," 2,500 men instantly enlisted in "Roosevelt's Tree Army."¹²

¹¹ Paul Dickson and Thomas B. Allen, *The Bonus Army: An American Epic*, (New York: Walker & Company, 2004), 25-38.

¹² *Ibid.* at 216.

In understanding these camps as marginal to the organization and motivated by different concerns than junior camps, historians followed the lead of the CCC itself. As a matter of policy, a strict segregation of veteran from junior enrollees was maintained. While an individual veteran could be transferred to serve as mess steward or cook in a junior company, he would always be counted separately and not affect the company's enrollment limits. "Should a veteran wish to leave such a position," he must be "transferred back to a veteran company."¹³ Under no circumstances were veteran and junior enrollees to share conservation work. Administrators feared that veteran involvement would damage the junior camps' burgeoning public popularity. As two observers have noted, [i]n the glowing official accounts of CCC accomplishments, the veterans were hardly mentioned."¹⁴ The suggestively titled photobook *The CCC at Work: A Story of 2,500,000 Young Men*, produced by the government in 1941, began with a reference to the "limited number of older men...among the Veterans, Indians, and Territorials," who were never mentioned again.¹⁵ A standard handbook produced for enrollees – which immediately identified the Corps as a "builder of men" designed to give "young men [a] chance for a brighter future" – limited mention of the veterans, 10% of enrollees overall, to one-half of one of its 96 pages.¹⁶

These assumptions about both the peripherality of the veterans' camps and the habits and motivations of the men within them are misleading. While it is true that the camps were a relatively minor concern in the overall administration of the CCC and were often doubted by their commanders and federal overseers, these camps provided all of the same services,

¹³ Ray Hoyt, *Your CCC: A Handbook for Enrollees*, (Washington, D.C.: Happy Days Publishing Co., 1938), 59.

¹⁴ Dickson and Allen, *The Bonus Army*, 221.

¹⁵ *The CCC at Work: A Story of 2,500,000 Young Men*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1941), 5; "Territorials" refers to enrollees in non-state U.S. territories and possessions including Alaska, Hawai'i, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Around 50,000 enrollees served in territorial camps, and many were granted exceptions to age and marital status regulations similar to those enjoyed by veterans.

¹⁶ Hoyt, *Your CCC*, i.

opportunities, and obligations of their junior counterparts. Though seemingly constitutionally incapable of not forming and guarding a distinct identity based on their military service, veterans in the CCC were, nevertheless, neither as segregated from the junior camps and the broader culture of the organization as its planners had sought to make them or its subsequent historians have made them seem. Veteran enrollees were well aware of the assumptions and stereotypes held about them by many members of the public and the federal officials above them. In the periodicals that the enrollees produced within the veteran camps, a great deal of time and effort was devoted to confronting what they believed to be pernicious myths about their fitness for the work they were now being paid to do, their motivations for accepting public employment, their willingness to avail themselves of the benefits which the CCC offered younger men, and about their insular and entitled attitudes based on their service.

The camp periodicals that veteran enrollees produced for themselves offer a rich set of primary sources depicting life in the veteran camps, recording the enrollees' perspectives on political life, their own work, nature, and the difficulties of weathering the Depression in middle-age. Despite the many dozens of newsletters and papers on offer, they have largely gone unused as historians of the CCC have overlooked them on the assumption that they offer little of value for understanding the organization as a whole. The only historical work to make systematic use of veteran papers has been military historian Alfred Cornebise's monograph on CCC newspapers, *The CCC Chronicles: Camp Newspapers of the Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942*. In his chapter concerning veteran papers, Cornebise repeatedly emphasized the many differences in both camp life and enrollee character that distinguished veteran and junior camps, concluding matter-of-factly that, "veterans, then, differed from the junior enrollees." In recreational and educational interests, physical ability, drinking habits, resistance to the CCC and

their commanders, isolation from other camps, and their taste for off-color humor, Cornebise sketches out a world of veteran enrollees functionally operating as members of an entirely different organization than the juniors.¹⁷ While Cornebise accurately captured many real dissimilarities between the camps, many of which veterans themselves acknowledged or even sought to establish in their own writing, close examination of the veteran papers reveals persistent attempts to minimize the divide between camp types. Veterans, of course, paid close attention to veterans' issues, both political and economic, and advocated for greater understanding of the peculiarities of their position and plight. However, they spent just as much time resisting the assumptions they feared were held about them by junior enrollees, CCC administrators, and the public at large. Their reintegration in the economic and social life of the nation through the CCC ran not simply through the public largesse they received through it as a welfare program, but also the opportunities it provided them to reclaim a sense of normality and belonging in their lives.

The most obviously divergent aspect of the creation of the veterans' contingent of the program from the rest of the CCC was that it came in response to the acute crisis of the Bonus March and the anxieties the March raised about veteran unrest. In some instances, enrollees who had joined the CCC directly from the March were simply recorded as "Bonus Veterans" in lieu of the normal practice of recording them by their state of origin.¹⁸ As a live political issue for the first three years of the CCC's existence, the Bonus question was naturally one of great interest to the veterans. It was central enough in the eyes of the V-CCC camp in McRae, Georgia that their

¹⁷ Alfred Emile Cornebise, *The CCC Chronicles: Camp Newspapers in the Civilian Conservation Corp, 1933-1942*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc., 2004), 137-157.

¹⁸ Ross Abare, *Camp Report for CCC Camp No. S-80, Company VC-1351, East Barre, VT*, October 21, 1933, 1, RG 35: CCC, Entry 115, Division of Investigations, Camp Inspection Reports, 1933-1942, Box 220, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

paper was called *Bonus Blues*.¹⁹ In addition to keeping enrollees informed on the prospects of the Bonus Bill, many papers advocated joining national veterans' advocacy organizations such as the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars to press Bonus claims. Multiple companies around the nation laid claim to the first American Legion Post established within a CCC camp. As the prospects for the Bill's passage brightened in 1936, the papers turned to preemptively countering the expectation that enrollees would squander their payments and return to the dole. Numerous editorials alternately harangued their readers to use the Bonus wisely, and assured outsiders that they would, in the guise of speculating on how they intended to do so. "The Bonus and then what?" asked *The Fullersburg Beacon* of Company 1668 in Illinois, before answering that all would spend the money on "highly legitimate purposes," including mortgage and tax payments, home repairs, the purchase of farms, and other avenues that would see it "circulated in channels that need it the most."

Veterans could be trusted with a special payment not forthcoming to junior enrollees because of their age, since, according to one Illinois camp paper, "the average veteran has had his fling...and will expend his bonus money wisely and judiciously."²⁰ Though several thousand veterans did leave the CCC following the payment, those who remained asserted that doing so was the product of rational financial planning and dedication to their work. A camp poet from Sublimity, Oregon wrote "After the Bonus Pay-Off," warning not to be like the "fool there was [who] made a vow/That he'd live no more on Government chow/But he's back again in the C.C.s now."²¹ "I am going to keep my money and stay right here until I can get a job," an enrollee in Georgia promised. "What could I do on the outside without a job?" A cartoon in the same camp

¹⁹ At least until the Bonus Bill was approved, when the paper was renamed *Park and Forest News*.

²⁰ "The Bonus," *Fullersburg Beacon* (Fullersburg, IL), Vol. 1 No. 1, March, 1936, 2.

²¹ "After the Bonus Pay-Off," *The Veterans Squawker* (Sublimity, OR), No. 7, January 14, 1935, 6.

summed up the attitude of the enrollees remaining as “now that the Bonus is settled, let’s get to work.”²² The Bonus, as well as other veteran-specific events and subjects like Armistice Day reminiscences and age-related medical conditions, were treated as topics of special interest to the readers of veteran papers, but not as subjects that might alienate veteran enrollees from juniors or the national CCC. In fact, they were frequently recast so as to bind them closer to the organization and its mission.

Well-aware of the national anxieties concerning veteran-led political unrest following the Bonus March, newly enrolled veterans in the CCC actively undertook to assure politicians and the general public of their political reliability. The men were distrusted across the political spectrum. Upon crushing the initial Bonus March in 1932, General Douglas MacArthur, called the men a mob of “insurrectionists...animated by the spirit of revolution,” of whom not, “one man in ten...is a veteran.”²³ Socialist Party Presidential nominee Norman Thomas captured the fear of militarism naturally triggered by Army-administered camps of young men and veterans isolated from the rest of society, when he argued that CCC “work camps fit into the psychology of a fascist, not a Socialist state.”²⁴ Veterans unceasingly pushed back against both accusations. Denunciations of communism were universal. Most veteran camp papers followed the editorial line of *Warvet*, which called such beliefs the products of “the misfits and crack-brained visionaries of the European rabble.”²⁵ They objected to charges of incipient militarism nearly as strenuously. Most defended the CCC from the allegation outright, while others took the next step of actively opposing the use of CCC camps for direct military training, at least until the start of

²² Goofy Gazebo, “Now that the Bonus is Settled, Let’s Get to Work,” *Slidell Review* (Slidell, LA), Vol. 1 No. 8, June 11, 1935, 4.

²³ Dickson and Allen, *The Bonus Army*, 181-183.

²⁴ Norman Thomas, “What Has Roosevelt Accomplished?” in *The Nation*, Vol. 136, April 12, 1933, 400; Calvin W. Gower, “The Civilian Conservation Corps and American Education: Threat to Local Control?” in *History of Education Quarterly*, Vol. 7 No. 1, (Spring 1967), 58-60.

²⁵ “No Place for Reds in USA,” *Warvet* (Phelps, WI), Vol. 1 No. 13, November 25, 1935, 1.

the Second World War. For all the superficial similarities between CCC camps and the Army camps of 1918, veterans maintained that there was a distinction between regimented camp life and active military training. Rejecting the comparison of the CCC to fascist paramilitary conservation units, the Massachusetts camp paper *The Vet* printed a cartoon showing “the German C.C.C.s,” goose-stepping in lockstep in stiff military uniforms and carrying their shovels like rifles. Unlike their American counterparts, even those with military training, the Germans were said to “march in squads, platoon, battalions and regiments, and are as well trained in the manual of arms as any military of other countries.” The writers of another Massachusetts veteran camp paper rejected charges of communism and fascism simultaneously, demonstrating a rare instance in which they would appeal directly to their knowledge of war. “The real pacifism of the ‘Vets’” which they feared had drawn some criticism, came from the firsthand realization that war was “not only a Hell-of-a-Mess but...a Mess from Hell.” They went on to assure readers that “[w]e are not Reds, as some might think.”²⁶

The next most obvious difference between veteran and junior enrollees – age – was similarly reinterpreted by the veterans to demonstrate their commitment to rather than detachment from the CCC and its mission. It was on this subject that they were perhaps touchier than any other. Veterans’ papers first had to convince their own readers that the average age of newly enrolled veterans in 1933, 40, limited neither the benefits to be gained from the CCC nor their potential contributions. “Life Begins at 40” was the most commonly used formulation for how a veteran should consider their age. Under this slogan, editorialists in different camps affirmed that “able-bodied World War Veterans in the CCC camps are in the prime of life,” cajoled the men to use their time in camp to prepare themselves for their return to society,

²⁶ “A Mess From Hell,” *The Woodpecker* (Charlemont, MA), 1934, 2.

insisted to prospective employers that veterans could still work, and reminded enrollees of various historical persons who had not been successful until late in life.²⁷ Using the examples of Kant, Goethe, Tennyson, one camp in Missouri went as far as to promise its veterans that “Life Begins at Seventy.”²⁸ In 1938 a camp in Kansas changed its name from *The Gully Guardian* to *Life Begins at 40*, because the phrase “carrie[d] the meaning of a psychology behind any successful enterprise,” and expressed the “seriousness of purpose” with which the men intended to “again take their place in the world.” The commander of the camp then inaugurated the new name by banning the use of the word “old” in association with the company.²⁹

To those outside the camps, veteran enrollees objected fiercely to the commonly held notion that older men did not work to the same standards as the juniors. Most veteran camp papers kept up running reports on the work being accomplished in their camps and many were quick to defend the independence and dignity of their labor. When a non-enrollee contractor working with veterans on a CCC project in Georgia was overhead saying that the men “don't do nothing and they hunt up them juniors to help 'em do it,” the *Ward Creek Veterans News* treated it as an spurious attack on all veterans and seemed to take as much offense to the claim that they were assisted by junior enrollees as the idea that they did not work at all. “All people who are disposed to put Veterans on their "list" please take notice,” it cautioned. “The work...for the entire Chattahoochee National Forest is being performed by our men without the assistance of local men or members of any camp of younger men.”³⁰ One veteran company in Chatom, Alabama satirized the ridiculousness of those who supposed that veteran enrollees could get

²⁷ “Life Begins at 40,” *Slidell Review* (Slidell, LA), Vol. 1 No. 5, May 21, 1935, 2; “Preparedness,” *The Vet* (East Otis, MA), Vol. 2 No. 7, April 12, 1935, 2; “Life Begins at Forty,” *Scars and Gripes* (Lillington, NC), Vol. 1 No. 1, January 15, 1938, 1.

²⁸ “Life Begins at 70,” *Camp Hadman Weekly* (Marysville, MO), Vol. 1, No. 15, May 15, 1935, 1.

²⁹ Lawrence Nelson, “Life Begins at Forty,” *Life Begins at 40* (Kingman, KS), Vol. 1 No. 1, January 1939, 3.

³⁰ “Note on Work,” *Ward Creek Veterans News* (Dahlonge, GA), Vol. 1 No. 18, August 19, 1936, 1-2.

away without engaging in labor by created a fictional camp where that was the case. The mythical Pea River Camp was allegedly in a fertile valley, “somewhere in the Big Rock Candy Mountains.” As a veteran camp it was “run on far more liberal lines than an ordinary camp,” with its primary regulation being “NO ONE SHALL DO ANY WORK, EXCEPT THE OFFICERS AND THE FORESTERS,” and its only injury risk “gout from the heavy eating.”³¹ Though the idea that veterans did not earn their pay in the same way as the junior enrollees was considered laughable, not all unflattering beliefs about older enrollees could be so easily dismissed.

CCC administrators assumed veterans to be uninterested in the educational programs available in the camps and resistant to any effort to pressure them into utilizing those resources. This impression was pervasive at camps around the country. One Educational Adviser (EA) at a veteran camp in Ponca City, Oklahoma considered it the “greatest problem in the Civilian Conservation Corps...to interest [them] in some sort of educational work,” and suggested making one educational course mandatory for veterans despite the opposition this would face. Another in New Jersey thought his job one which had “seldom if ever before in the history of education been attempted, namely, trying to interest adults of little previous education in study.” The stereotype was sufficient to overcome even firsthand experience to the contrary. A newly arrived EA in Illinois claimed that there was “more truth than poetry” in the camp commanders’ assessment that the “average veteran...thinks that he is too old for [education]” and “would rather lie on his bunk reading a magazine than attend classes,” despite also claiming that at his previous veteran camp his courses had been so well-attended that he had had to double the number of classes he offered.³² To this, most veteran enrollees offered at least a sheepish

³¹ “The Pea River Camp,” *Chatom Chatter* (Chatom, AL), No. 1, undated, 6.

³² “Education,” *The McDowell Messenger* (Naperville, IL), Vol. 1 No. 1, July 1940, 3.

agreement. Typical of the veteran response was an enrollee in, *Stars and Gripes*, the camp paper in Lillington, North Carolina, that openness to education was the clearest contrast between themselves and younger enrollees. Education “is better fitted to juniors, than to veterans,” who were, he wrote, “past the age when they can be taught a vocation.” He pessimistically ascribed this to a fundamental disconnect between the goals of the EAs and their veteran students: “The Veteran doesn't fit the C.C.C. program and the program doesn't fit the Veteran.”³³

When criticized as lacking a strong work ethic, veterans referenced their age as either a reasonable explanation for any deficiency or an active benefit to mission of the CCC. They commonly equated age with experience and experience with ability to assert their equality with, or even superiority to, junior enrollees, and were especially pleased to see this confirmed by CCC officials. Enrollees in North Carolina reprinted a letter from their camp inspector which confirmed their belief that “Veteran Companies have in many cases been able to achieve standards of excellence due to their greater experience and training which younger men...have not been able to accomplish so quickly or so completely.” The fact that they had “already served [their] apprenticeship and passed through the early stages of training in [their] chosen work,” made them valuable to the CCC and seemingly less likely to serve as a burden on the public as such experience would appeal to private employers.³⁴ When a camp paper in Louisiana challenged its readers to validate the public support they received in an editorial which asked, “Are We Worth That Amount?” a state forester answered to assure the men that they were. His only regret was that the state only contained two veteran camps, since veterans, as “older

³³ “Captain Seeks Jobs for Men; 2341 Offers Diversified Talents,” *Stars and Gripes* (Lillington, NC), Vol. 1 No. 1, January 15, 1938, 1, 4.

³⁴ D.G. Wilson, “Captain Wilson Impressed Favorably by Veterans’ Aims,” *Stars and Gripes* (Lillington, NC), Vol. 1 No. 2, February 1, 1938, 1, 3.

men...trained in many occupations...have created a very high-class record for accomplishments.”³⁵

In lower stakes contexts where veterans’ work or fitness were less likely to be maligned, such as recreational athletic competition, the older enrollees were even liable to poke fun at themselves about their age. When a group of veterans, “all around the age of forty-seven” defeated a group of local youths in four consecutive games of volleyball, the *Warvet* joked that the men had “lost their rights to a disability pension,” and “worried” that in the case of a future conflict, “the powers that be may consider the Vets are not so far gone that they can’t fight two or three more wars.” After a baseball victory over a junior camp, a veterans’ paper in Illinois reported that sons beating fathers was “commonplace, but when the fathers beat the sons, that is nothing short of a miracle.”³⁶

Veteran enrollees mounted a similar defense of their academic accomplishments. It was common for veteran camp papers agree with *The Sound Off* of Co. 1778 in Lebanon, Kansas that, unlike juniors, “veterans are not interested in academic subjects or in making up deficiencies in the public school education,” having only future employment and the cultivation of a hobby as “incentive to take up...study in the camp.”³⁷ However, veterans had their own justifications for this which ranged awkwardly excusing it to seeing it as evidence of veteran cleverness. In some cases, it was the product of the simple physical realities of age. Among the camp improvements solicited by one inspector was the use of higher-wattage lightbulbs in veteran barracks since, the men claimed, “at their age, they often like to recline on cots to read,

³⁵ “Are We Worth That Amount?,” *Slidell Review* (Slidell, LA), Vol. 1 No. 14, August 6, 1935, 1; V.H. Sonderegger, “State Forester Pays Men Compliment,” *Slidell Review* (Slidell, LA), Vol. 1 No. 16, August 20, 1935, 1.

³⁶ “Phelps Vets Lose Pensions,” *Warvet* (Phelps, WI), Vol. 6, No. 2, July 3, 1939, 1; “Veterans Win Over Juniors,” *The Vet’s Gazette* (Naperville, IL), Vol. 2, No. 25, July 25, 1938, 4.

³⁷ “Educational Activities in Veteran Company 1778; Program Varies Greatly from Juniors,” *The Sound Off* (Lebanon, KS), Vol. 1, No. 1, July 26, 1935, 1.

instead of utilizing the recreation hall or library.” At other times, the veteran emphasis on the vocational was presented as a sure sign of veteran practicality. One camp working on soil conservation in Arkansas championed “on the job” training over classroom instruction on the grounds that “[m]en of mature age like to see truths demonstrated. They had rather see the lessons than hear them.” This was the sort of wisdom that veterans claimed over junior enrollees. “These Vets have had too darn much experience to be interested in a lot of theory,” the paper continued, “unless they can be shown the practical side of it by a demonstration.” Importantly, this made the veterans more committed and better suited to the mission of the CCC rather than identifying as misfits or outsiders to the program. Demonstrating the practical value of new practices was “just what the Soil Conservation Service” [was] trying to do with farmers,” so practically minded older men were exactly who was needed for the job.³⁸ Driving home this association between the men and the mission, the Arkansas camp paper had chosen *Veteran’s Soil-Saver* as its name.

This practical streak among the veteran contingent of the CCC was accompanied by a rhetorical extension of the definition of education to include non-classroom activities in which many older enrollees took pride. Many camp educational advisers looked down on the reading habits of veteran enrollees, which frequently skewed toward pulp western and crime fiction. In 1937, *The Vet’s Gazette*, a paper jointly produced by four veterans’ camps in Illinois, acknowledged the popularity of allegedly lower brow reading material, but reinterpreted it as both an unrepresentative sample and a way in which the men could be directed towards more explicitly educational fare. “Romance, mystery, [and] ‘bang-bang’ Western, are checked out along with history, sociology, travel, biography, or reference work. The usually crowded reading

³⁸ “Conference on Enrollee Education,” *Veterans’ Soil-Saver* (Magnolia, AR), Vol. 2, Nos. 9 and 10, May 15 and 31, 1937, 1.

room, facilitated by an active educational adviser, meant that men broadened their interests in conversation with one another.³⁹ The educational work “to widen the mental horizons of these men,” as an educational adviser in New Gretna, New Jersey put it, was embraced by many enrollees as the refutation of “the often expressed opinion that Veterans cannot be interested in educational activity.”⁴⁰ The same *Veteran’s Soil-Saver* which so extolled practical education also told veterans that the opinion they held of themselves as “too old to learn some new skill or acquire definite...information on some subject” was “fallacious, illogical, and deceptive.”⁴¹

Alongside frequent accusations of shirking their work duties due to either physical incapacity or general laziness, veteran enrollees were widely thought to be more directly insubordinate to their commanding officers. Although it might have been presumed that their previous service had conditioned them to obey orders, it was also understood that their military experience might have trained them in how to effectively navigate command hierarchies to minimize their own labor. According to one official investigating enrollee complaints at a camp in Gorham, New Hampshire, when commanders displayed lax enforcement of regulations, “a company of Veterans are quick to take advantage of such a condition.”⁴² However, veterans themselves asserted, and observant officials recognized, that this was at best a broad stereotype. In many instances, veteran enrollees expressed an appreciation for the regimentation and regularity of life in a camp operated by the Army, finding the familiarity and nostalgia of the experience comforting. According to an editorial in *Warvet*, the newspaper of a veterans’ camp

³⁹ “Reading,” *The Vets’ Gazette* (Naperville, IL), Vol. 1, No. 18, December 27, 1937, 2.

⁴⁰ John S. Shanley, *CCC Camp Educational Report for Camp No. S-55, Company V-2201, New Gretna, NJ*, August 30, 1940, 3, RG 35: CCC, Entry 115, Division of Investigations, Camp Inspection Reports, 1933-1942, Box 138, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

⁴¹ “Not Too Old to Learn,” *Veterans’ Soil-Saver* (Magnolia, AR), Vol. 1, Nos. 3 and 4, February 15 and 28, 1937, 1.

⁴² *Special Investigation into CCC Camp No. SP-1, Company V-392, Gorham, NH*, undated, 3, RG 35: CCC, Entry 115, Division of Investigations, Camp Inspection Reports, 1933-1942, Box 137, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

in Phelps, Wisconsin, veterans adapted to “strangeness” more quickly than others. “[Eighteen years is not such a long time,” it claimed, “and the old atmosphere of Army life comes back as rolls are called, mess calls sounded, and occasionally a uniform is seen.”⁴³ Company 372 in East Otis, Massachusetts expressed the smooth integration of new enrollees into a veteran camp with a brief salutation in 1934. “Welcome you new replacements...No introduction necessary, for you are Veterans.”⁴⁴

Many observers, sympathetic or otherwise, were quick to point out that veterans’ camps presented their commanders with challenges unknown in the rest of the CCC. The New Hampshire investigator who was wary of the veteran tendency to exploit laxity thought that such camps were the most difficult administrative challenge, as they “have many problems that are unknown in a unit of juniors, as well as all of the problems which are likely to arise” in standard camps. However, contrary to their reputation for dissolution and idleness, the investigator had to admit that the veterans had beneficially fallen back on some of their military habits. Where the commanders of standard units struggled to enforce often hated uniform regulations, these “veterans...take better care of the items issued to them than do the junior enrollees.”⁴⁵ Others, such as an inspector of camps in the CCC’s Second Corps Area, recognized this as a near universal rule. “This being a veteran company,” he wrote of a camp in upstate New York, “there is not the need, as in junior companies, to give the close inspection for dress in the mornings...In all veteran companies, with the exception of a few individuals, the men give attention to their

⁴³ “The End of the Trail,” *Warvet* (Phelps, WI), Vol. 2, No. 18, September 25, 1936, 2.

⁴⁴ “The First Section,” *The Vet* (East Otis, MA), Vol. 1 No. 2, October 26, 1934, 3.

⁴⁵ *Special Investigation into CCC Camp No. SP-1, Company V-392, Gorham, NH*, undated, 3, RG 35: CCC, Entry 115, Division of Investigations, Camp Inspection Reports, 1933-1942, Box 137, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

clothing and...shoes.”⁴⁶ Though seemingly superficial, such fastidiousness among veterans countered negative assumptions about their behavior and contributed to their overall understanding of the CCC as an organization through which they could take the best and most useful parts of their Army lives such as self-discipline, camaraderie, and idealism. Their belief that their experiences allowed them to judge other parts of the camp system as unnecessarily militarist or onerous sometimes brought them into conflict with their commanding officers, but did not demonstrate any distaste for or distance from the core mission of the CCC. As the editor of the newsletter for a veteran camp in East Otis, Massachusetts wrote in 1935, “our ‘Forest Army’” echoed “April of 1917, when the Nation had its manhood in camps training for war,” but that now they were being given “a constructive mission not only of material things but mentally and spiritually as well.”⁴⁷

One of the most consistent complaints lodged against veteran enrollees concerned their perceived disrespect for and unwillingness to serve under commanding officers who were younger than themselves and especially those who were not themselves veterans of the World War. For men like Robert Ermentrout, who served as a junior camp officer as an R.O.T.C. cadet, this was a sign of their surliness and an attempt to take advantage of potentially sympathetic fellow veterans.⁴⁸ It is undeniably true that veterans anticipated that camps would tend to operate with less friction if led by fellow war veterans. According to an official at the Veteran’s Service Office in Ashland County, Wisconsin, it was “improper...to have a non-veteran and especially a young fellow that did not participate in the World War to be placed in charge of men that have

⁴⁶ Patrick J. King, *Supplemental Report on CCC Camp No. S-129, Company V-2234, Newcombe, NY*, September 3, 1941, 2, RG 35: CCC, Entry 115, Division of Investigations, Camp Inspection Reports, 1933-1942, Box 151, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

⁴⁷ “The C.C.C.,” *The Vet* (East Otis, MA), Vol. 2, No. 5, March 8, 1935, 2.

⁴⁸ Ermentrout, *Forgotten Men*, 17.

gone through the mill.” The many complaints he had received from a nearby camp indicated to him that this was a matter of practicality rather than entitlement. Non-veteran officers “may be wonderful men personally,” but their unfamiliarity with men who had seen combat led them to unrealistic expectations as to what their enrollees could reasonably accomplish and was endangering the camp by encouraging the men to leave the CCC.⁴⁹ When veterans did use their service records to justify complaints about their commanders, they similarly stressed their commitment to the CCC as a whole. In a complaint against their commander, an anonymous group of enrollees in North Carolina identified themselves as “a group of men that has been with the camp for six years” who “strive to comply with every regulation in the Civilian Conservation Corps.” They did not reference their commanders own record but only asserted that they were not being “treated as any ex-soldier or man should be treated.”⁵⁰

For many veterans, having a fellow war veteran as a commanding officer was less about benefitting from that shared experience than ensuring a “fair deal” from camp administration. When that expectation was met to their satisfaction, veteran enrollees were likely to accept their officers regardless of experience; and when it was not, a veteran commander was as reviled as any other. War service was seen as a useful indication of fair treatment but not its guarantor. Many camp publications introduced new commanders to the enrollees by examining the new arrival’s war record. When the camp in Phelps, Wisconsin replaced its well-liked commanding officer in 1936, his replacement was given leeway by the men since he had served admirably in France. After commanding a junior company, his new position was seen as a homecoming as he

⁴⁹ Elmer F. Englund to Director of the Civilian Conservation Corps, December 12, 1939, 1, RG 35: CCC, Entry 115, Division of Investigations, Camp Inspection Reports, 1933-1942, Box 238, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

⁵⁰ Company 2340 to Robert Fechner, Director of the Civilian Conservation Corps, April 20, 1940, 1-2, RG 35: CCC, Entry 115, Division of Investigations, Camp Inspection Reports, 1933-1942, Box 160, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

was “once more among a great many of the former members of his old division,” and the camp was “still commanded by a veteran of the War, which is as it should be.”⁵¹ Many Commanders and CCC administrators quickly came to recognize veterans’ expectation of the officer-enrollee relationship, and to use it to their own advantage. One camp inspector in California, endeavoring to explain the different conditions on two veterans’ camps, attributed it to “the personality and administrative tactics” of the commanders. The commander of the superior camp in Somis, California operated under the principle that, “veterans respond to kindly treatment, just the same as most anyone else,” while his counterpart expressed what the inspector deemed a “different psychology.” The inspector noted that this was not attributable to a dislike of discipline among the enrollees or the commanders’ veteran status. He witnessed a series of veterans “administratively discharged for infraction of rules or regulations ask to shake hands with the commanding officer before leaving camp, and declare... ‘I received a square deal and am sorry,’” a circumstance he noted seeing once before in a veteran camp run by a non-veteran lieutenant.⁵²

Younger and non-veteran officers in veteran camps who were considered respectful by their enrollees often received paternal affection from their men. “They are hardworking young fellows and given responsible jobs...they almost invariably make good,” *Warvet*, editorialized. A junior officer was not to be taken advantage of, but rather empathized with and inducted into soldierly life. Their age, and the generally acknowledged reputation of veterans as “a hard lot,” meant that their tasks was in some instances more difficult and vital to the organization than the

⁵¹ “Captain Gruselle Takes Command of Co. V-1680; The New Skipper,” *Warvet* (Phelps, WI), Vol. 2, No. 5, March 10, 1935, 1.

⁵² A.W. Stockman, *Additional Remarks to Camp Inspection Report for CCC Camp No. SCS-3, Company V-1917, Somis, CA*, 1938, 5-7, RG 35: CCC, Entry 115, Division of Investigations, Camp Inspection Reports, 1933-1942, Box 31, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

senior commander's. This was even more difficult in the "semi-civilian" world of the veteran camps, where junior officers needed to train themselves as leaders but frequently disregard aspects of their training and "be good mixers, enjoying a limited comradeship with the enrollees." Pleased with their own junior officers, the Phelps Camp expressed not only the willingness to obey their orders in the CCC, but to follow them "should this gang of war horses ever again" be called to fight.⁵³ This paternalism could even enable some veterans to put up with good-natured insults from younger men they might not otherwise abide. When the son of the commander of a camp in Michigan attended a Citizen's Military Training Camp and claimed he would return "the kind of the soldier [the enrollees] never thought of being," he was welcomed back as "the six foot 3 ½ in. baby" of the company" because they admired his friendliness.⁵⁴

Competent commanders knew how to tactically deploy the pride veterans had in their own service and turn their identity from a potential liability to a way to increase their productivity. After a veteran in Wisconsin drunkenly stole a car, his commander reminded his fellow enrollee's that they had a "duty to do all that which will bring honor to the name of Veteran," and nothing which "may bring...shame or dishonor to stain the memory of those" killed in the War.⁵⁵ They also used the memory of the War to bind their men to the CCC organization itself. "In the A. E. F.," one commander in South Dakota wrote, "organizations that possessed Esprit de Corps couldn't be beaten... In the Civilian Conservation Corps there too is Esprit de Corps but more of it is needed." Each man "owes [the CCC] more than he can ever repay" for giving him the "chance to maintain his self-respect" as a veteran.⁵⁶ Some commanders

⁵³ "Subalterns and Shavetails," *Warvet* (Phelps, WI), Vol. 1, No. 14, December 10, 1935, 2.

⁵⁴ "Our Baby, Just 6 Ft. 3½ is With Us Again and is a Better Soldier," *Clear Lake Breeze* (Onaway, MI), Vol. 2, No. 12, August 9, 1935, 7.

⁵⁵ Max S. Edelstein, "The Skipper Says," *Warvet* (Phelps, WI), Vol. 1, No. 14, December 10, 1935, 3.

⁵⁶ C.T. McEniry, "Esprit de Corps," *The American Islander* (Chamberlain, SD), Vol. 2, No. 1, January 25, 1937, 2.

leaned on their own service to ingratiate themselves with their men as quickly as possible and thus extract from them better work. When Captain Frank Waggett took command of a camp in 1938, he introduced himself to the men by publishing the war diary he had kept in France in multiple issue of the company paper, *The Vet's Gazette*. The excerpts emphasized that Waggett had been an enlisted man who did his duty without being told why he must “labor and suffer,” subtly encouraging the men to follow his lead.⁵⁷ Non-veteran commanders learned to push for the same dedication through veteran paternalism when they did not have such a background on which to rely, as in the case of the young lieutenant in charge of a camp in Arroyo Grande, California whose men, an inspector noted, “having rather ‘adopted’ him, extend themselves for his benefit.”⁵⁸

Generally missing from the assertions of the practical benefits of age and experience, the explanations and defenses of veteran educational attainment, and the real, if overstated, preference for veteran commanders, were appeals to the combat or wartime service. This is not to say that the war itself, or its memory and legacy, was absent from their minds. Veteran enrollees in the CCC were, however, far more reticent about invoking it to rationalize the benefits they received through the program or to excuse any failure to meet the requirements of subsidized employment. Despite assertions “from the press [and] a section of the public” that veterans, “because of their service in the Army or Navy of the United States felt that they were entitled to the support of the government for the rest of their lives,” the North Carolina paper *Scars and Gripes* promised, their “real desire” was the same as any other American suffered in

⁵⁷ Frank G. Waggett, “A War Diary: As a Soldier Saw It,” *The Vets' Gazette* (Naperville, IL), Vol. 2, No. 23, May 28, 1938, 3.

⁵⁸ A.W. Stockman, *Camp Inspection Report for CCC Camp No. SES-2, Company V-1916, Arroyo Grande, CA*, July 31, 1935 5-7, RG 35: CCC, Entry 115, Division of Investigations, Camp Inspection Reports, 1933-1942, Box 31, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

the Depression: “a job whereby in return for an honest day's work [they] may receive sufficient pay to support [themselves] and families without benefit of charity.” The paper, which distinguished itself from other CCC papers in its near-constant push for enrollee job placement in private employment, pitched itself directly to potential employers by explicitly disavowing special claims based on status while subtly reminding them of the war. Veterans “know their war service isn’t going to count in their favor when they seek employment,” it announced. All they asked, “in all fairness, that it not count against them.”⁵⁹

Tying references to the war with the renunciation of it as form of special pleading was a common rhetorical move. One camp chaplain, himself a veteran of the A.E.F. who knew how to use his own familiarity with war to ingratiate himself with the men, perfected the maneuver. Though surrounded by “men who have served their country in war, highly honored...with valorous decorations,” he wrote, “never once have I heard any of them utter that infamous statement, ‘because I am a Veteran, I served my country in war; now it owes me a living.’”⁶⁰ Veteran enrollees used the war as proof of their normality rather than as something that distinguished them from others. Writing of the representative educational backgrounds of the men in Company 1680 in Wisconsin, the *Warvet* stressed that “[a]s veterans of the War, we are a cross section of the average man.”⁶¹ The claim of averageness was often extended to defend veterans from common charges against them, such as their susceptibility to excessive drinking. In a 1935 editorial titled “Why Do People Drink Booze?” the *Camp Hadman Weekly* in Maryville, Missouri did not mention the war or any other form of psychological trauma, but

⁵⁹ D.G. Wilson, “Captain Wilson Impressed Favorably by Veterans’ Aims,” *Scars and Gripes* (Lillington, NC), Vol. 1 No. 2, February 1, 1938, 1, 3; “A Job, A Pension, Or ???,” *Scars and Gripes* (Lillington, NC), Vol. 1 No. 4, March 1, 1938, 1-2.

⁶⁰ George C. Wood, “Effect of CCC Life on Health,” *Warvet* (Phelps, WI), Vol. 1 No. 9, September 25, 1935, 2.

⁶¹ “Education, Is It Worthwhile?,” *Warvet* (Phelps, WI), Vol. 23, No. 16-17, September 10, 1936, 2.

rather attributed it to the universal and possibly eternal problems of “egotism” and “man’s nature.”⁶² A poem reprinted in multiple veterans’ papers asked for public sympathy for alcoholic veterans, but not because their war experiences made them this way. “Men of all kinds, when they’re drinking/Misbehave, act rough, and swear/Drunken soldiers and civilians/Are disgusting anywhere.”⁶³

Clever commanders, chaplains, and educational advisors were a far likelier source of invocations of the war. Many determined that their men, however reluctant to employ its meaning on their own behalf within the CCC organization, still felt its weight as a part of their identity. It could therefore be summoned in service of the CCC. Such appeals were tempting for commanders who needed to bond with their enrollees or quickly provide them a sense of purpose or morale boost. Lieutenant Lawrence Nelson, a non-veteran Army Reserve officer in charge of a veteran camp in Spivey, Kansas linked his men’s war service with the pride he felt at their good conduct under his command. “There is no more chance of stopping this outfit now than there was in 1918,” he effused after noting the work enrollees put into improving and beautifying the camp in 1939. “[Company] 4718 will go over the top.”⁶⁴ The memory of the war was especially useful for encouraging veterans to overcome doubts about their age and any negative self-assessment that might result from it. Aware of the alleged resistance to classroom education (to which many veterans readily admitted), the commander of Company 1680 in Wisconsin closed what was an otherwise generic promotion of the educational program with a bit of rousing, veteran-specific

⁶² “Why Do People Drink Booze?,” *Camp Hadman Weekly* (Marysville, MO), Vol. 1, No. 12, April 23, 1935, 2.

⁶³ “Our Side of It,” *Camp Hadman Weekly* (Marysville, MO), Vol. 1, No. 23, July 17, 1935, 2.

⁶⁴ The gap in gravity between what was being invoked and what it was used to encourage could border on the absurd. One of Nelson’s successors, paraphrasing “the words of the soldier at Verdun: ‘they shall not pass,’” bid the enrollees to not let the upcoming year pass “without doing something to make it a happy and worthwhile year.”

rhetoric. “Put some of the spirit of 1918 into 1935,” he exhorted. “Forget your age and get busy.”⁶⁵

War memories were almost always shared in a veterans camp on Armistice and Memorial Days, but largely in ways which interpreted the war as something which drew the men of a camp together or helped bond veterans to the larger structure of the CCC. The service of veteran enrollees was often weaponized against external criticism of the Corps. When the economist Roger Babson wrote an editorial identifying CCC camps as “hotbeds of radicalism” training “a revolutionary army” of Communists, enrollees of all varieties reacted harshly. Wendell Herrick, the editor of *Clear Lake Breeze* in Onaway, Michigan, responding as “a Veteran, in a Veteran’s camp,” adopted a series of combat metaphors to defend the organization. He asked, “every true American [to] don his gas mask against these fault-finders...slip into the front line trenches, instead of the rear, and go over the top with the General.” Though he referenced veterans’ “sacrifice” in 1918, Herrick made clear that he was guarding the reputation of the CCC itself and not its veteran enrollees alone. Most of the editorial praised the Corps for its work developing “weak, pale faced, stooped shouldered” youths and extolling the benefits of forestry work on “boys of eighteen.”⁶⁶

When not used to defend the CCC from attack, references to shared military experience were far more likely to be deployed internally to encourage veterans to be better enrollees. Enrollees referenced that war to each other much like the commanders who used it to either boost morale or make their veterans feel responsible to show good behavior. The editors of *The Gully Guardian*, in Kingman, Kansas leaned on the war to boost support of the paper itself, which was in danger of folding due to a lack of circulation in the camp. “We didn’t quit 20 years

⁶⁵ Max S. Edelstein, “The Skipper Says,” *Warvet* (Phelps, WI), Vol. 1, No. 4, July 10, 1935, 3.

⁶⁶ “Says Roger Babson,” *Clear Lake Breeze* (Onaway, MI), Vol. 2, No. 10, June 1, 1935, 3.

ago,” they told their readers in 1937, “[a]re we going to now?”⁶⁷ The war was also invoked to reiterate the importance of the work in which the men were engaged and to encourage them to do it as safely as possible. The cover of the July 1939 *Park Creek Crier* equated military service and the company’s firefighting work. Alongside a quote from *American Forests* magazine stating that “forest fires...are fought like wars – on the firing line,” two black and white illustrations juxtaposed doughboys going over the top of a trench into the haze of battle with enrollees silhouetted against raging flames. The men, finding themselves, “on the line again” were exhorted that they “MUST PROTECT THE FOREST.”⁶⁸

They used the war and their experiences of military life to characterize themselves as suited to the requirements of the CCC, such as frequent orders to transfer camps to new locales, the physical dangers of manual labor, and the enforced isolation from friends and family, in ways that junior enrollees might not be. While many companies struggled with the common CCC practice of moving entire camps to new locations as necessity dictated, the *Warvet* claimed that being in a “vagabond company” simply made their “feet itch for the new trail,” since “as veterans, old in the Service, they await the command, “FORWARD!”⁶⁹ War references and iconography were repurposed alternately to remind the veterans of the relative ease of their current enlistments and to stress the real dangers of CCC enrollment. The *Fullersburg Grit* of Fullersburg, Illinois satirically reminded veterans that “the World War was quite some brawl [do not] forget the battle of the CCC” even if most of its “wounds are to the pride and feelings.”⁷⁰ This was belied by the real dangers of CCC life, as *Life Begins at 40* captured in a cartoon which depicted the plain white cross that adorned countless American graves in Europe but repurposed

⁶⁷ “Notice to All Barracks,” *The Gully Guardian* (Kingman, KS), Vol. 2, No. 8, February 1938, 4.

⁶⁸ “WE MUST PROTECT THE FOREST,” *Park Creek Crier* (Deadwood, SD), Vol. 4, No. 7, July 21, 1939, i.

⁶⁹ “CO. V-3638 Prepares for Rainbow Trail,” *Warvet* (Phelps, WI), Vol. 1, No. 3, June 25, 1935, 1.

⁷⁰ R. Hall, “Wound Stripes,” *Fullersburg Grit* (Fullersburg, IL), Vol. 1 No. 2, June 26, 1936, 2.

to warn of the dangers of unsafe driving around camp, with a caption stating “War is bad, but so it this.”⁷¹

Much of the commendation for the CCC among veteran enrollees made no mention of the war or veteran status at all. An editorial in *The Chanticleer* of Huron, South Dakota, was typical of the sentiment found in veteran camps across the country when it called the Corps, “one of the greatest organizations ever created” based on its dam building, tree planting, erosion control efforts and its “equally important” work in “conserving the youth of America.”⁷² Across the state in Deadwood, South Dakota, the *Park Creek Crier* lauded the camps for improving national defense based solely on the positive influence it exerted exclusively on “young men,”⁷³ possibly indicating that the larger public association between the CCC and young men had filtered down to veterans, some of whom seemed aware that they were considered peripheral to the program by its architects.

Even when veterans maintained the rhetorical distance between themselves and the juniors, they praised the CCC as something valuable to all enrollees regardless of age. One veteran poet in a Michigan camp specifically praised the egalitarianism of the “helping hand” offered by “the heads of the CCC” in a poem of thanks. “It’s for your best, both young and old/They’re for you too, you see,” he wrote, “For youth there’s work and discipline/For old their trade long learned/They do their best for everyone/A boost for all concerned.”⁷⁴

Both the architects of the Civilian Conservation Corps, who segregated the camps to limit the negative influence they presumed veterans would exert over younger men, as well as historians of the organization, who have assumed that this segregation instantiated an actual

⁷¹ “SAFETY,” *Life Begins at 40* (Kingman, KS), Vol. 5 No. 9, September 1939, 27.

⁷² “Editorial,” *The Chanticleer* (Huron, SD), Vol. 2 No. 4, April 1939, 2.

⁷³ “CCC in National Defense,” *Park Creek Crier* (Deadwood, SD), Vol. 6 No. 2, February 28, 1941, 11-12.

⁷⁴ Herrick, A.G., “To the Heads of the CCC,” *Clear Lake Breeze* (Onaway, MI), Vol. 2, No. 12, August 9, 1935, 1.

divergence of interests and priorities between veteran and junior enrollees, misread the relationship between the two groups. For one example, the boundary between the two sorts of camps was more porous in reality than observers then or now have acknowledged. While it has been noted previously that veteran enrollees could only serve in limited and specific roles in junior camp administration, such as mess steward or as company overhead, in practice, they crossed paths with juniors in multiple other contexts as well. Junior camps were also assigned up to eight so-called “local experienced men” (LEMs) to ease tensions between camps and “local, unemployed laborers, who were hired...to show ‘green’ enrollees how to work,” and who, authorities feared, would resent “the importation of youths to work in areas the foresters considered their own.”⁷⁵ Though universally treated as one of three distinct “non-standard” enrollee designations alongside veterans and Native Americans, veteran enrollees would occasionally transfer to junior camps as LEMs, sometimes based on woodcraft skills they had only obtained through the CCC as “green” recruits themselves.

Veteran and junior enrollees also came into contact with each other within the normal operations of their nominally isolated camps. As noted above, intercamp athletic competition was not limited to one sort of enrollment or another and offered veterans the prospect of demonstrating their fitness against younger competition.⁷⁶ Their conservation work, “modified to suit their age and physical condition,” presented a similar opportunity. Many veterans, like those of Company 1676 in Grandview, Wisconsin, who, though, “not required to do as much work on planting and scalping⁷⁷ as the Juniors,” took pride that there was no “difference in the numbers

⁷⁵ Maher, *Nature's New Deal*, 148.

⁷⁶ Education presented a similar opportunity for comparison against junior enrollees when the physical proved untenable. One camp commander recommended his veterans devote themselves to academic work since “we, as veterans, are getting to the age when we can’t compete with younger men at manual labor.” Louis C. Hutton. “From the C.O.,” *Park Creek Crier* (Deadwood, SD), Vol. 2, No. 15, December 17, 1937, 2.

⁷⁷ Scalping refers to a technique in the practice of reforestation wherein sod and topsoil are removed from a patch of ground to eliminate competing vegetation before a tree seedling is planted.

of scalps made.”⁷⁸ The work occasionally required their joint effort. Veterans embraced these as moments to exhibit both their “loyalty” to the mission they shared with juniors and their continuing vitality. In an emergency, wrote a Georgia enrollee, the veteran “will come; cheerfully stumbling over the hills, fighting like the hero that he is,” afterwards “drag[ging] his tired limbs back to Camp praising the fast-stepping juniors for their cooperation.”⁷⁹ In these instances, war memories served to bring veterans and juniors closer together rather than increase the social distance between them. When a volunteer detachment of veterans helped a junior camp in Neodesha, Kansas respond to a flood in 1937, “the boys appear[ed] very young and eager for war tales,” though in this case the men “were too tired to unlimber any real war dope.”⁸⁰ In easier circumstances, as when a veteran company in Louisiana spent the night with the “youngsters” of a junior camp, and “spent a good part of. the night speiling (sic) yarns to them.”⁸¹

Veteran camp papers urged their readers to use their age and experience to empathize with their junior counterparts and the assist them in their own work. Veterans sought to conduct themselves as positive examples for juniors rather than as the cautionary tales the CCC feared them to be. Upon receiving a Flag of Merit from their Forestry District, Company 1670 at Camp Presque Isle in Michigan crowed that it was “very fitting that the men who once led in war are now leading in peace,” but explained that their goal was “building morale” not only in themselves, but “in the young men of the Junior C.C.C. camps” as well. As older men with varied career experience and an understanding of managing home and family, the paper added in

⁷⁸ Salmond, *The Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942*, 37; William P. Hammon, *Camp Inspection Report for CCC Camp No. F-36, Company V-1676, Grandview, WI*, October 13, 1936, 2, RG 35: CCC, Entry 115, Division of Investigations, Camp Inspection Reports, 1933-1942, Box 151, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

⁷⁹ Jim McGhee, “Idiotorial,” *Ward Creek Veterans News* (Dahlonaga, GA), Vol. 1, No. 17, May 30, 1936, 1,5.

⁸⁰ “Volunteers Return to Camp,” *The Gully Guardian* (Kingman, KS), Vol. 1, No. 8, February 1937, 2.

⁸¹ J.A. Puleston, “What the New Members of Company 2428 Missed,” *Slidell Review* (Slidell, LA), Vol. 1 No. 1, April 9, 1935, 1.

a later editorial, “a camp of the veteran’s kind should be the best in every part of the country,” working at “creating new opportunities for...the junior, in all walks of life.”⁸²

The ominous prospect of another war in the near future further solidified veteran identification with junior enrollees and the CCC as a whole. A 1936 editorial in *Company 1680’s Warvet* hailed the younger men as “the future leaders of our country.” The writer empathized with them as potential future veterans. “We of the Veterans’ C.C.C. might just as well look into a mirror as to look at these boys,” who might be called to “march away as the veterans did in 1917-18,” he wrote. Labor in nature in the CCC – “our youngest Army...organized not to tear down, but to build up” – brought them up to the standard of the veterans by preparing them for war. “[W]orking all day in the blistering sun, bare to the waist, or out in the bitter cold,” he promised, “will come to their rescue.” Enrollees who did leave the CCC for military service, a move attributed to having grown fond of “the camp life and the good fellowship” they discovered in the “Junior CCC,” another *Warvet* article thought them “men whose names will some day be known in every household, as Sergeant York and men of a like caliber.”⁸³

While the traumatic experience of the First World War helped bridge the gap between veteran and junior enrollees, the more persistent divide between the two was their familial status. Married enrollees considered their position as the heads of households as crucial to their identity as their military experience. Accepting public assistance denoted a deficiency of masculinity among them that even those who had proven themselves in combat felt the need to neutralize.⁸⁴

⁸² “Veterans Win Top in CCC Education Most Able Workers,” *Clear Lake Breeze* (Onaway, MI), Vol. 2, No. 12, August 9, 1935, 1-2; “Work of Veterans Camp Proving Real Value,” *Clear Lake Breeze* (Onaway, MI), Vol. 3, No. 2, March 1936, 6.

⁸³ “The Army and Navy Forever: The Boast of the Red, White and Blue,” *Warvet* (Phelps, WI), Vol. 3, No. 2, March 10, 1937, 2.

⁸⁴ Life in the CCC put veteran enrollees in an ambiguous position as welfare recipients. On the one hand, as the heads of households, they met the gendered familial expectations of the ideal conduit for government aid. See especially Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the*

“We of the Veterans CCC are not here from choice,” one veteran paper announced. “We are, for the most part, family men and would prefer to be home with our families.”⁸⁵ Despite showing consistent support and gratitude for the CCC, veterans often felt compelled to assert their preference for family life. As a camp poet in Michigan put it, “the CCC is great for boys...who have no regrets/Of leaving the city and its noise,” while veterans thought only of “the little home/Their wives and the kiddies dear.”⁸⁶ Whereas veterans frequently referenced war related disabilities as proof of the impressiveness of their conservation work, their family lives were more likely to be recognized as sources of difficulty. The commander of Company 1668 in Illinois claimed that the average Veteran in the three C's has bettered himself” and that it was only “[t]hose Veterans who have families [that] are without doubt having a hard time to make ends meet.”⁸⁷ Veterans used their need to support families to respond to the recurrent accusation that they were likelier to remain on the government payroll longer than younger men. In the CCC, veterans saw themselves not as receiving a special dispensation by their exemption from the requirement of being single, but as facing an additional burden to that of older men on other forms of public relief. “These men are at home with their families,” wrote one Kansas veteran “while the Veteran is many miles from his home” and the prospects of local employment. “With

Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th Century America (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001). However, as noted by historian Margot Canaday, the CCC's primary association with younger men built up certain public expectations about its function. Canaday argues that it was the overt militarism of the CCC, its creation of “the (false) impression that enrollees were soldiers-in-training rather than relievers,” which helped justify its stable and lauded place in public discourse. As men whose soldiering days were behind them, and who consistently took public anti-war stances based on their combat experiences, veteran enrollees remain suspect. Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 91-95, 117-123. Furthermore, the double injury of war trauma and economic immiseration implied another gendered argument against their fitness and deservedness. As Elaine Showalter argues, shell shock had once been interpreted by psychologists as a sign of cowardice or effeminacy. Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 172.

⁸⁵ “The End of the Trail,” *Warvet* (Phelps, WI), Vol. 3, No. 3, March 25, 1937, 2.

⁸⁶ Earl C. Woodring, “To the Vets,” *Clear Lake Breeze* (Onaway, MI), Vol. 2, No. 7, April 5, 1935, 4.

⁸⁷ Earl B. Barkley, “A Word of Advice,” *The Fullersburg Grit* (Fullersburg, IL), Vol. 1, No. 2, April 1936, 7.

a family depending on him,” he concluded, “the Veteran hesitates to leave a camp until he is assured of a form of livelihood.”⁸⁸

The needs of family members allowed veteran enrollees to argue the CCC employment was a stopgap measure about which the public did not need to feel worried. A veteran, disabled or otherwise, might always use that status to demand priority in welfare spending, but the head of a household merely had to be restored to his previous position. Veterans had accepted “their present condition being a part of the welfare program...as a temporary measure,” wrote a Georgia enrollee in 1936. However, he assured his readers that their ultimate goal was to “find the place where Happiness dwells - a place where the fire on the hearth burns brightly, where there is heard the laughter of happy children...where ‘Dad’ is King and Mother is Queen in their own domain, where love abounds - that is Home.”⁸⁹ Veteran enrollees and their wives lauded the salutary nature of the CCC on their lives while simultaneously stressing the undesirability of the seemingly unnatural arrangements put on their homes and marriages by the Depression and the need to accept assistance. Veterans told of wives who had managed farms, brought in crops, hired help, and worked in mills and offices to “supplement...that \$25 allotment check we send home each month.” The acceptance of welfare was recast as an act of love and sacrifice that went beyond what a family normally should endure. “I consider the truest of true love,” one enrollee reported, “for a girl to marry a man while he was still a member of the CCC’s.”⁹⁰ The wife of a Missouri enrollee confirmed the hardship in her “Lament of the Wife of a CCC Vet,” wherein

⁸⁸ “Rehabilitation of the Veteran,” *The Sound Off* (Lebanon, KS), Vol. 1 No. 2, September 3, 1935, 2.

⁸⁹ “Happiness,” *The Slidell Review* (Slidell, LA), Vol. 1 No. 4, May 14, 1935, 2.

⁹⁰ “The Girl I Left Behind,” *The Ward Creek Veterans News* (Dahlgonega, GA), Vol. 1, No. 14, January 31, 1936, 4.

she described how the organization had improved her husband “in brain and brawn,” but that the separation had made “a wreck of me.”⁹¹

The appeal to the importance of home and family proved a useful rhetorical device for veteran enrollees. It helped alleviate the cultural degradation implicit in accepting public assistance. Men with wives and children were plausibly able to claim that CCC employment was temporary expedient taken on behalf of their dependents due to the circumstances of the Depression for which they repeatedly denied any blame. Louisiana enrollee Ralph Roland explained in 1938, that he had joined the CCC “to earn a living for my wife, two babies [and] my aged father-in-law” as he was “but one of the many World War Veterans who are in the CCC because of an economic collapse for which I claim no responsibility.”⁹² It also allowed them to lay a claim on these benefits in a way that did not rely on their military service, which threatened to alienate them from other Americans. By portraying their expectations for the CCC as something any citizen might desire, they disavowed any superior preference. While the notion that junior enrollees were potential future veterans was widespread, the much more certain guarantee that many would become husbands and fathers meant that even the most overt enrollment exception received by the veterans did not fully isolate them from their younger counterparts.

Each of the major categories which seemingly served to sequester the veteran contingent from the remainder of the CCC—advanced age, marital status, military service, physical infirmity—was reimagined by those veterans as a way to integrate themselves into the organization and to uphold its purpose and ideals. In different circumstances, this took the form

⁹¹ Mrs. S.A. Stiers, “Lament of the Wife of a CCC Vet,” *The Camp Cutting Comet* (Blue Springs, MO), Vol. 1, No. 5, February 1937, 9.

⁹² Ralph O. Roland, “The Reason I am a Member of CCC Camp,” *The Slidell Review* (Slidell, LA), Vol. 1 No. 17, September 3, 1935, 1.

of justifications for veteran involvement, devotion to the use their age and experience to assist the development of junior enrollees, lavish praise for the organization's significant beneficial effects on the nation's environment and support for its political position without reference to its benefits for veterans, enthusiasm for the education program (as adapted to suit individual needs), and assurances of political reliability to discount the perceived threat of social unrest stemming from veteran anger about the Bonus issue. Without denying the many differences between themselves and younger enrollees, veterans actively rejected the idea that CCC employment served as the repayment of some government debt to former soldiers and renounced any preferential treatment based on their service beyond the exceptions to CCC enrollment guidelines that permitted them to join. Veterans likened their needs to those of the juniors, who were thought to be going through the same difficulties of unemployment, poor health, and needy dependents with only a minor variation in the causes and details of their misfortune.

They also asserted, contrary to the assumptions of the administrators of the CCC and many of its later historians, that the benefits which flowed from the work they did in the CCC was indistinguishable from those enjoyed by younger men and that they were equally meaningful to both sets of enrollees and the nation as a whole. For the youth that the CCC was intended to "conserve," life in the CCC was primarily understood as a process of "transformation." As Neil Maher summarized the common estimation of the organization's results, "CCC work in nature transformed thin, shy boys into healthier more self-assured men." This "transformation" took many forms, from physical and mental improvement and an introduction to new ideas, people, and environments, to the integration of immigrants, increased enrollee political engagement, and the broadening and strengthening of the goals of the New Deal and American conservation

politics.⁹³ The absence of the veteran from almost all studies of the CCC seemingly lends credence to the accusation, common in the 1930s, that veterans entered the CCC to bide time until their economic fortunes improved and they could return to their previous lives unchanged; their age presumably making the “transformations” achieved in junior camps unlikely or impossible.

However, veteran enrollees put forth their own metaphor to characterize what they were achieving in the CCC: rehabilitation. For older enrollees, rehabilitation was a capacious idea. It simultaneously strengthened their arguments justifying their inclusion in the program and made their employment the restoration of their bodies to prewar fitness rather than another bonus payment; it clearly carried significant weight for war veterans while also remaining similar enough to the idea of transformation to yoke the experiences of veterans and juniors in the CCC together; and it furthered a potent symbol connection between veterans and the labor in nature that was the heart of the CCC’s public purpose. Rehabilitation drew together the men and the mission. It helped the veterans reject any notion of their own peripherality to the organization.

By framing their participation in the CCC as a program of mass veteran rehabilitation, older men were able to acknowledge that they were attempting to win back something they had previously lost while constantly mirroring the improvements in health and attitude among junior enrollees which made the CCC such a popular program among the American public. Administrators and junior enrollees alike trumpeted the physical benefits of manual labor in nature. Public anxiety about underweight and malnourished young men was addressed by reference to all of the weight that sickly boys put on in the camps. Enrollees and the CCC often noted that these boys were receiving proper meals and exercise, “for the first time.” While it was

⁹³ Maher, *Nature’s New Deal*, 77-113.

rare for Americans to express nearly so much concern about underfed, middle-aged veterans, the veterans themselves noticed and promoted the same changes; all that was necessary to make these similar claims more plausible was to call them a return, that than an introduction, to health. Other than the monthly remittance that provided for his family, improved health was primary benefit veterans credited to enrollment. Writing in the third person, former Marine in a Louisiana camp, Henri Eglise, held that “the CCC working and living conditions in general has restored his health,” resulting in “a gain in avoirdupois of about forty pounds.” Where juniors could attribute their poor condition to the Depression, the veterans added the War as a cause. While the Depression had not been kind to Eglise, he attributed most of his problems to “his health having been impaired during the World War.”⁹⁴ Crucially, physical rehabilitation and transformation were both thought to be accomplished by the work in nature that both sets of enrollees undertook. “Outdoor work and its healthful effects on the human,” an observer at a veteran camp in North Carolina noted in 1938, were evident in young and old enrollees alike. It might have “not been as spectacular among the older members as among the younger men,” he admitted, but still credited with better health among enrolled veterans than either unenrolled veterans or even older civilians.⁹⁵

References to rehabilitation were as adaptable to different aspects of veteran camp life as were those which younger enrollees made to their transformations. Both the vocational training and more academic educational programs in veteran camps were pushed by administrators and enrollees in this way. Educational Advisors in veteran camps in West Virginia, New Jersey, New York, and Washington explicitly referred to rehabilitation as “the primary feature of our camp

⁹⁴ Henri Eglise, “How the C.C.C. Has Benefitted a Former U.S. Marine,” *The Slidell Review* (Slidell, LA), Vol. 1 No. 22, January 14, 1936, 2.

⁹⁵ D.G. Wilson, “Captain Wilson Impressed Favorably by Veterans’ Aims,” *Scars and Gripes* (Lillington, NC), Vol. 1 No. 2, February 1, 1938, 1, 3.

program.” Others used to terms such as restoration or reintegration, but nearly all followed one New Jersey advisor in framing education as the improvement of “the psychological and moral” aspects of the men’s lives, something distinctly beyond mere job training.⁹⁶ By implying that veterans sought to recover, as CCC Assistant Director Charles Taylor phrased it in 1938, “the, social and economic status which they formerly occupied, but from which they were displaced by economic plight,” the language of rehabilitation allowed veterans to singularize themselves and their experiences while maintaining the plausible disavowal of politically suspect special pleading.⁹⁷ According to an editorial in *The Sound Off* of Company 1778 in Lebanon, Kansas titled “Rehabilitation of the Veteran,” job training was the preference among the men not because it constituted “any special favors in, the matter of rehabilitation,” but merely as “an opportunity for re-employment, a chance to live as everyone desires to live.”⁹⁸ Rehabilitation was even a tool to encourage men to embrace non-practical education opportunities. The *Slidell Review* in Louisiana urged enrollees to take advantage of the camp library solely for its “stimulating effect on the mind, which – to the Veterans of the World War – is in itself a rehabilitating measure.”⁹⁹

Among the most common changes which junior enrollees identified within themselves as a result of their work in the CCC was a blossoming awareness and knowledge of the natural world and the sometimes unfamiliar ecologies to which their service introduced them. Despite the occasional assumptions by commanders and administrators, admittedly confirmed by some veterans, that older men had less affinity for the natural world, many veterans similarly embraced

⁹⁶ Rocco J. Montani, *CCC Camp Educational Report for Camp No. CP-2, Company V-2224, Rahway, NJ*, August 22, 1940, 1, RG 35: CCC, Entry 115, Division of Investigations, Camp Inspection Reports, 1933-1942, Box 137, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

⁹⁷ Charles H. Taylor, “Get New Hold,” *The Vet’s Gazette* (Naperville, IL), Vol. 2 No. 22, April 29, 1935, 3.

⁹⁸ “Rehabilitation of the Veteran,” *The Sound Off* (Lebanon, KS), Vol. 1 No. 2, September 3, 1935, 2.

⁹⁹ “Camp Library,” *Slidell Review* (Slidell, LA), Vol. 1 No. 14, August 6, 1935, 2.

the opportunity presented by the CCC to strengthen their emotional and political links to the natural environment. Rehabilitation played a role in this process as it did in their understanding of their physical convalescence and the educational achievements. Veterans could intuitively connect the act of positively modifying the natural environment to their own personal growth.

One Michigan veteran, who entered the CCC “all hopelessness and despair,” performed a representative version of this rhetorical move in *Clear Lake Breeze* in 1935. He reported that the process of laboring to make their pine forest camp site livable “regimented me mentally, physically, and spiritually...I have learned to appreciate what Thoreau calls “the beneficence of Nature.”¹⁰⁰ George Wood, a veteran camp surgeon in Wisconsin, thought that “[n]atural outdoor life has done more for the veteran than all the previous [veterans] legislation combined.” Aware that the reconstructive conservation work of the CCC was one of the most popular aspects of the program with the public, Wood promoted the camps’ effects on its enrollees by drawing a direct comparison between the two. “[T]here is even greater restoration among these men in their moral and physical being” he concluded, “than in the restoration of the woods and soil which is an undisputed known fact of what they are accomplishing.”¹⁰¹

Enrollees at camps engaged in soil conservation work and tree planting were particularly drawn to this metaphorical link between environmental health and their own, but similar arguments were made by veterans working in fire prevention, trail building, fish stock hatching, and game bird propagation. As was true of their junior enrollee counterparts, veterans learned to think of themselves as a natural resource and their rehabilitation as a form of conservation.

Writing in *The Lake Minatare Breeze* in 1939, a Nebraska veteran directly associated the

¹⁰⁰ “A Story of Christmas and a Vet. Reclaimed,” *Clear Lake Breeze* (Atlanta, MI), Vol. 2 No. 14, December 1935, 1, 8.

¹⁰¹ George C. Wood, “Effect of CCC Life on Health,” *Warvet* (Phelps, WI), Vol. 1 No. 9, September 25, 1935, 2.

democratic principles for which he had fought in Europe with the restoration of veteran bodies and thence to the restoration of American nature. He encouraged his fellow veterans to vote, noting that many states did not protect those too disabled to work, before stating that “[i]n the CCC we are engaged in furthering conservation and adequate utilization of natural resources. But in a broader sense ‘natural resources’ includes very definitely human life and happiness.”¹⁰² The veterans of Company 2759 saw their work as positive for their historical reputation and the public’s enjoyment of nature. By focusing on introducing Chukar, a European game bird, to South Dakota, “the Veterans of Park Creek Camp” would “be remembered as the men who supplied the answer to a much felt need long after the camp itself has passed into oblivion.”¹⁰³

All of the attention paid to the possibilities for personal growth and rehabilitation presented by life in the CCC attuned enrollees to their surroundings. It was not necessarily enough to do work in the outdoors in order to rehabilitate oneself. The surrounding environment needed to be conducive to recovery. When Veteran Company 1827 was moved from Meridian State Park in central Texas to Huntsville in the east of the state, the enrollees announced their appreciation at being “ideally located, with a swell batch of pine trees all around the camp,” a far cry from the previous site they called “the rocks of Meridian.” There may have been some resentment at the fact that they had spent their time in a less-than-ideal campsite “making scenery,” in the form of the new park that would be enjoyed by the public and not by themselves.¹⁰⁴ Despite the assurance of one company, referenced earlier, that veterans were always willing to embrace new campsites, this was not always the case when it meant moving to

¹⁰² Milford Flood, “Editorial,” *The Lake Minatare Breeze* (Minatare, NB), Vol. 5 No. 4, March 1939, 2.

¹⁰³ “A Monument to Park Creek Veterans?,” *Park Creek Crier* (Deadwood, SD), Vol. 3, No. 2, February 13, 1938, 2.

¹⁰⁴ Newspaper Fragments, December 8, 1934 and undated, RG 35: CCC, Entry 115, Division of Investigations, Camp Inspection Reports, 1933-1942, Box 211, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

surroundings that the men did not feel promised to aid their health. Upon being moved from a flat site to a steep hillside, a South Dakota camp testified that the change “was received with a tremendous lack of enthusiasm by all and sundry,” both because the “grades in camp are stiff on us ol’ timers,” and because they had already “put seven long years of improvement into [their previous] home.”¹⁰⁵

For the most part, however, camp enrollees tended to embrace CCC camps as places well-suited to the improvement of their mental and physical conditions. When they found themselves comfortably situated, enrollees quickly grew attached to their surroundings and were likely to praise it for its beauty and healthfulness in equal measure. Percy Hickox, a camp chaplain and war veteran in western Massachusetts advised his men to consider it compensation for all their travails for the War to the Depression that they were stationed “in these healthy Berkshire hills,” which, in combination with regular food and work and “the comradeship of kindred souls,” had left them “younger in spirit and more hopeful for the future.”¹⁰⁶ A camp commander in Oregon tied this appreciation for wholesome nature directly to memories of the war. On Armistice Day, 1935 he directed his men to take that day as a chance to reflect on the good fortune of their environment. “Stop and consider [the] temperature in other parts of the nation, as well as earthquakes and hurricanes.”¹⁰⁷ The reference to hurricanes was not coincidental. Veterans were consistently aware of environmental threats to their camps after the 1935 Labor Day hurricane devastated the Florida Keys. The storm killed dozens of veterans stationed at a Federal Emergency Relief Administration work camp on Lower Matecumbe Key. An American Legion report on the incident excoriated the government for sending the men “to a

¹⁰⁵ “We Occupy Our New Home at Este,” *The Este Ripples* (Roubaix, SD), Vol. 1 No. 1, August 1941, 1.

¹⁰⁶ Percy M. Hickox, “A Column by the Chaplain,” *The Vet* (East Otis, MA), Vol. 2 No. 14, July 26, 1935, 10-11.

¹⁰⁷ C.A. Hebert, “From the Company Commander,” *The Vets’ Squawker* (Sublimity, OR), Vol. 1, No. 3, November 13, 1935, 2.

wilderness in the high-seas on a so called ‘rehabilitation program,’” but veterans CCC camps, some of which took in hurricane survivors as enrollees, continued to support the rehabilitative promise of work in nature.¹⁰⁸

The access that veterans maintained to rehabilitative nature through their work for the CCC was something they considered a valuable privilege. James Walters, a veteran enrollee in Illinois, cited “outdoor exercise” through his work with the 47 pounds he gained in the first 10 months of his enrollment, before equating his own manual labor with recreation. “Wealthy people pay a lot of money,” he argued “for the stooping over exercises we do out here and get paid for.”¹⁰⁹ Numerous other camp papers promoted the idea that they were fortunate to be situated in naturally beautiful and healthful locations and compared their time in them to vacations, with one Missouri enrollee going as far as to compare his camp favorably to a “country club” but blessed with an egalitarianism due to their shared age and military experience.¹¹⁰

Once out of the CCC, some enrollees continued to show an affinity for nature, coupled with the regret that they could no longer enjoy it as easily without the subsidy of government employment. One South Dakota enrollee, discharged to seek work in California, wrote his former campmates describing his journey. Most of the letter was devoted to recounting the natural beauty of the drive. Of his stop at Yellowstone National Park, he wrote that he and his family wished “to spend a week or more there but the munificent salary Uncle had been paying me for the last four forbade it.”¹¹¹ Through their enrollments veterans became more aware of and

¹⁰⁸ Quimby Melton, “Report of Special Investigation Committee, Florida Hurricane Disaster to National Executive Committee, the American Legion,” November 1, 1935, 6.

¹⁰⁹ James Walter, “Praises CCC,” *The Fullersburg Grit* (Fullersburg, IL), Vol. 1, No. 2, April 1936, 14.

¹¹⁰ Granville H. Poots, “Appreciation,” *The Camp Cutting Comet* (Blue Springs, MO), Vol. 2, No. 4, January 1938, 2.

¹¹¹ Leif Dahl to Al Sampont, September 28, 1937, printed in *Park Creek Crier* (Deadwood, SD), Vol. 2, No. 13, October 26, 1937, 2.

involved in conservation as a political ideal, just as the junior did. This could even cause them to question certain parts of their own work. Though many veterans at the CCC camp in Deadwood, South Dakota took pride in the trails, fire roads, campgrounds, and telephone lines for which they were responsible, the company clerk of the camp had come to think of this as a process of “replacing the deer and grouse and Nature as it was” with “civilization with its empty tin cans and bottles.”¹¹²

Despite the obvious pride veteran enrollees took in their service to their country and the value of their later conservation work, they chose to almost completely disaggregate one from the other. Veterans in the CCC seem not to have believed that their military backgrounds either entitled or connected them to nature and its acknowledged healing properties in any way that was not just as applicable to junior enrollees or other non-veteran Americans. As we have seen, most veteran enrollees were hardly apathetic towards the natural environment, nor were they dismissive or doubtful of its rehabilitative potential. Nature poetry crowded the pages of many veteran camp papers, and such verses never seemed to mix with those which tried to explain the men’s feelings of their experiences as veterans. While the destruction and mud of European battlefields made their appearances, poetry about nature in camps did not even invoke such images as comparisons. More representative was the poem of Michigan enrollee Walter Gilmore, who found that in camp, “Nature was busy with color/ It painted a wonderful scene,” before turning to praise its impartial accessibility. Approaching camp, he “offered a silent prayer/For God's great gift of Nature/That Rich and Poor can share.”¹¹³ Veterans used nature and the gifts offered by labor within its restorative confines to pull them closer to juniors rather than pry them apart with proprietary claims based on age or service. Work in nature was, in fact, a way to bring

¹¹² “History of the Company,” *Park Creek Crier* (Deadwood, SD), Vol. 4, No. 4, April 29, 1939, 14-16.

¹¹³ Walter Gilmore, “Our Poet Laureate of No. 3,” *Clear Lake Breeze* (Onaway, MI), Vol. 2 No. 7, April 5, 1935, 2.

civilians closer to that ideal of service to which the older men clung. Upon the opening of a new enrollment period in 1935 one veteran paper ran through the many accomplishments of the CCC in farmland restoration and forest conservation and attributed responsibility for these widely. It was true that men, “who have not forgotten the smell of powder in 1918” had joined, but added that “[b]oys, away from home for the first time, have been the heroes of these exploits.”¹¹⁴

Veterans might claim a more intuitive understanding of the more mystical or romantic patriotic associations of soil and nation or claim that the Army had given them skills of perseverance or adaptability which enabled them to thrive in nature but never asserted that the benefits they derived from these encounters could not be acquired by others. The clearest articulation of the veterans’ ecumenical understanding of restorative nature was presented in a remarkable 1935 editorial in *Warvet*, entitled “Veterans and Nature,” which proposed to “see what nature has done for the man” as a change from all the attention paid to the good the CCC had done for nature. After characterizing the Depression itself as a force of nature – “a bank of fog, enveloping every town and hamlet in its course” – and crediting the wisdom of President Roosevelt in creating the Corps, the anonymous writer listed all the familiar benefits of life in the CCC and attributed them to nature itself. “Fresh air, sunshine, clean living, good food, and recreation, have put,” the men, he wrote, “in the best condition they have known for years.” It had also heralded a transformation in their emotional relationship to the natural world. Men who had once come to the forest “only to destroy,” and had only known deer through “the sights of a rifle, and at a distance,” had now “made friends of the birds and beasts of the forests.” This was, he thought, more easily done by veterans, who found in the camps “a taste of the old life they were used to,” and who “were fighters” with a “new battle to fight, against the elements, wind,

¹¹⁴ “New Enrollment Period,” *Warvet* (Phelps, WI), Vol. 1 No. 8, September 10, 1935, 3.

rain, and fire.” Boys may have found it “a strange experience,” but, critically, they could be trained to the same appreciation and renewal in nature. Juniors faced the absence of their home lives as acutely as veterans, and it was this dislocation, rather than any lingering trauma or injury related to combat that the CCC and nature addressed.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ “Veterans and Nature,” *Warvet* (Phelps, WI), Vol. 1 No. 8, September 10, 1935, 2.

Chapter 4: War as Though it Were a Sport: the 10th Mountain Division and Combat, Recreation, and Conservation in War and Peace

At the end of the Second World War, George Orwell famously wrote that high-level athletics, driven by “hatred, jealousy, boastfulness...and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence,” was at its core, “war minus the shooting.” By inflaming nationalistic passions, international competitions constituted a form of “mimic warfare.”¹ The connection between sport and war was most evident in the Olympic Games even before Orwell’s formulation. Aside from the obvious implications of pitting athletes against one another by nationality, many of the events themselves were recreational adaptations of military training exercises frequently contested by active or reserve military officers. These martial connotations, less overt than they have been since the end of World War II, were revived for American viewers of the 2026 Olympic Games held in Milan and Cortina d’Ampezzo, Italy. In collaboration with the U.S. Ski and Snowboard, the U.S. Army’s 10th Mountain Division produced a series of advertisements retelling the unit’s role in the liberation of Italy during the Second World War and highlighting both its role in transforming elite-level downhill and cross-country skiers into soldiers and the contribution of many of its veterans to the development of the American winter sports industry after 1945. The 10th Mountain had inverted Orwell’s association of combat and sport before he had even made it. “They look at the war as though it was a sport,” a still-dazed German soldier continued repeating after being captured by the Division at the Battle of Riva Ridge in 1945. “They are not tired at all. It’s all a sport with them.”²

¹ George Orwell, “The Sporting Spirit,” *Tribune*, December 14, 1945, 10; See further, Peter J. Beck, “War Minus the Shooting: George Orwell on International Sport and the Olympics,” in *Sport in History*, Vol. 33 No. 1, (January 2013), 72-94.

² George Barrett, “Mountain Fighter in Combat,” *Yank*, March 16, 1945, David Ross Brower Papers, Oversized Box 3, Folder 3, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

Obscured in the neat iteration of the unit's history presented in the ads is a more contentious narrative. It is accurate and commonly noted in the telling of this story that the development of both soldiers and athletes is substantially influenced by environmental conditions, a link captured in one of the commercials jointly produced by the Army and the U.S. Ski and Snowboard team, wherein U.S. Olympic Alpine ski racer Bella Wright and 10th Mountain Division sergeant Rylan Kerr inform the viewer that the organizations, "were both born in the cold, where the air cuts thin and the ground is never steady."³

However, this history also tells us that this connection is reciprocal. The recruitment, training, deployment, and reintegration of the 10th Mountain Division reflected significant changes in Americans' relationship to wild nature and transformed how they recreated in it and sought to protect and preserve it. It did so by importing new outdoor equipment, training techniques, and recreational organizations to the United States, introducing thousands of men, previously experienced and otherwise, to both these novelties and new environments at home and abroad, and producing a large cohort of veterans who entered postwar public life intent of spreading alternate visions, sometimes complementary and sometimes competing, for the development and preservation of American wilderness.

For most observers, the historic legacy of the Division is inseparable from its association with American skiing and its development into a major industry. As the historian Annie Gilbert Coleman noted in her history of ski culture in the Rocky Mountains, their exploits, "translated veterans' skiing into an American act." It was the veterans themselves who "helped introduce skiing to a broader slice of the American public after the war." They were both tied to the "exhilaration" and love of nature of prewar skiing and indispensable to organizing "the money,

³ U.S. Army, "Olympics: Born in the Cold," <https://www.ispot.tv/ad/gVmS/us-army-olympics-born-in-the-cold>, (accessed, March 9, 2026).

labor, and machinery” necessary to make “recreational skiing into a business as well as a sport.”⁴ In covering the Army’s current publicity campaign, the National World War II Museum chose to highlight three soldiers each of whom fit neatly into this this narrative. They were Torger Tøkle and Roy Mikkelsen, both Norwegian-born champion ski jumpers and Walter Prager, the first World Champion in downhill skiing and longtime college ski coach.⁵ Other Division veterans became synonymous with the modern resort skiing industry, such as Friedl Pfieffer, an Austrian immigrant often credited with the transformation of Aspen, Colorado into a ski mecca and Peter Seibert, who did much the same in nearby Vail. If 10th Mountain Division soldiers treated war as a sport, it was at least in part because sport had drawn them to the war in the first instance.⁶

Hidden in a single word of one of the Army’s new advertisements, however, is a different subset of the Division’s personnel whose wartime experiences and postwar activities illustrated a very different orientation to nature and outdoor recreation. The ad offhandedly mentions “climbers,” referring to the many mountaineers and rock climbers whose skills were considered more directly applicable to mountain warfare than those of the skiers by some officers of the new Division. These men brought a different set of experiences to the battlefield and returned with a very different set of environmental concerns and recreational priorities to their skiing counterparts.

⁴ Annie Gilbert Coleman, *Ski Style: Sport and Culture in the Rockies* (Lawrence, KS: The University Press of Kansas, 2004), 118-121, 124-126; The scholarship of the legacy of the 10th Mountain Division in the Colorado High Country and the American West is voluminous. See also, Charles J. Sanders, *The Boys of Winter: Life and Death in the U.S. Ski Troops During the Second World War*, (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2005); Peter Shelton, *Climb to Conquer: The Untold Story of World War II’s 10th Mountain Division Ski Troops* (New York: Scriber, 2003), 225-233, 248-251; Maurice Isserman, *The Winter Army: The World War II Odyssey of the 10th Mountain Division, America’s Elite Alpine Warriors* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019), 240-241; and Hal K. Rothman, “Selling the Meaning of Place: Entrepreneurship, Tourism, and Community Transformation in the Twentieth-Century American West,” in *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 65, No. 4, (November 1996), 525-557, 544-548.

⁵ The National World War II Museum, YouTube short, “10th Mountain Division's Legacy on U.S. Skiing and Snowboarding,” February 6, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/y8H0RymSPuM> (accessed, March 9, 2026).

⁶ Isserman, *The Winter Army*, 49-51.

This segment of the Division was most clearly embodied in the figure of David Brower, one of the nation's premier pre-war alpinists and perhaps its most prominent postwar environmental activist. When the Second World War began, Brower had few American equals as a climber. On one especially productive ten-week "knapsacking" trip in the Sierra Nevada mountains in 1934, he had surveyed more than five dozen peaks, including over thirty that had never been ascended previously. Brower and a team of fellow Sierra Club members had introduced expansion anchor pitons to American rock climbing in their audacious 1939 first ascent of Tsé Bit'a'i (Shiprock) in New Mexico. Climbing had a profound psychological effect on Brower, filling him with a sense of safety and ease despite its dangers. "This person was not coming home," he wrote of himself following his return from the 1934 trip. "He had just left it!"⁷ It also set him on the path to his career as a vociferous wilderness preservationist as the Sierra Club's first Executive Director, from which position his passionate personal style and aversion to compromise helped mobilize the public against development in places like Utah's Dinosaur National Monument, the Grand Canyon, and Redwood National Park. In so doing he "led the transformation of an easygoing culture of nature lovers into a hardened army of nature defenders."⁸ In this capacity Brower resisted numerous ski developments across the American West, including fights at Mineral King and San Geronimo Mountain in California which pitted him against many of his fellow 10th Mountain Division veterans directly.

Brower's story, though hardly ignored in the historiography of twentieth century American environmentalism, can tell us more than has so far been understood about the historical legacy of the 10th Mountain Division and how military veterans deployed their

⁷David Brower, "Far From the Madding Mules: A Knapsacker's Retrospective.," *Sierra Club Bulletin*, Vol. 20, (February 1935), 68-77.

⁸ John Balzar, "David Brower, Crusader for the Environment, Dies at 88," November 7, 2000, accessed June 6, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2000-nov-07-la-me-david-brower-20001107-story.html>

experiences of combat to relate to the natural world as a place of rehabilitation and reintegration into civilian life. Many veterans of both world wars made note of the ecological devastation wrought by industrial warfare. Brower added a new dimension to this trope in that his wartime experiences seemed to make him more aware of the danger posed to wilderness by its enjoyment than by ordnance. Combat accounts written by Brower and other Sierra Club members to their civilian colleagues were usually as focused on tactics, troop movements, and displays of bravery and sacrifice as any standard combat narrative. Only rarely did they touch on environmental harm directly attributable to the fighting. In an account first published in the *Sierra Club Bulletin* entitled "Pursuit in the Alps," Brower devoted a single paragraph to the devastation the tiny village of Torbole in the Tyrolean Alps, where a single day of fighting had left gardens pocked with shell craters, trees shattered to splinters, and spoiled views of scenic Lake Garda.⁹ Later in his career, Brower made a point of emphasizing the direct environmental costs of combat in his opposition to the Vietnam and Persian Gulf Wars, but during his own time in the military he seemed to have other concerns in mind.¹⁰

Instead, Brower wrote home of trends that had been threatening European nature since before the *First* World War. After the German surrender, the 10th Mountain Division was kept in the Julian Alps to defend the territory of their new Italian allies against incursions from Yugoslavia. The postwar recreation boom that was soon to grip the United States started early for the Division as men took every available moment to climb and ski in the Alps. Yet Brower was unable to fully enjoy what should have been a highlight of his mountaineering career. All

⁹ David Brower, "Pursuit in the Alps," *Sierra Club Bulletin*, Vol. 31 (December 1946), 32.

¹⁰ As the head of the more radical and confrontational Earth Island Institute, Brower broke with the Sierra Club by opposing the Gulf War as a political, moral, and environmental catastrophe. For Brower these were inherently linked, the war being an extension of the nation's disastrous energy policy and a sign of future resource-based conflicts. Lisa Meyer, "Earth's Future Loser in the Gulf, Brower Says," *Banner-Graphic* (Greencastle, IN), Vol. 21, No. 123, January 28, 1991, 1.

around him he saw “the shattered remains of what must have been a beautiful wilderness,” he wrote for the *Bulletin* in August 1945. The culprit was obvious to Brower but odd in the context of what the region had just endured. The quickest way to “kill a wilderness,” he saw, was not to bomb it, but to “[k]eep adding the comforts that each preceding addition has brought the people to demand;” the trails, roads, buildings, mines, and other ephemera of modern recreation that allowed wilderness to be exploited by inconsiderate recreationists or extractive industry.¹¹ Brower later claimed that this was an especially clarifying experience that put “wilderness at the top of [his postwar] agenda.”¹²

As both scholars and the public have become more and more aware of the popularity and promise of recreation and nature therapies among military veterans, many thought to look back at Brower’s postwar career for signs of the war’s influence on his environmental thinking and activism. To the extent that historians and biographers have scrutinized Brower’s military service at all, they have largely done so for this purpose. According to longtime personal secretary and biographer Tom Turner, the war taught Brower “about leadership and managing people,” and influenced “his attitude about ‘improvements’ in wild country.”¹³ One historian of California

¹¹ Brower was, of course, familiar with the environmental destruction wrought by the War, so his decision to invert this and focus on the dangers of development is a particularly notable element of his thinking at the end of the war. His feelings at the end of the war also demonstrate that he was already developing the combative attitude and acerbity which became part of his later persona as an activist. The most famous example of this, and one which contributed the Club’s loss of its tax-exempt status and Brower’s ouster from his leadership position, was the advertisement Brower insisted on running against the construction of a dam on the Colorado River which would have flooded portions of the Grand Canyon in 1966. Ridiculing the Bureau of Reclamation’s contention that higher waters would allow visitors a better view of the top of the Canyon, the ad asked, “Should We Also Flood the Sistine Chapel So Tourists Can Get Nearer the Ceiling?” The idea, which became associated with Brower for the rest of his life, actually originated in 1945. Seeing the consequences of Alpine development, Brower accused those responsible of a desecration. “No one,” he argued would think of cutting into little bits, so that all could enjoy them, Michelangelo’s frescoes in the Sistine Chapel.” David Brower, “How to Kill a Wilderness,” *Sierra Club Bulletin*, Vol. 30 (August 1945), 2-4.

¹² David Brower, *For Earth’s Sake: The Life and Times of David Brower* (Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith Press, 1990), 128.

¹³ Tom Turner, *David Brower: The Making of the Environmental Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 48-49.

ventured a more directly psychological assessment, suggesting that surviving the “existential crucible” of combat allowed Brower to be “born again” as a champion of nature.¹⁴ Others have disagreed. Brower’s autobiography says little about the personal effects of combat, and his son Kenneth proposed that his father’s “course was set before the war.” Having already risked his life on countless mountains, organized and led dozens of logistically daunting wilderness outings, and devoted all of his free time to the Sierra Club before the war, “[h]e didn’t need Hitler to deepen what was already his passion,” Kenneth Brower argued.¹⁵ It did, however, induce major changes in the Club which Brower came to lead for nearly two decades. According to Sierra Club historian Michael Cohen, the legacy of the war experiences of members were “all-pervasive. The military metaphor was entrenched in the Club’s language, not only in speaking of climbing, but also in speaking of conservation.”¹⁶

In 2006, the Sierra Club introduced a new program called Military Outdoors to organize out of doors excursions for veterans and to advocate for “opportunities for the veteran and military community to engage with the natural world.”¹⁷ They did so without reference to the military history of their own organization that was so important to an earlier generation of its members and leaders. This was a timely move for the Club to make. The emergence of veteran-exclusive outdoor recreation opportunities was and remains a popular reaction to the ongoing issue of veteran reintegration. When David Brower and his fellow Sierra Club members returned from service in the Second World War, the idea of protecting all American nature for all Americans, necessarily felt more related to war veterans than such broadly constructed projects

¹⁴ Kevin Starr in Martin Litton, *Monumental: David Brower’s Fight for Wild America*, DVD-ROM (New York: First Run Features, 2005).

¹⁵ Kenneth Brower interviewed by author, Berkeley, September 17, 2019.

¹⁶ Michael P. Cohen, *The History of the Sierra Club, 1892-1970* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988) 75-77.

¹⁷ Sierra Club, “Outdoor Access for the Military Community,” <https://www.sierraclub.org/outdoor-access-military-community> (accessed May 18, 2026).

would today. Over one-quarter of the entire membership of the Sierra Club served in the military during the war in some capacity, dozens in the 10th Mountain Division alone. The experience of the war for these men made them aware of the capacity of outdoor recreation to bring more Americans into an understanding of the value of wild nature, and to transform previously inexperienced Americans into skilled outdoorsmen who could live their fullest peacetime lives in closer proximity to that nature. However, the 10th Mountain Division's veterans who returned from war eager to explore the economic and sporting possibilities of large-scale recreational development prioritized a very different set of values, equally ennobled by the appeal to their wartime exploits. Both groups stressed that they represented the interests of a large segment of the nation's civilian population, a common theme for returning veterans in the twentieth century. By the twenty first, veteran recreators had become a more distinct and somewhat isolated identity group which became reflected even in the patterns of their recreation. A portion of the Division's historical legacy can be found in how nature was put into practice in the construction of meaning and purpose for these veterans, not in the idea that service dictated a specific approach to the natural world or that there was a single way in which nature was properly enjoyed.

David Brower's prewar life as one of the United States' most prominent and innovative mountain climbers was steeped in metaphors of combat, as well as organizational structures and logistical planning which foreshadowed what he would encounter in the Army. Climbers of the 1930s were already accustomed to thinking about their leisure as a form of combat. According to the eminent military historian John Keegan nineteenth-century Romantic mountaineering had developed into "a sort of military operation, in which sport imitates war." Keegan thought that

the introduction of “artificial” climbing equipment like crampons and pitons had militarized mountaineering toward ever more extreme and risky climbs and away from its earlier emphasis on “exercising one’s agility, testing one’s nerve, practising team spirit, and enjoying God’s great outdoors.”¹⁸ Brower himself had employed such metaphors in his own climbing career, foreshadowing his later adaptation of civilian methods to martial purposes.¹⁹ The dangers Club members saw in climbing were similar to those found in battle. Writing about a failed expedition to climb Mount Waddington in British Columbia, Brower employed numerous military metaphors common to mountaineering. Brower’s team planned “a ten-day attack on the peak.” They were split into “assault teams” and “support teams,” which pushed ahead “on two fronts before being repulsed by a “bombardment of the south face by falling rock and ice” which Brower termed the mountain’s “defensive weapons.”²⁰ War metaphors gave climbers a useful way to describe recreational dangers, and recreational techniques gave them a way to prepare for combat. The clearest example was Brower’s famed first ascent of Shiprock. Each member of the four-man team served in the military during the War, three of them in the mountain troops. In Brower’s retelling of the endeavor for *The Saturday Evening Post*, the climber in charge of provision management became “the quartermaster;” the man with the most experience with similar climbs became, “the rock engineer;” and another not joining them but who had tested their new equipment was said to have “served as intelligence officer.”²¹

¹⁸ John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), 299-302.

¹⁹ Early Military alpinists footnote.

²⁰ David Brower, “Unpublished Notes,” 1935; in Brower, *For Earth’s Sake*, 40-57; Though military officers and veterans made major contributions to eighteenth and nineteenth-century European alpinism, they largely did so recreationally rather than in a military capacity. The first specialized mountain warfare troops were organized in the 1870s, most prominently the Italian Alpini.

²¹ David Brower, “It Couldn’t Be Climbed,” in *The Saturday Evening Post*, (February 3, 1940); See also, Cohen, *The History of the Sierra Club*, 75-77; Even the military itself applied military metaphors to mountaineering. When including Brower on a list of accomplished outdoorsmen in the 10th Mountain Division, the Army’s official history of the Mountain Training Center at Camp Hale identified him as “the conqueror of Shiprock.” *History of the*

Recreators were first enlisted to aid the war effort by testing the new and developing climbing, skiing, and camping equipment for their fitness for military applications. Even before the war began, the Club began attempts to harness their own knowledge to support this goal. In April 1941, Brower and twenty experienced skiers spent several days snow-camping in Little Lakes Valley, an isolated, glacier-carved canyon that hugs the tree line along the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada mountains. Though it included many Sierra Club members, the skiers were mainly there to conduct equipment tests for the U.S. Army's newly proposed mountain and winter warfare division. They brought with them every conceivable piece of skiing, camping, and mountain climbing gear they could obtain from civilian outfitters: Northland skis, L.L. Bean boots, Abercrombie & Fitch sleeping bags, along with snowshoes, mittens, pitons, and a stunning variety of ski waxes.²²

Future Sierra Club Bestor Robinson, who had recently put his Sierra Club duties on hold to join the staff of the Army's Quartermaster General, brought the results to Washington. Satisfied with his own contribution, Brower "rather hoped that such contributions would be all that was expected of him for the war effort."²³ After Pearl Harbor, Brower enlisted in the Army, along many other Club total members, not counting others who took on civilian roles in war-related industries. His first assignment after enlisting was an even more direct application of his recreation skills to military necessity. Tasked with creating a training manual for mountain warfare, Brower adapted most of it from the *Manual of Ski Mountaineering*, a collection written by Club members and edited by Brower himself. Once the Army adopted the training methods

Mountain Training Center, 26-29, Study No. 24, 1946, 57, Army ground Forces Historical Section, RG 337, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

²² Shelton, *Climb to Conquer*, 24.

²³ Brower, David, *For Earth's Sake: The Life and Times of David Brower* (Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith Press, 1990), 87.

and equipment of Club recreators, it disseminated them to thousands of new recruits, many without previous exposure to wilderness recreation. This readied them to participate in a major postwar outdoor recreation boom, which would be further facilitated by the widespread introduction of surplus military gear into public markets during the Army's demobilization.

Mountaineering knowledge may have been especially easy to integrate into military training strategies, but as the United States began to organize specialized winter and mountain warfare units, it looked to the larger American recreation community. By the time the 10th Mountain Division arrived in Italy in late 1944, it was already one of the most famous divisions in the U.S. Army. As the only unit especially trained for mountain or winter warfare in American history, and one filled with colorful figures and prominent athletes, it had received extensive press coverage as soon as they had been formed. Based on its unique knowledge of nature and the skills attendant to this, the communities of skiers and climbers who made up the bulk of its first enlistees had considered their contributions to the war effort even before American entry into the conflict. Inspired by the effective but doomed resistance waged by ski-borne Finnish guerillas against the invading Soviet Army in 1939, Charles Minot "Minnie" Dole, head of the civilian National Ski Patrol, pressured the U.S. Army to create its own winter warfare unit. Dole knew that such a unit would depend on men familiar with a different sort of environment than that in which most soldiers were trained to operate. To Dole, the Finnish ski troops were "a perfect example of men fighting in an environment with which they were entirely at home and for which they were trained."²⁴ Less than a month before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Dole

²⁴ Charles Minot Dole, "Birth Pains of the 10th Mountain Division," Unpublished, 1946, 10th Mountain Division Collection, Denver Public Library. This argument also justified the Club's push to keep the National Parks open during the war itself. Such a policy was now justified on national security grounds. The campaign was an immediate success as Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes ordered the parks open for the duration of the war. The government actively encouraged recreation and did so in terms that echoed the Club's arguments. "Travel Strengthens America" a United States Travel Bureau slogan declared, "it builds the nation's health, wealth, and unity." According to National Park Service Director Newton Drury, declining attendance was no reason to completely open the parks to

received word that the Army had approved the idea, and began to recruit the first enlistees for what would become the 10th Mountain Division from the ranks of American recreation enthusiasts. This strategy reflected the beliefs of the Sierra Club, whose future President Bestor Robinson had written in a prewar edition of David Brower's *Manual of Ski Mountaineering* that it "is easier to train a skier to be a soldier than to train a soldier to be a skier."²⁵

While nearly all Americans could understand the general physical and psychological benefits of recreation for the military, the Club's particular brand of wilderness recreation would prove especially valuable. In March 1942, Dole wrote directly to the *Sierra Club Bulletin* to recruit "men accustomed to living and working in the high mountains...men who have made mountaineering an *avocation*." Skiers would have their place as the Division expanded, "but the *immediate* requirement," Dole asserted, "[was] for bona fide 'mountain men.'"²⁶ This was not something of which Club members needed to be reminded. Days after Pearl Harbor, the Club had decided to keep its private ski facility, Clair Tappaan Lodge, open "for [the] training of skiers in the ways of ski mountaineering...to further the national defense."²⁷ Soon after Dole's recruitment notice, the Club prepared a radio broadcast advertising the Club's *Manual of Ski*

extractive industry or military training, as "Americans [would] still take pride and courage in the fact that this part of their cultural heritage [was] still being preserved for future enjoyment." See, Leavitt F. Morris, "America's Skies and Trees: Builders of Strength," *Christian Science Monitor* (Boston), February 27, 1942, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 120, Folder 13, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California; US Department of the Interior, *Annual Report of the Director of the National Park Service to the Secretary of the Interior*, by Newton Drury, (June 1942), 159, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 7, Folder 6, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California. The Army itself supported these efforts, maintaining a "general understanding" that "the fullest outdoor recreation activities possible be maintained consistent with defense necessities." This was seen a wholesome and patriotic recreation option for soldiers on leave, nearly 650,000 of whom visited NPS sites from July 1941 to July 1942, nearly one-tenth of total attendance. The Army even worked with the Club directly and consulted with the U.S. Forest Service and the Southern Pacific Railroad to guarantee access for skiers to Donner Summit in the Sierra Nevada, where the Club maintained its private Clair Tappaan Ski Lodge. Arthur Blake, "Outdoor Recreation and the War," Undated, 1942, Sierra Club Records, Box 301, Folder 17, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 71/103 c, Berkeley, California.

²⁵ Bestor Robinson, in *The Manual of Ski Mountaineering*, ed. David Brower (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1942).

²⁶ Charles Minot Dole, "Mountain Troop Requirements Changed," *Sierra Club Bulletin* 27 (April 1942), 7.

²⁷ Lewis F. Clark to Haven Jorgenson and James McLaughlin, December 11, 1941, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 19, Folder 31, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

Mountaineering and the role ski mountaineering would play in training the first generation of American ski troops. “[W]ith proper training and equipment,” the Club promised, “an army can turn wintery weather into an ally.”

War necessities made recreation a secondary concern for most Americans, but it did not entirely stop the work being done by either conservationists or outdoor recreators prior to the war. The Sierra Club, like most American civic organizations, certainly reoriented its priorities when the United States entered the conflict. As early as December 8, 1941, Club leadership reminded the membership that many of them possessed “an unusual knowledge of winter and mountain travel,” which could “be of extreme value to the country in this winter campaign.”²⁸ They would contribute their recreational knowledge to the government, but they consistently argued that continued recreation was a necessity to that effort as well. One of the Club’s first initiatives undertaken after Pearl Harbor was a campaign to pressure the Department of the Interior to leave the National Parks open to visitors. The Park Service quickly agreed. Frank Kittredge, the Superintendent of Yosemite National Park announced on February 19, 1942, that his park would remain open so that civilians might find “peace from the strife of the war-torn world.” Not only was recreation necessary to maintaining morale at home, it also supported the war effort concretely by endowing American bodies with “fresh vigor for renewed efforts in the fight to preserve the things for which America stands.”²⁹ This idea of recreation as physically and ideologically imperative to the war would influence both wartime training measures and postwar recreational landscape.

²⁸ “Notice to Sierra Club Members,” December 8, 1941, Sierra Club Records, Box 19, Folder 31, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 71/103 c, Berkeley, California.

²⁹ Frank A. Kittredge, “Vacationing in the High Sierra,” *Yosemite Nature Notes*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (April 1942), 36.

The enlistees who were organized into the Mountain Troops were to learn the finer points of climbing and skiing for combat rather than recreation at the Army's newly established Mountain Training Center at Camp Hale, along the Eagle River in the Colorado High Country between the soon to be famous towns of Vail and Aspen. The earliest recruits to the 10th Mountain Division were the volunteer recreators, but these were quickly supplemented by draftees without such outdoor experience. Other military units from around the country were also reassigned to become a part of the Division, including the 31st Dixie Division from Leesville, Louisiana, which the official U.S. Army record of Camp Hale, *The History of the Mountain Training Center*, described as was "one of the hottest, flattest, and lowest spots in the United States."³⁰ These soldiers were the first to be exposed to the training methods introduced to the Army by Sierra Club members like Brower. In this chaotic training environment, Brower was able to implement the methods with which he was familiar with little oversight. Brower employed a fifteen-part rubric to assess and rank soldiers, which he adapted from Richard Leonard, and had used extensively in his time training civilian climbers. The system was broken into mental, physical, and personality traits scored from one to ten. Some, such as resourcefulness, orderliness and stamina were obviously applicable to military evaluations. Others, like sociability, tact, and humor, seemed less martial but were crucial to training military units capable of quick, efficient climbing in dangerous situations.³¹ Despite some initial reluctance, the Army ultimately acknowledge the necessity and desirability of accommodating instructors like Brower, however, insisted that it needed they be tempered. "Best results were possible when the prerogatives of Army command were subordinated to the superior knowledge

³⁰ *History of the Mountain Training Center*, 45-46; see also Jack A. Benson, "Skiing at Camp Hale: Mountain Troops during World War II," in *Western Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 15 No. 2, (April, 1984), 163-174, 166.

³¹ David Brower, "Untitled Training Rubric," Undated, 1943, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 118, Folder 1, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

and skills of the mountaineering experts who had come into the Army from civilian life,” according to the official Army history of the Mountain Training Center at Camp Hale “and when at the same time the experts subordinated their enthusiasm for their specialties to Army discipline.”³²

Before being brought on to adapt the *Manual of Ski Mountaineering*, Brower had been afraid that Sierra Club knowledge would go unused to the Army’s detriment. He chafed at receiving instruction in map reading, first aid, and camp sanitation, all skills he “knew before—while someone who [didn’t] know very much about climbing [wrote] a climbing manual.”³³ After being allowed to adapt the *Manual* himself and receiving his commission, Brower’s fears abated as Clubs methods became the de facto basis for American mountain warfare training. Brower gave credit to Charles Hanks for doing “a beautiful job steamrolling S.C. technique into the G.I. course.” Without that work Brower speculated that training would probably still consist of “shoulder and knee belays,” referring to out-of-date and dangerous rope-assisted mountaineering procedures.³⁴ The results of these methods, once implemented, had Brower writing to the *Sierra Club Bulletin* to tout the transformation it induced in the recruits. They had started, he wrote, as men “who thought either a cornstalk or the topside of a curb plenty high

³² Joseph Rockis, Prefatory Note to *History of the Mountain Training Center*, 1948, ii; Though Brower and other Club members did not always respect the specific content of Army physical training doctrine, part of the reason they were able to adapt to Army life as efficiently as they did was that recreational and military training doctrine shared the fundamental premise that coordinated physical activity with the correct gear had the power to transform and improve individuals. A series of cartoons distributed as part of the Army’s Officer Candidate School (O.C.S.) attended by Brower laid this process out visually. The first image depicted a hunched, spindly recruit in ill-fitting khakis, while the second portrayed the same recruit after O.C.S., standing ramrod straight in an impeccable dress uniform. A third cartoon left no doubt as to the mechanism of the transformation. It showed the recruit mid-training, loaded down with “student equipment” including rifles, gas masks, a footlocker, and an entire bedframe and mattress. Infantry School Graduation Program, April 19, 1943, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 118, Folder 7, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

³³ David Brower to Arthur Blake, October 27, 1942, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 3, Folder 20, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

³⁴ David Brower to Richard Leonard, May 21, 1943, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 7, Folder 6, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

enough,” and had discovered “a submerged ability that had previously never had a chance to go anyplace.” He even saw the seeds of the postwar recreation boom in the transformations the Club’s methods had induced: “[W]e can only guess how many postwar devotees of the sport will emerge from the thousands who were exposed to the fatality-free training.”³⁵

Sierra Club members adapted Minnie Dole’s dictum about skiers being easier to turn into soldiers than vice versa for themselves, casting climbers as natural soldiers or at least better prepared for the rigors of Army life. Experienced recreators believed that they had already accomplished most of the transformational goals of military training through their own personal accomplishments in the outdoors. They often claimed that mountaineering was far more strenuous than anything encountered in Army physical training drills. Military calisthenics went “very easy with us high-altitude boys and our acclimatization,” Brower reported to friend and soon to be mountain trooper Paul Harlow.³⁶ And because the standard Army physical training was not based on knowledge derived from wilderness experience, it could actively harm a recruit’s fitness. Any Club member could have told the Army, for example, that calisthenics done in the cold “wasn’t too smart.” Neither were hiking breaks taken in direct wind. Recreation, however, would fix these issues since Club climbers already felt that they had mastered them in their own lives. Brower held out hope that his *Manual of Ski Mountaineering* would fix these common errors.³⁷

Not only did climbers consider Club training methods superior to those then in use by the military, they also found the equipment they were first given by the Army to be flawed in

³⁵ Charlotte Mauk, “The Sierra Club All Over the World,” *Sierra Club Bulletin*, Vol 30, (December 1945), 6-7.

³⁶ David Brower to Paul Harlow, January 17, 1943, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 5, Folder 11, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

³⁷ David Brower to Arthur Blake, October 27, 1942, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 3, Folder 20, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

comparison to their own personal items. The best equipment for military training was not to be determined by scientific examination in Army-funded laboratories but had already been discovered in the prewar practice of leisure in nature. Beyond helping the military determine what sorts of equipment should be distributed to troops, some soldiers cut out the middleman and supplied themselves from their personal stores of outdoor gear. As an early enlistee in the mountain troops, Brower was well-placed to prepare other Club members who would follow him into the service. Writing to Artur Argiewicz as the younger climber was preparing to join the Division, Brower claimed the soldiers were mostly well-provisioned with certain exceptions that the men would have to supply themselves for the time being. His most frequent complaint regarded footwear, which tended to run large, since the military “[took] for granted that no one ha[d] ever hiked or packed before getting into the Army.”³⁸ Brower’s own solution was to send home for his keds, which he presumed superior to any climbing shoes the Army provided. In the early days of the war, Club publications like *The Yodeler* and the *Sierra Club Bulletin* featured numerous similar requests from newly inducted soldiers for sleeping bags and tents from home.

At times, Camp Hale itself seemed to take on the look of an extremely well-regimented mountain resort. Descriptions of the leisurely aspects of life at Camp Hale abounded among those who did not instinctively dislike the cold and altitude. Once the Division moved in the soldiers frequently trained in ways that were hard to distinguish from peacetime recreation. In Army promotional material, the Camp sounded almost like a preview of the ski resorts that would dot the area after the war. The history of Camp Hale, “[was] a story of mountains and streams, snow and beautiful skies. It [was] a story of...rugged, foot-sore, mule-cussin’ mountain

³⁸ David Brower to Artur Argiewicz, November 15, 1942, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 3, Folder 10, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

climbers and skiers.”³⁹ In the glossy photo booklet the Army compiled for public release, the “rugged, well-trained men” the Camp produced looked like tourists who happened to be in uniform. In one, a group of four khaki and helmet clad men look relaxed and happy lounging against a rocky slope while on break from a hike. In another, a larger unit is receiving instruction, but are situated in a large meadow, the photo accentuating the breathtaking alpine landscape around them.⁴⁰ A typical day, as Brower related it to friends soon after his induction, sounded like a vacation. The 5:45 AM calisthenics were “brisk.” Drill was followed by “a strenuous bit of touch football” and “a pleasant 13-mile hike in the afternoon.”⁴¹ Major John Woodward, the head training officer and former Captain of the University of Washington ski team, recalled a sense of guilt that so much of the unit’s training had consisted of “doing the things we loved.”⁴²

The skills associated with climbing proved more directly applicable to both military training and combat operations than those of downhill skiing. The actual military act for which the Division is most famous, the capture of Riva Ridge in February 1945, involved a 2,000 foot climb of a near-vertical cliff face at night with little to no skiing. The ski-centric narrative which grew up around the Division’s legacy, which stresses a somewhat streamlined transformation of a unified class of recreationists into soldiers, obscures some very real distinctions between climbers and skiers within the ranks which presaged later conflicts over wildland development in the West. Recruits already trained in vastly different forms of sport sometimes fell into conflict over the proper way to apply their knowledge to military training and which types of knowledge

³⁹ U.S. Army, “Camp Hale, Colorado,” 1943, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 118, Folder 5, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ David Brower to Richard Leonard, October 23, 1942, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 7, Folder 5, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

⁴² Shelton, *Climb to Conquer*, 104.

were most valuable. Brower, already showing signs of his future outspokenness, filled his early letters home with complaints about all aspects of winter warfare training. By not allowing Club members to design their own training methods for the Division, leadership “showed complete indifference to the men’s inability to climb or camp on snow.” Brower felt compelled by his own knowledge to lodge these complaints. “I joined,” he wrote to fellow climber and future Army Air Corps bomber pilot Fritz Lippmann, “because I figured if those who knew how to climb didn’t join up, then who in the hell would the mountain troops consist of?”⁴³ Brower and other alpinists employed as climbing instructors at Camp Hale, asserted that their civilian skills should stand in a mark of authority within the hierarchy of the Army. There was a great deal of rank inversion during training as experienced recreators of lower rank, including Brower, who began his training duties as a private before attending O.C.S., had to issue orders to occasionally resistant officers.

Instructing new recruits in the fundamentals of safe mountaineering helped more experienced climbers overcome biases against other kinds of Americans and recreators. Early in the war, Club members’ opinions of their fellow recruits frequently mirrored their negative feelings toward unfamiliar environments. Upon his enlistment, Brower expressed anxiety about his ability to fit in with the other recruits, many of them “flatland grown,” that is, raised far from anything that could reasonably be called a mountain.⁴⁴ Club members saw this lack of prewar training as a distinct liability. After recounting a series of fatal training accidents and self-inflicted injuries by men attempting to avoid winter drills, Charles Hanks identified a certain type of recruit as troublesome. “Most of the problems and tests this winter,” Hanks wrote to

⁴³ David Brower to Fritz Lippmann, November 19, 1942, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 7, Folder 9, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

⁴⁴ David Brower, “They’ll Take the High Road,” Unpublished, 1943, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 4, Folder 89, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

Brower, “were strictly flatland.” In their earliest training experiences, the men had difficulty handling exercises in even moderately hilly terrain.⁴⁵ The process of training did not just transform the men subjected to it, but the experienced recreators who served as instructors as well. The Club took the lessons its members had learned as instructors and as soldiers and began to apply them to their conservation work.

The friction between Sierra Club members and “flatlanders” was less pronounced than that which initially existed between Club climbers and the downhill skiers, who largely came from the Eastern United States and practiced a less wilderness-focused form of recreation. Sierra Clubbers frequently complained about these differently trained winter athletes. Artur Argiewicz, an avid young climber who would be one of the first Club members killed in action in Italy, had to be reminded “that the war is between the Allies and the Axis and not between the various ski and mountain climbing schools of the Etats Unis.” Fellow climber Jack Riegelhuth was even more vocal in his complaints about the non-mountaineering “primadonnas” in the Division.⁴⁶ This mild disdain had even been a part of the Club’s initial enlistment drive. The radio broadcast advertising Brower’s *Manual of Ski Mountaineering* had warned that ski mountaineering was a more rugged pursuit than downhill skiing, not suited for all “practice-slope skiers.” The message was clear: ski mountaineering prepared men for war in a way that purely recreational skiing did not.⁴⁷ It did not help matters that climbers and skiers were onboarded into the Division in discrete groups which roughly corresponded to region, setting off some of the Clubbers parochial resentments. According to an official Army history, with an influx of New England skiers, “the

⁴⁵ Charles Hanks to David Brower, April 25, 1944, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 5, Folder 10, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

⁴⁶ Arthur Blake to David Brower, December 9, 1942, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 3, Folder 20, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

⁴⁷ “Men Against the Snow,” aired April 12, 1942, on Station KGO and the Pacific Coast Blue Network. Transcript, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 3, Folder 14, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

Mountain Troops soon lost their purely Western makeup and began to assume a definite Yankee character as more reinforcements continued to pour in.”⁴⁸ The process of imparting their divergent skillsets and knowledge during training and especially the shared experience of combat tended to resolve these conflicts by making any gap between climbers and skiers seem petty and irrelevant to the prosecution of the war. However, some these differences would return after the war in conflicts over the development of resort skiing infrastructure.

The Division’s movements prior to being shipped off to fight in Italy broadened Club members’ ideas about what varieties of nature were valuable and worth protecting just as it enlarged their ideas of who might be brought into beneficial contact with nature through recreation. Occasionally, California-based Sierra Clubbers made claims so provincial and close-minded that they bordered on facetiousness or self-parody. “I’m fighting this war for California, and not for the U.S.,” Brower wrote to a climbing companion in 1943, “because I don’t think much of the rest of it that I’ve seen.” While he conceded that he might add a state or two “after a while” it would only be after careful thought.⁴⁹ Sergeant Charles Hanks, a longtime climbing companion and Club member, was just as disdainful towards Colorado. Writing to the newsletter of the Club’s climbing section in November 1942, Hanks expressed his desire that the war’s “sacred ‘afterwards’” would include more recreation in “the glorious white fastnesses of our

⁴⁸ *History of the Mountain Training Center*, 12; At its most extreme, mountaineering could exert such an influence on identity that it even structured one’s attitude towards Axis soldiers. Climbers to express their admiration for the famed German alpinist Paul Bauer despite his position as a Captain in the Wehrmacht’s Gebirgsjäger (mountain light infantry) then serving in Operation Edelweiß, the Nazi invasion of the Caucasus. This only seemed to inspire regret that they might one day fight someone whom they respected. The minutiae of climbing preparations and strategies also helped distinguish American and German approaches to both war and mountaineering. Writing in the *Sierra Club Bulletin* in 1942, climber and soldier Morgan Harris did not mention the war but did differentiate American climbing from the “Munich School...whose reckless disregard for danger,” he considered, “a malignant growth which destroys the sport in climbing.” American soldiers would be trained in a more recreational form of climbing “in which serious risk of injury is not justifiable.” Morgan Harris, “Safety Last?” *Sierra Club Bulletin*, Vol. 27, (1942), 78.

⁴⁹ David Brower to Morgan Harris, March 21, 1943, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 5, Folder 16, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

beloved High Sierra.” He could not leave it there. Encountering “a few of the famed Colorado Rockies” he added, did nothing but heighten his appreciation for what he had left behind in California.⁵⁰

The landscapes of the rest of the United States fared even worse in Clubbers’ critical eye than the Colorado Rockies. From an Army Air Base in Sioux City, Iowa, Club climber Fritz Lippmann reported that seeing snow in country “flatter than a pancake” left him “feel[ing] miserable.” He even expressed some sardonic jealousy towards a fellow climber and pilot shot down over southern Germany “for being so lucky as to land in the haunts of those revered München climbers.”⁵¹ And while the Rockies were more impressive to the 10th’s downhill skiers, not all new environments met with such praise. Not long before shipping out in December 1944, the Division was transferred to “learn what war would be like if you didn’t have a bit of defilade to hide in or height to observe from” in the “flatlands” near Camp Swift, Texas. One Captain in the 86th Mountain Infantry Regiment was moved to hail East Texas’s “glorious expanse of sky,” but most of the men felt betrayed by Washington.⁵² Their discontent with their surroundings was so obvious that one Bastrop, Texas newspaper noted it in an article the new arrivals were “inclined to stare in amazement at the vast flat Texas landscape and distant horizons...and have a tendency to remove hats and mop brows more frequently than is normal for visitors from the north.” This was only natural, the paper continued, given that the men had been trained at Camp Hale, “where the breezes are not so balmy and the terrain is so steep that the soldiers count off from bottom to top instead of left to right.”⁵³ Brower’s officer candidate

⁵⁰ Charles W. Hanks, “A Note From Another Mountain Trooper,” *The Yodeler*, November 11, 1942, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 3, Folder 10, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

⁵¹ Fritz Lippmann to David Brower, December 6, 1942, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 7, Folder 9, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

⁵² Brower, *For Earth’s Sake*, 95.

⁵³ “From Camp Hale to Texas,” *The Yodeler*, July 31, 1944, Sierra Club Records, Box 19, Folder 8, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 71/103 c, Berkeley, California.

training and specialized military climbing instruction took him back and forth between Colorado, Georgia, West Virginia, and Texas. He had unqualified praise for precisely none of these unknown environments. He found the train journeys across Prairie that just got “rollinger and rollinger” monotonous in the extreme.⁵⁴ His time in Georgia was “really quite all right” at best despite being surrounded by “skinny, anemic-looking pines of no size whatever,” and having no worthwhile mountains or skiable snow.⁵⁵ Even the Colorado High Country which enchanted other recruits to the point that they planned to permanently resettle there after the war was deficient in comparison to California. It would be better for both training and recreational purposes, Brower thought, for the Army to simply allow mountaineers to “go off somewhere in California and get some real mountain troops underway.”⁵⁶

Even during the war, there were indications that Club members were becoming interested in the fate of nature outside of California due to their time in the Army. In fact, it is possible that Camp Hale itself was the very first place outside of the Club’s home state to receive such direct and continuous attention. When the Army first planned the construction of a permanent Mountain Training Center at Hale, the project’s environmental costs were quickly added to Brower’s long list of early complaints about life in the armed forces. Writing to Arthur Blake, Brower decried the destruction the construction of Camp Hale would involve. Though he sometimes joked that the Division would be better off training in the superior environment of California, on this point he reconsidered. “[I]f you feel sorry that such a development [as Camp Hale] was not made in the High Sierra,” he wrote, “just consider this little statement, culled from

⁵⁴ David Brower to Richard Leonard, January 11, 1943, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 7, Folder 6, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

⁵⁵ David Brower to Paul Harlow, January 17, 1943, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 5, Folder 11, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

⁵⁶ David Brower to Richard Leonard, February 21, 1943, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 7, Folder 6, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

a large-scale map of the area... ‘Eagle River channel will be obliterated.’” He went so far as to suggest that the military was uniquely suited to environmental destruction. The Army, he said, proved adept at defeating the river with “characteristic thoroughness.”⁵⁷ Some of the negative assessments of nature among Clubbers were almost certainly said in jest between people who had previously devoted most of their free time to climbing in California. However, this provincialism, and its diminution in the decades following the Second World War, genuinely reflected a shift in the political attentions of the Sierra Club as a whole.

The attention paid by 10th Mountain Division soldiers to the possibilities of recreation continued through the midst of combat. In June 1945, even before settling back into civilian life, Brower wrote to the Eastman Kodak Company’s processing laboratory in upstate New York and asked after a roll of film he had handed off to a base censor at the end of the War and had not received back. The photos sounded very much like a vacation album from a warzone and included “some rather precipitous mountain crags, several of flower-filled meadows, with perhaps a jeep and other G.I.s scattered here and there.”⁵⁸ The exact time in which Brower took these photos is uncertain, but other evidence shows that sight-seeing took place as the fighting raged. Several years after the War, for example, a 10th Mountain Division veteran named John Pierpont wrote to Brower about a different loss of photographs taken throughout the Division’s travels “in Colorado, the Aleutians, and Italy.” The photographs unfortunately did not survive, having been destroyed “when [Pierpont’s] ruck took a direct hit” in Italy, which forced him to

⁵⁷ David Brower to Arthur Blake, October 27, 1942, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 3, Folder 20, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.; In this instance Brower might have been hasty in his condemnation of the Army’s conservation standards. Colorado was itself Washington’s second choice for the Mountain Division’s headquarters. Initial plans for a base along the edge of Yellowstone National Park in Montana were scrapped when Frederic Delano, the President’s uncle and a prominent figure in the Wildlife Conservation Committee, led an effort to move the headquarters to avoid harming Yellowstone’s population of nearly extinct trumpeter swans; See, Hal Burton, *The Ski Troops* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971), 89-90.

⁵⁸ David Brower to Eastman Kodak Company, October 29, 1945, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 118, Folder 2, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

ask Brower for suitable replacements.⁵⁹ These wartime recreation activities also proved useful in conservation efforts. At a Sierra Club event in September 1945, Club member and combat medic William Ferguson publicly displayed the photographs that he had taken “from his days at Camp Hale through his combat experiences and his departure from Europe.”⁶⁰

We have seen that Brower was already thinking of the threats posed to nature by excessive recreation as he was stationed along the Alps in 1945, but this was not his own idiosyncrasy. Other Sierra Club affiliated veterans of the 10th Mountain Division were similarly anticipating the environmentalist backlash to the overexploitation of wilderness by postwar recreators. The postwar recreation boom came as no surprise to Club members, who saw it coming from the earliest phases of the war. Correspondence between Club members in the armed forces was consistently loaded with visions of postwar recreation. Most references to recreation in what Charles Hanks called the “sacred afterwards” were personal. The ability to engage in recreation as they always had was, in fact, the goal many for which many of them were fighting to begin with. “We’re fighting this war to have the right to belong to clubs like ours,” fighter pilot and climber Robin Hansen wrote to Brower in an undated letter from Europe, “to ski and climb and take our vacations in the mountains.”⁶¹

While there was little doubt that experienced climbers would return to the mountains after the war, Club members predicted that interest would rise among others as well. After the war, Fritz Lippmann saw, “the arrow and the sentinel will get no rest,” referring to two peaks in the Cascades. He envisioned a “valley...too cluttered up with eager climbers,” forcing more

⁵⁹ John Pierpont to David Brower, June 27, 1947, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 118, Folder 29, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

⁶⁰ Sydney Hendricks, “Bay Skiers Home Vet Mountain Troops,” *The San Francisco News*, September 4, 1945, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 120, Folder 13, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

⁶¹ Robin Hansen to David Brower, Undated 1943, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 5, Folder 9, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California. The fact that many Nazis enjoyed skiing and climbing did not seem to enter into Hansen’s mind.

experienced mountaineers to find “new horizons,” possibly in the Himalayas.⁶² Equipment was central to these predictions. Brower himself connected the Little Lakes Valley tests to postwar recreation directly. Promoting the trip’s success in “‘testing to destruction’ several innovations in lightweight equipment.” Though he acknowledged that the tests had been conducted for military purposes, he made sure to add that “the peacetime mountaineer may look forward to” them as well.⁶³ There was no doubt that they were applying the label “peacetime mountaineer” to themselves. Just after the end of the war, the Division’s newspaper, *The Blizzard*, published a cartoon entitled “When the Fighting’s Done,” depicting two happy recreational climbers silhouetted by images of themselves on the same mountain in their winter gear, carrying rifles and looking more determined than their smiling future selves.

Upon their return to the United States, such predictions about the war’s transformative effect on recreation were soon confirmed. Historians of outdoor recreation have long emphasized the circulation of gear and knowledge on the staggering burst of popularity in outdoor recreation after the war, often granting it the same level of explanatory power as other more structural changes consequent to the end of the war such as the cessation of the rationing of gasoline and other resources, the demographic transformations of the baby boom, and the massive proliferation of highway construction and other transit infrastructure. New research has expanded the attention of historians regarding the exact time frame of the war’s influence. As the environmental historian Rachel S. Gross noted in her history of the outdoor clothing and equipment industries, “[these] companies conceived of the conflict as good for business during the eventual peacetime,” and work to exploit this by emphasizing their own patriotic

⁶² Fritz Lippmann to David Brower, March 16, 1943, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 7, Folder 9, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

⁶³ David Brower, “Outdoorsmen Form Forest Reserves,” *Sierra Club Bulletin*, Vol. 27 (April 1942), 10.

contributions in equipment testing and production, promising their consumers that a more leisurely future was coming, and employed soldiers as “brand ambassadors,” making “wartime insiders an important community that mattered to the surplus era to come.”⁶⁴

Gross has also corrected a misapprehension that had worked to diminish the attitudes of the veterans themselves. The already devoted climbers and skiers of the 10th Mountain Division were always going to return to their prewar passions, but because the bulk of military recruits had little experience with organized outdoor recreation at all, let alone with the Club’s wilderness-focused form of leisure, some historians have argued that the average soldiers’ experience of war are of limited importance when considering the postwar boom. According to recreation historians Laura and Guy Waterman, veterans “came back from war to go to work, not to escape to the backcountry.” They had just “‘gotten away from it all’—and were anxious to get back to it all.”⁶⁵ Gross reframes the equipment surplus as the means rather than the cause of postwar veteran affinity for outdoor recreation, which could be motivated by a host of psychological, social, and financial motives ranging from “nostalgia for the brotherhood and sense of purpose” of the war years, to suburban malaise, to the need for affordable vacation options.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Rachel S. Gross, *Shopping All the Way to the Woods: How the Outdoor Industry Sold Nature to America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024), 71-90. The application of veteran knowledge transformed not just winter sports in the United States, but the outdoor recreation equipment industry in general. Men such as Nike co-founder Bill Bowerman and Gerald Cunningham of the Colorado-based outdoor sports equipment firm Gerry, brought to civilian consumers equipment as well as newly circulating ideas in “clothing science” such as layering techniques and material moisture absorption rates, which had been tested in combat and had been advertised as such during and after the war.

⁶⁵ Laura Waterman and Guy Waterman, *Forest and Crag: A History of Hiking, Trail Blazing, and Adventure in the Northeast Mountains* (Boston: Appalachian Mountain Club, 1989), 558; Silas Chamberlain, *On the Trail: A History of American Hiking* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 160-165; See also, James Morton Turner, “From Woodcraft to ‘Leave No Trace’: Wilderness, Consumerism, and Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America,” in *Environmental History*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (July, 2002), 462-484, 468-473.

⁶⁶ Gross, *Shopping All the Way to the Woods*, 92-93.

Though it had long organized recreational trips, it was only after the War that the Club embraced the education of non-members as a means of creating more environmentally conscious recreators. By the early 1950s the Club had produced two wilderness guides that demonstrated the effect of the war on their outreach. The first was the newly updated civilian version of the *Manual of Ski Mountaineering*. In its introduction, Brower was explicit about the cyclical relationship between recreational and military training. Ski mountaineering methods had been “adapted to California terrain by the Sierra Club” before being used to aid the armed forces. The civilian edition of the *Manual* was meant to take the “combat mobility and *esprit*” mountain troops had developed return it to recreational pursuits “before it [was] forgotten.”⁶⁷ The influence of World War II was also on display in the Club’s less technical educational efforts. The Club’s 1951 guidebook, *Going Light— With Backpack or Burro*⁶⁸, was a wilderness guide geared towards more casual recreators and families. Still, the ultimate lesson for how to approach recreation in peace was the same as it had been for war: “acquire the technique, the equipment, the company, the time, the physical conditioning—and take off.”⁶⁹ Despite their different audiences, both books were fundamentally the product of the war. They included similar recommendations for surplus military equipment, emphasized the need for flexible but stable command structures, and drew direct lessons for recreators from combat experiences.

It was not only those with prewar experience as guides and instructors who spread wartime knowledge to the postwar civilian climbing community. The nature poet Gary Snyder

⁶⁷ David Brower, “Skis to the Winter Wilderness: An Introduction,” in *The Manual of Ski Mountaineering*, 4th edition, ed. David Brower (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1969), x-xi.

⁶⁸ Brower served as the editor of this guide, but other veterans contributed as well. Different entries were provided by Bestor Robinson and Richard M. Leonard who applied their knowledge of climbing and camping to the logistical work of the Army’s Quartermaster Corps, as well as Lewis Clark, Milton Hildebrand, and H. Stewart Kimball, all of whom served alongside Brower in the 10th Mountain Division.

⁶⁹ David Brower, “About Camping,” in *Going Light with Backpack and Burro: How to Get Along on Wilderness Trails (Chiefly in the West)*, (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1951), 10.

recalled that when he began climbing as a teenager with the Mazamas, roughly the Oregon equivalent of the Sierra Club, the group was “all middle-aged people.” The organization was given new life by returning 10th Mountain Division veterans – “these twenty-five-year-olds who were very sharp” – and who “became my generation's ...teachers in that era's state-of-the-art snow and rock climbing,” as they had the cachet of “both war and mountaineering experience.”⁷⁰

The experience of the war created more of these peacetime mountaineers and prepared them for their postwar leisure activities. All of the innovative equipment in the world would not matter much if there were not a sufficient supply of new recreators willing and able to use them. As with technology, we can see a cyclical relationship between recreational and military training. Techniques drawn from the world of wilderness recreation were applied to military training, which propagated a relevant set of skills to soldiers who would participate in the postwar recreation boom. The formula was simple and mirrored the Army's own conception of training. Equipment combined with knowledge produced expertise, whether in climbing or soldiering. According to Richard Leonard, knowledge gained on “the Cathedral Spires of Yosemite” guaranteed that the “equipment to be used by our Army [were] far superior to anything ever imported from Europe,” creating soldiers “capable of defeating” well-trained German mountain troops.⁷¹

When 10th Mountain Division veterans returned to California, the more varied tastes in environments which they had developed at Camp Hale and in Europe became a part of Club members' conservation and recreation activities. They first expressed this by comparing these landscapes to those with which they were already familiar. Brower's admiration for the Alps

⁷⁰ John P. O'Grady, “Living Landscape: An Interview with Gary Snyder,” in *Western American Literature*, Vol. 33 No. 3, (Fall, 1998), 275-291, 276-277.

⁷¹ Richard Leonard, Letter to the editor, *Sierra Club Yodeler*, Undated 1942, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 7, Folder 5, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

may not have been a surprise, but in the war's aftermath he displayed an unexpected change of heart on less iconic environments as well. The exact sort of modest American environments that Private Brower had disparaged before arriving in Europe were less distasteful than they had been. Soon upon arriving back in California, the Army's new Historical Division offered Brower an editorial position working on the Army's proposed 120 volume history of the war. Though the furthest that Brower ever lived from his native Berkeley was neighboring El Cerrito, he was surprisingly open to the possibility of a cross-country move. While he admitted that he "retain[ed] much of the provincialism as is inherent...in native Californians" he assured the Army that his passion for mountains and conservation would not suffer fatally. "There are mountains and snowfields not far from Washington D.C.," he argued, "and one who knows the Capitol Hill pathways can very effectively aid the cause of conservation." Brower and the Army failed to agree on salary, but his willingness to even consider such a move is remarkable in light of his previous low opinion of the natural beauty of the East.⁷² This trend had started in Europe between the end of hostilities and the 10th Mountain Division's return to the United States. Brower, "felt quite at home" on the Glacier des Nantillons in the French Alps, he informed in the *Sierra Club Bulletin*, as it "was so similar, in all but scale, to the Sawtooth Ridge country of northern Yosemite."⁷³ By the time he was famous as the "Archdruid," Brower was no longer drawing distinctions as to which wild landscapes were more worthy of protection.

Other Club members followed their soon to be Executive Director's lead. Lieutenant Raymond Brown, a Club member and climber serving with the Army Medical Corps in Australia and New Guinea, wrote to *The Yodeler*, the newsletter of the Club's mountaineering section, to

⁷² David Brower to A.F. Clark, April 17, 1946, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 11, Folder 6, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

⁷³ David Brower, "Some G.I. Climbs in the Alps," *Sierra Club Bulletin*, Vol. 30(December 1945), 84.

simultaneously extoll and condemn the tropics. Foremost on his list of complaints was the lack of mountaineering opportunities. “The closest to rock-climbing here,” he opined, “is climbing trees after mangoes or trying to run up coconut trees barefooted,” which he found much more difficult than “utopian movies” suggested. Much of his free time was devoted to daydreaming about the mountains of the Central Highlands of New Guinea, where his “great-great grandchildren will still be able to make first ascents--if not discoveries--of mountains as high as any in California.”⁷⁴ Some soldiers invoked the Sierra even more explicitly “to make the days pass more smoothly.” Though he did not serve in World War II, Catholic priest Robert Duryea traveled across the Pacific as an Air Force chaplain in the 1950s. Writing to Brower in 1953 as a “Sierra Clubber temporarily dislocated,” Duryea saw eagles in every tropical frigatebird and thought a boardwalk at an Army airfield at Kwajalein in the Marshall Islands smelled “precisely like the wooden bridge across the Kern [River]” in Sequoia National Park. The priest closed in the hope that “such daydreams will soon give way to dream days” in the mountains.⁷⁵ This appreciation mirrored the growing scope of the Club’s political ambitions, as it opened its first chapter outside of California in 1950.

As a postwar environmentalist, Brower became famous among his admirers and critics for his efforts to protect wild nature of all sorts. When the *New Yorker* writer John McPhee profiled him for a series of magazine articles later compiled into the 1971 book *Encounters with the Archdruid*, he followed Brower on wilderness excursions with three different promoters of development in three different regions of the country, each of which he extolled and defended with equal fervor. This has frequently been attributed to Brower’s sense of personal shame at his

⁷⁴ Raymond Brown, “V-Mail From the Jungle,” *Sierra Club Yodeler*, December 28, 1942, Sierra Club Records, Box 19, Folder 8, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 71/103 c, Berkeley, California.

⁷⁵ Robert Duryea to Sierra Club Board, July 7, 1953, Sierra Club Records, Box 19, Folder 8, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 71/103 c, Berkeley, California.

failure to adequately value the wild Glen Canyon on the Colorado River, leading its inundation by the Glen Canyon Dam in 1966.⁷⁶ However, this lack of discrimination between environments, mirrored by the Sierra Club's transition from a hiking club for a small group of elite California nature seekers to an organized wilderness preservation institution with national political ambitions and scope, was already ongoing and its origins are properly attributed to travels across the country which Brower and other Clubbers undertook only reluctantly during his military service. Asked by McPhee if a certain segment of the Cascade Mountains met his definition of wilderness, Brower demonstrated how his professional interests in preservation had broadened without altering his personal tastes. "Yes, it is wilderness," he answered before qualifying, "the Sierra is what I love, but these mountains are perhaps the most beautiful we have."⁷⁷

As noted earlier, however, this was the reaction of veterans already primed by their membership in an avowedly conservationist organization like the Sierra Club to become more amenable to taking such an interest. Others, like those who became involved in the resort ski industry after the war, demonstrated other priorities. While Sierra Club members would come to oppose much of the development of the Colorado High Country which is so closely associated in public memory with the 10th Mountain Division, and such development would incite recurrent environmental controversies, it faced the same battles even earlier in its own backyard of

⁷⁶ The first major environmental controversy with which Brower became involved as the Executive Director of the Sierra Club took place in the early 1950s, when the Club joined a coalition of preservationist organizations to successfully stop the construction of the proposed Echo Park Dam on the Green River between Colorado and Utah. As the plan would have flooded major portions of the Dinosaur National Monument, the groups organized around the principle of keeping the boundaries of already protected parks, monuments, and other public lands sacrosanct and free of development. In doing so, Brower waived opposition to the construction of the Glen Canyon Dam. According to environmental historian Mark Harvey, prior to the Echo Park controversy, Brower was typical of the Club's California "provincialism," as "few of them thought much" of places beyond their beloved Sierras. Mark W. Harvey, *A Symbol of Wilderness: Echo Park and the American Conservation Movement*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 164-165.

⁷⁷ John McPhee, *Encounters With the Archdruid* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), 14.

California.⁷⁸ Most famously, the Club was the primary litigant in the lawsuits surrounding the proposed development of Mineral King just outside the southern boundary of Sequoia National Park by the Walt Disney Company which began in the 1960s.⁷⁹ Less well known, but critical in signaling the Club's postwar transition from a hiking club to an activist preservation organization were a recurrent series of proposals to develop ski infrastructure at San Geronio Mountain in Southern California. Usually associated with a flurry of back-and-forth arguments between the Club-aligned grassroots group Defenders of the San Geronio Wilderness and ski-lift operators in the mid 1960s, the case is easy to dismiss as one of many seemingly identical controversies in which the Club took part between Echo Park and David Brower's ouster as Executive Director in 1969. However, the earlier debates about similar projects to transform San Geronio for resort skiing took place in 1947 and 1956, and paying attention to these earlier controversies highlights how the Club was already changing its approach to preservation and its political arguments in the aftermath of the war, and how the legacy of the 10th Mountain Division shaped how both sides of the debate sought to achieve its ends.

⁷⁸ Sierra Club opposition to Colorado ski development took place mostly after the passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964. In the 1970s, the Club temporarily blocked ski development at Beaver Creek, 20 miles north of Camp Hale and joined the substantial opposition to Denver's bid to host the 1976 Winter Olympics, both of which were pushed hard by Mountain Division veteran and Vail developer Peter Seibert. See Michael W. Childers, *Colorado Powder Keg: Ski Resorts and the Environmental Movement*, (Lawrence, KS: The University Press of Kansas, 2012), 80-81, 90, 120-122.

⁷⁹ The case, which helped popularize ultimately unsuccessful arguments about the legal standing of non-human nature, was a landmark in environmental law as it permitted groups like the Club to claim legal standing to sue to stop wildland development if such development would negatively impact even a single Club member. It was instrumental in making such lawsuits a crucial and frequently successful tool of environmental preservationists. See, Christopher D. Stone, "Should Trees Have Standing? Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects," 45 *Southern California Law Review* 450 (1972), 3-55; Susan R. Schrepfer, "Establishing Administrative 'Standing': The Sierra Club and the Forest Service, 1897-1956," in *Pacific Historical Review* Vol. 58, No. 1 (1989), 55-81; Larry Dilsaver and William Tweed, *Challenge of the Big Trees: A Resource History of Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Park* (Three Rivers, CA: Sequoia Natural History Association, 1990), 278-82, 298-301; and Daniel P. Selmi, *Dawn at Mineral King: The Sierra Club, the Disney Company, and the Rise of Environmental Law* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2022).

The highest peak in Southern California, San Geronimo Mountain features a series of deep glacier-carved cirques along its steep upper faces. The only thing which had spared it from an earlier wave of downhill skiing development was its ruggedness and relative isolation. Its topography and location made it an ideal site for a fight over the proper line to be drawn between nature and recreation. For one White House adviser, the mountain posed an obvious land use management problem. "This area does, in fact," he wrote "offer the best Wilderness in the National Forests of southern California and also the best potential ski area." There was intense demand for both wilderness uses and winter sports "and it is not possible for this one are to be used for both purposes."⁸⁰ This incompatibility with any semblance of a multiple use policy produced a great deal of recrimination on both sides of the debate. According to the reporter Cole Phinizy, writing in *Sports Illustrated*, San Geronimo marked a new kind of environmental battle. Unlike the familiar contests between conservationists are "miners, railroaders, [and] loggers... for the first time, on the high ground of San Geronimo, we have sportsmen against sportsmen in a major fight."⁸¹

The inter-recreationist nature of the San Geronimo controversy did not merely evoke the sometimes-difficult relationship between skiers and climbers in the 10th Mountain Division early in the War. It pitted veterans of the Division against one another directly. Veterans did not become involved in the growing ski resort industry in Colorado alone. Like their fellow Californians in the Sierra Club, members of the California Ski Association (CSA) had joined the Mountain troops and returned home eager for their familiar peaks. In 1948 the CSA, its membership swollen with returning veterans, fused with several other regional ski clubs to form

⁸⁰ William O. Douglass to David R. Brower, April 19, 1962, Sierra Club Records, Box 82, Folder 34, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 71/103 c, Berkeley, California.

⁸¹ Cole Phinizy, "The Battle for a Mountain," in *Sports Illustrated* Vol. 22 (1965), 18.

the Far West Ski Association (FWSA). Though not regularly invoked, Sierra Club, FWSA, and the members of other interested organizations occasionally appealed to their status to back up their positions on San Gorgonio. “I’m an ardent skier myself,” wrote Frank Sargent, the Executive Director of the federal Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission, to the FWSA’s Chandler North in support of San Gorgonio development, “formerly 10th Mountain Division.” North then passed this on to National Ski Association of America Executive Director Chelton Leonard, presumably in the belief that it would encourage Leonard, also a Division alum, to support the proposal as well.⁸² The anti-development version of this same dynamic is evident in a letter sent by David Brower to frequent ally and occasional antagonist, Interior Secretary Stewart Udall. Brower forwarded to Udall an article that seemed to indicate the government’s openness to San Gorgonio development, calling it “a...shocking departure from your wilderness precepts.” Brower indicated that he was altered to the article by a “long-time member” known to him from “the U.S. Mountain troops.”⁸³ Though veterans on both sides of the ski development issue claimed to be lovers of both nature and outdoor recreation, there existed clear divisions between the two. As late as the 1990s signs of this persisted. When veteran John Geisler wrote to Brower on some business for the 10th Mountain Division Alumni Association in 1996, he told Brower that he and his wife were “tree huggers from way back and want to convey our appreciation for your resisting dam building and promoting awareness of the fragile balance between plants and animals.” However, Geisler made sure to not copy any other veterans on this correspondence, aware that it might stir up some old controversy.⁸⁴

⁸² Chandler North to Chelton Leonard, March 13, 1962, Sierra Club Records, Box 82, Folder 34, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 71/103 c, Berkeley, California.

⁸³ David R. Brower to Stuart Udall, March 13, 1962, Sierra Club Records, Box 82, Folder 34, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 71/103 c, Berkeley, California.

⁸⁴ Joan and John Geisler to David R. Brower, June 18, 1996, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 118, Folder 23, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

Sierra Clubbers were well aware that skiers in favor of development were inclined to caricature them “as selfish extremists, rugged, wealthy, and opposed to all-out multiple use.”⁸⁵ In response, they would not deny the charge of ruggedness but lean into it. Preservationists positioned themselves as being in truer communion with both the mountains and the proper spirit of masculine recreation. Downhill skiers, they argued, had the benefit of ski lifts and access roads all over the West and Southern California. It was the ski mountaineers who would be disfranchised by development of San Gorgonio. Ski mountaineering was “the most wholesome skiing,” while downhill skiing was mere “slope dopeing.” And just because skiing was a generally “wholesome activity” this did not exempt it from possibly posing an environmental concern. Swimming was also a worthwhile sport, Brower wrote in one prepared talking point, “but look at what has happened to our beach towns” due to development.⁸⁶ They argued both that multiple use was the bedrock of their position so long as you disaggregated “wilderness use” into its constituent parts and that their version of winter sport was superior. “Hikers, campers, hunters, fishermen, horsemen” as well as “youth groups...water users...[and] naturalists” would all benefit from the area remaining wilderness, while “[n]o other place in Southern California offers a good chance for” cross-country skiing, the “original, and still finest form of the sport.”⁸⁷

They simultaneously defended themselves from charges of anti-downhill elitism by characterizing themselves as the true advocates of the interests of skiers. “Some people think the San Gorgonio controversy is a battle between skiers and non-skiers,” the Riverside Chapter of the Sierra Club wrote to Club President William Siri in 1964, “[t]he Sierra Club has probably

⁸⁵ David R. Brower to Clinton P. Anderson, January 11, 1962, Sierra Club Records, Box 82, Folder 34, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 71/103 c, Berkeley, California.

⁸⁶ David R. Brower, hand-written note dated, 1947, David Ross Brower Papers, Box 4, Folder 91, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 79/9 c, Berkeley, California.

⁸⁷ Defenders of the San Gorgonio Wilderness, “HELP PRESERVE SAN GORGONIO!” undated, Sierra Club Records, Box 82, Folder 34, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 71/103 c, Berkeley, California.

more skiers than any ski club in the nation” and “lodges and training facilities for the use of skiers.” They would be more than happy to see additional commercial ski development, just not at the expense of “our last and finest wilderness of Southern California.”⁸⁸ Muir Dawson, another veteran of the mountain troops and longtime Club member from Southern California had twice won major downhill ski races on San Gorgonio, feats which he made sure to emphasize in his opposition to the construction of lifts. He could not be dismissed as an out of touch preservationist when he claimed that having to scale the mountain beforehand had only added to his enjoyment of his downhill victories.

The 1947 plan for San Gorgonio development ended when the Chief of the U.S. Forest Service, under pressure from the coordinated efforts of wilderness preservationists, announced that no development would go through on the grounds that “San Gorgonio Primitive Area has a higher public value as a wilderness and a watershed than as a downhill ski area.” The contest with pro-development downhill skiers offered the first chance for Brower to express his newfound direction for the Club in the context of preserving American wilderness. “The San Gorgonio crisis calls for a re-examination of old precepts,” he wrote in the *Sierra Club Bulletin*. “What is behind the words we toss about so freely? What good is Wilderness?” Rejecting the short-term, profit-oriented thinking he saw embedded in the development proposals, Brower argued for a definition of conservation which emphasized the preservation of wilderness as “a resource of the spirit” on a generational timescale.⁸⁹ The remainder of David Brower’s long career as an environmental activist, inside and outside of the Sierra Club, was dedicated to the notion of protecting that “resource of the spirit,” for as expansive a constituency as possible; “for

⁸⁸ Unsigned to William Siri, July 15, 1964, Sierra Club Records, Box 82, Folder 34, Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 71/103 c, Berkeley, California.

⁸⁹ David Brower, “In the Long Run,” *Sierra Club Bulletin*, Vol. 32 No. 2, (February 1947), 4.

thousands today and for millions of tomorrow's generations.”⁹⁰ This new direction, guided by a principle of universal protection for all wilderness areas for all Americans, was a direct outgrowth of the experience of the war.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Conclusion: Nature Therapy and Bridging the Veteran/Civilian Divide

Tim Keenan felt like a new man after hiking all 2,178 miles of the Appalachian Trail. The journey, alternately arduous and inspiring, gave the Michigan native “a new level of inner peace.” By the time he reached the trail’s end at Mt. Katahdin in September 2009, he was no longer just Tim Keenan, a Vietnam veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder diagnosis, a failed marriage, and a strained relationship with his son. A portion of his identity was tied up with his trail name, “Naneek.” He felt lighter, tougher, stronger, and had overcome the crippling fear of being alone in the woods that had dogged him since his return from a year of combat duty in 1968. “The journey helped me sort through much of the anger and sadness that I brought home from the war,” he wrote in his memoir *The Good Hike*. Above all, he felt a profound sense of grateful simplicity, living by the mantra: “Enjoy, relax, be grateful.” He had achieved this not by avoiding his traumatic memories as he had for decades, but by letting them return to his mind on the trail. Each ridge was a reminder of Hill 1338, the strongpoint that his Division had taken at great cost and for little strategic gain during the Battle of Đắk Tô. A troop of Boy Scouts jumping in a Vermont pond triggered memories of his platoon slogging through a tropical river and burning leeches from each other’s bodies afterwards. At least one of the “trusting and loving bond[s]” he formed with another thru-hiker, “was eerily similar to the bond formed by [his] fellow soldiers and [himself] in Vietnam.” Keenan returned to Michigan spiritually, psychologically, and physically revived, even returning to Vietnam to revisit Hill 1338 and to seek reconciliation with some of the Vietnamese soldiers he had fought as a young man.¹

¹ Tim Keenan, *The Good Hike: A Story of the Appalachian Trail, Vietnam, PTSD, and Love*, (Traverse City, MI: Mission Point Press 2016), 180, 233-242.

Four years after Keenan completed his thru-hike, a veteran of a different war celebrated the same feat. Zachary Adamson, a twenty-four-year-old from Georgetown, Ohio who hiked under the trail name “Shady,” had felt much the same as Keenan: confident, respected, and strong. A fellow thru-hiker with him that day named “Patches” described the collective feeling of their “trail crew” as “a certain sense of invincibility and solidarity.”² Adamson, an Airborne Ranger in the Army’s 75th Ranger Regiment, had been honorably discharged from the military four months earlier after four years in the Army and five tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. The idea for the hike had been gestating since an early deployment to Afghanistan, when Adamson’s close friend and fellow Ranger, Eric Hario, who frequently spoke of his own A.T. plan, was killed in action during his first mission. Like Keenan, Adamson faced constant reminders of combat, including his involvement in a serious but non-lethal friendly fire incident. “Patches” later recalled that his “war memories stalked him on the trail and ambushed him in his sleep. At night, he tried to protect us from foes that we couldn’t see and only he could know,” once throwing himself on top of another hiker when an animal’s shriek triggered his combat-trained instinct. Despite a similar exhilaration, Adamson’s story sharply diverged from Keenan’s when he returned to Ohio. “I loved being on the trail, but I came back home thinking I could pick up where I left off, and I was obviously wrong,” he wrote in his journal in October 2013. “I don’t know what I want to do or where I want to go,” he continued. “What makes me happy is excitement, adrenaline, new places, new adventures,” precisely what both the Army and the A.T. had given him, but which had also left him with the insomnia, heightened emotional responses, and paranoia familiar to traumatized veterans. In January 2014, only three months after

² “Patches,” “Getting Thru.” *Patches Thru*, January 12, 2014, <https://resonantliving.wordpress.com/2014/01/12/getting-thru/> (accessed September 16, 2025).

summiting Katahdin and less than a year after his discharge, Zachary Adamson died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound.³

These stories, so nearly identical with the exception of their tragically divergent endings, demonstrate some of the complexity of the now common practice of military veterans engaging in therapeutic outdoor recreation as a form of treatment for the physical, emotional, and psychological scars of combat. In this, Keenan and Adamson, were each, though on their own initiative, consciously reenacting a decades old narrative of trauma and healing through nature. However, as the story of Zach Adamson reveals, nature therapy is neither a permanent or perfect solution to veteran trauma. As the Department of Veteran's Affairs, the National Park Service, and other federal and state government agencies have turned to nature therapy as a cheap, popular, politically uncontroversial, and seemingly efficacious solution to an epidemic of veteran mental and physical health problems, it is crucial to investigate how and why veterans began to engage in these practices and how this history informs their organized implementation in the present.

Multiple factors are always at play in the process of veteran reintegration into civilian life. Nature may be powerful and efficacious in many cases, but it cannot account for all of the elements which govern the success or failure of that process. The case studies in this dissertation offer examples of past veterans who were largely successful in their reintegration because their encounters with nature involved many of these factors. For example, gendered ideas of family

³ Cindy Ross, *Walking Toward Peace: Veterans Healing on America's Trails*, (Seattle: Mountaineers Books, 2021), 97-107; Veterans searching for the peace of nature on the trail have also encountered violence from other sources. In 2019, Ron "Stronghold" Sanchez, an Iraq War veteran who thought of the A.T. as "a safe place to process his emotions and find the self-efficacy to meet internal challenges," was stabbed to death in a random act of violence along the trail in Virginia while on a thru-hike as part of a Department of Veterans Affairs neurological study; Kathryn Miles, "Before His Murder, Ron Sanchez Sought Solace on the AT," *Outside Online*, May 17, 2019, <https://www.outsideonline.com/outdoor-adventure/hiking-and-backpacking/appalachian-trail-murder-ron-sanchez/> (accessed September 23, 2025).

and masculinity were always present, and veteran homesteaders and CCC enrollees were able to recast their work in nature as a way to provide for their families as the heads of households despite their war-related injuries and neuroses. However, when veterans are left to encounter nature individually or exclusively as veterans, they can easily come to augment this relationship with less wholesome connotations.

Despite the prevalence of organized outdoor therapy programs, when one now thinks of the veteran in nature, they are likely to conjure up images of a lone figure who has retreated to the woods as a form of isolated self-medication or to simply avoid the pressures of reintegration. The immediate cultural touchstone for this stereotype is John Rambo, the troubled but honorable Vietnam-veteran drifter portrayed by Sylvester Stallone in a series of increasingly violent and rightwing action films of the 1980s. In the relatively staid first installment of the series, *First Blood*, Rambo travels alone through the forests of the rural Pacific Northwest hoping to visit a former comrade. Upon learning that his fellow veteran has died from cancer related to the wartime defoliant Agent Orange, he is harassed by a local sheriff until his traumatic memories trigger the violent reemergence to the survival and evasion skills he learned as a Special Forces soldier. The character has become an avatar of the alleged abandonment of veterans by both their government and wider civilian society.⁴ To the extent that wild nature is therapeutic for Rambo, it is as a buffer insulating him from trauma that only other veterans might understand.

⁴ The Rambo film franchise has been repeatedly analyzed by historians and film scholars, who see a host of cultural neuroses and anxieties represented in it. It has been considered as a symbol of attempts to resurrect the damaged masculinity and power of a defeated United States and a meditation on the boomeranging violence of combat returning to the home front. See, Susan Jeffords, "Debridging Vietnam: The Resurrection of the White American Male" in *Feminist Studies* Vol. 14 No. 3 (Autumn, 1988), 525-543; Eben J. Muse, "From Lt. Calley to John Rambo: Repatriating the Vietnam War" in *Journal of American Studies* Vol. 27 No. 1 (April 1993), 88-92; Kirby Farrell, "The Berserk Style in Post-Vietnam America" in *Etnofoor* Vol. 13, No. 1 (2000), 7-31. According to literary scholar Joseph Darda, the character was crucial to the construction of the default cultural assumption of the veteran as a white man. Rambo "reimagined white America as veteran America." Joseph Darda, *How White Men Won the Culture Wars: A History of Veteran America* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), 121-124, 143-147. The specific importance of isolating nature to the character has not yet received sustained scholarly attention.

It is not coincidental that John Rambo's fictional biography designates him as a Special Forces veteran. For the plot of the film, this background explains both his facility for decisive violence and his ability to employ guerilla tactics and survival skills which allow him to almost disappear in nature. Since 1980, soldiers operating under the U.S. Army's Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), have played an increasingly prominent role in American military strategy.⁵ This has coincided with the rising cultural visibility of special operations units such as the Navy SEALs and Army Rangers as symbols of American martial competence. These units also embody a particular conception of the relationship between soldiers and veterans and American nature. Special Forces applicants undergo extensive and grueling training involving harsh and extreme environmental conditions, their transformation into elite soldiers through such activities a less peaceful mirror of the ideas which underpin much contemporary veteran nature rehabilitation programs.⁶ As they have become more and more central to American combat operations despite their largely clandestine activities, they have also begun to serve as a symbol of the growing divide between civilians and veterans.

In some cases, the association between returning Special Forces soldiers and American nature seems to offer a path to social reintegration familiar from the preceding chapters. In the early 1970s, Colonel Robert Rheault returned to America after serving as the commander of the Army's 5th Special Forces Group in Vietnam. Rheault had retired after a 26-year military career after facing a court-martial for his alleged involvement in the conspiracy to extrajudicially

⁵ Matthew Johnson, "The Growing Relevance of Special Operations Forces in U.S. Military Strategy," in *Comparative Strategy* Vol. 25 No. 4 (2006), 273-296; Christopher K. Ives, *U.S. Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam: Military Innovation and Institutional Failure, 1961-1963*, (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2006).

⁶ Some veterans nature programs are, in fact, geared exclusively toward members of Special Forces units. These include FORCE BLUE which sends former Special Forces soldiers on marine restoration "missions," participation in which is referred to as a "tour of duty," and Operation Healing Forces, which offers more traditional therapeutic retreats but only for Special Forces veterans and their loved ones.

execute a suspected North Vietnamese double agent. When Rheault took a job as an instructor at the Hurricane Island Outward Bound school in coastal Maine in 1971, he found it comfortable because it reflected all of his favorite aspects of military life: “the intense physical involvement, the camaraderie, the sense of mission, the sense of service; yet...without destruction.” He found, according to his wife Susan, “what William James called *the moral equivalent of war*.” However, the truest form of Rheault’s return to psychological health and balance came in his reintegration into social life, a process which involved shedding some of the baggage of his first career. He arrived in Maine, he said “a bit of a pole cat at a church picnic” because of his notorious Army service. “I was certainly not welcomed with open arms,” he claimed. “I had to prove myself as being a person and not just a caricature.”⁷ This he accomplished by coming to be a part of a community of recreators and educators.⁸

The association between veterans and nature is, however, just as open to cooptation by those driven by darker historical forces. Unlike most those seen in the preceding chapters, many veterans have returned from their service prepared to assert proprietary claims on American nature, often as part of a racist or white separatist ideology. The historian Kathleen Belew has written about the central role played by military veterans in the white power, neo-fascist, and paramilitary movements in the United States, especially since the end of the Vietnam War. Within this history are links, sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit, between ideas of racial and environmental purity. Belew explores how white nationalist veterans turned to the rural Pacific Northwest as an ideal base of operations partially due to a crude environmental

⁷ Susan St. John, *To Sail Beyond the Sunset: Hurricane Island – the Outward Bound Years* (Camden, ME: Philip Conkling & Associates, 2017), 166-169.

⁸ This also made Rheault an early proponent of the organized use of outdoor recreation for the treatment of veterans’ mental and physical problems, working to “convince the VA (Veterans Administration) that [Outward Bound excursions] should become a regular part of the VA’s treatment process” as early as 1983. Bob Rheault, “Outward Bound as an Adjunct to Therapy in the Treatment of Vietnam Veterans” in Tom Williams, ed. *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders: A Handbook for Clinicians* (Cincinnati: Disabled American Veteran, 1987), 233-237.

determinism. The region “had everything the movement required: space free of ‘hostiles, indifferents or aliens,’ a coast, mountains, water, vacant land, a definable border, and ‘the warmth of the temperate zones but the cold which our Folk require in order to thrive.’” Other far-right veterans, terming a portion of the area the “American Redoubt,” have emphasized its supposed defensibility in the event of civil conflict or social collapse due to its mountainous and rugged terrain. Such veterans are also as prone to self-narrativization as any others. The historian Evelyn A. Schlatter has shown the centrality of myths associated with the American West for white supremacists. In the shock of the loss in Vietnam, she argues, some Americans fell back on familiar tropes to reconstruct their masculinity and power. Noting the ongoing resonance of the idea of a violent frontier, where such men “can be the cowboys and the warriors that serve as the archetype of American culture and character.”⁹ While there is obviously a relationship between veterans and American nature that does not need to result in this sort of extremism, it is important to understand how such content can graft itself onto that relationship with ease under the correct conditions.

Military veterans are hardly alone in their use of nature as a refuge from the problems of their lives. Those who do so are necessarily engaging in a practice with deep roots in American life and culture. For as long as there are American wars, American veterans are likely to turn to

⁹ Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 162; James Wesley Rawles, “The American Redoubt – Move to the Mountain States,” *Survivalblog.com*, March 28, 2011, <https://survivalblog.com/redoubt/> (accessed April 23, 2026); Evelyn A. Schlatter, *Aryan Cowboys: White Supremacists and the Search for a New Frontier, 1970-2000* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 37. In many ways, the veterans studied by these historians are embracing a literal version of the role assigned to the frontier in American cultural life by the historian Richard Slotkin, “regeneration through violence.” See, Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000) 2nd ed. These trends also mirror the rise of Special Operations units within the armed forces. Prominent white separatists who have tried to create their own Pacific Northwest redoubts include Randy Weaver and Bo Gritz. Famous for their roles in the standoff between the Weaver family and federal agents in rural northern Idaho, both were Green Berets, though Weaver never served overseas. See Crawford Gribben, *Survival and Resistance in Evangelical America: Christian Reconstruction in the Pacific Northwest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

the outdoors to in the search for rehabilitation. The fact that the U.S. government has latched onto the practice as way of managing the results of its conflicts indicates that it will only rise in prominence with any new military engagements. The case studies covered in this dissertation offer the reminder that there is no true rehabilitation without reintegration, and that any attempts to use nature to heal veterans in isolation from the rest of society are leaving out a significant element of what makes nature therapy a useful clinical and social tool in the first place. Veterans will always seek to construct meaning for themselves in peacetime. American nature can play a role in this process, but it is incapable of taking its place.

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