Wilderness Architecture and the American Mind

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This paper was first delivered at the Northwest Regional Conference hosted by Washington State University with the theme of "The New Geography of Power." The delegates convened, on one of its two days, in the sublime landscape of Hell's Canyon. Although remote from any city, they remained firmly connected to the wider world. Unlike early pioneers and settlers in the canyon, they arrived effortlessly from diverse places after only a few hours of travel, and while they were there, modern technology ensured that they need not lose contact with people far away. Clearly they possessed amazing powers that seemed to deny the very essence of wild places. This paper demonstrates and discusses the role of political and economic power in the creation of wilderness architecture.

Since, as we discuss such architecture, we cannot ignore the influence of the picturesque tradition in art; I would like to begin by asking you to form amental picture of a wilderness scene I will describe. The image on the screen shows a conventionally composed seventeenth century painting by Claude Lorraine that clearly represents one of the roots of the picturesque movement. Such works may well influence the way you visualize landscape and how you imagine the place, the people and the architecture of which I speak. Close your eyes and imagine that we are looking out from the porch of a rustic building, fashioned of whole tree trunks, toward a small stream-fed lake in the heart of a forest. The picturesque setting is ideally composed to provide a motif for a romantic artist. Dark trees in the foreground frame a delightful view of the lake. Morning sunlight plays on the water and on the reeds along its bank. Shafts of light penetrate the darkness of the forest and illuminate a path leading into a clearing, beyond which can be seen the peak of a distant mountain. Three figures on a grassy slope in the foreground make animated gestures as if involved in a dramatic event. In the middle distance a fisherman contributes to the picturesque effect as he lazily casts his line over the prow of his boat.

Although the scene would appeal to an artist influenced by Claude Lorraine, the characters who pose in the foreground are not, as you might have guessed, heroes of classical mythology. We are on Swan Lake, Montana, and the men engaged in the lively encounter on the shore are a corporate lawyer, the director of a huge corporation, and their architect who gesticulates dramatically as he explains his concept for a vast new lodge. His wealthy clients secured their powerful positions by brilliant legal maneuvering, resulting in the winning of a trade war and the ruin of their competitors. Although the director's principal home is a palatial Georgian mansion on Long Island, New York, he comes here in the summer to enjoy the beautiful scenery, display his mastery of fly fishing and entertain influential people. After all, his company can convey him here in luxury and the technology exists for him to run the organization from this far away wilderness hideout. Furthermore he can lure important people here, keep them in joyful captivity at this backwoods retreat, and increase his fortune by extracting significant promises from them. In order to help charm the politicians and business men whose support he needs, he includes among his guests stars of the entertainment world, and members of high society, especially beautiful women and good conversationalists who will enhance the pleasurable atmosphere.

All this could be happening today. The corporate jet and the latest electronic communication systems easily promote "The new geography of power." But surprisingly, the scene I describe was set almost eighty years ago. Orville Evans, a wily attorney for the Anaconda Company, had routed the opposition and won the Copper Wars of 1904. Rewarded by his company with a long vacation, he chose to spend the summer at a dude ranch on Swan Lake, near Kalispell. Finding what he described as "paradise" he persuaded his colleague Cornelius Kelley, to join him in buying the place. They built several rustic cabins so that they could entertain family and guests. Even after Kelley became president of his corporation, he continued to spend two months here each summer and to run the company over the long distance phone lines. He always traveled from the East Coast in sumptuous style on the Anaconda, the luxurious company train, attended by Clydesdale, the Scottish butler and an entourage of family and servants. Their voluminous baggage included the silver chest with place settings for fifty people and all the porcelain, glass, and linen needed to maintain the standards of high

Figure 1. The great hall at Kootenai Lodge Montana 1919-20. Architect: Kirtland Cutter.

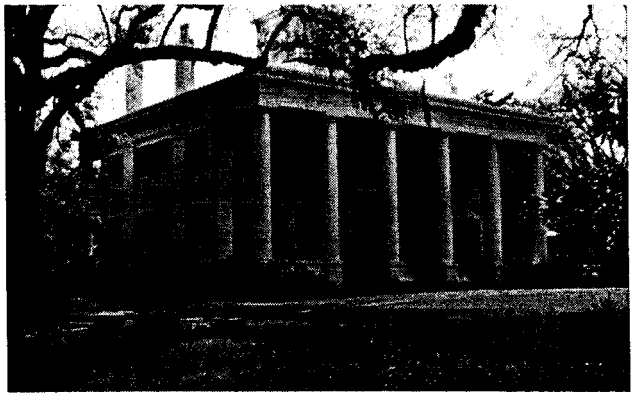

Figure 2. D'Evreux, Natchez Mississippi. ca. 1840.

society while in the backwoods.

Evans and Kelley probably chose their architect Kirtland Cutter because he had created several rustic lodges including one in the Adirondacks for a member of the wealthy Carnegie family, as well as Lake McDonald Lodge in nearby Glacier National Park. Cutter designed log-walled bedrooms around a courtyard linked to a vast interior space like a medieval great hall, but built of whole tree trunks with the bark still on. Along one side, above the massive stone fireplace, runs a balcony like the minstrels' gallery of an old hall. Cutter contrived the structure ingeniously. Clusters of four tree trunks, rising through the cantilevered balcony, hold up giant log purlins, which in turn help to carry the roof. The handrail of the gallery is of gnarled and twisted branches; the steps are of split logs, as if improvised by resourceful pioneers. Here in the great hall exquisitely dressed celebrities gathered before dinner during the season, apparently oblivious of the wilderness around them.' They represent an extraordinary phenomenon in American social life since the late 19th century, the appropriation of the wilderness by the elite.

Up to the late 19th century the American people were unrelenting in what they saw as a God-given task: to subdue the wild continent they settled. In 1654 Edward Johnson eloquently expressed the Puritan view of the land that for centuries had been home to Indians by thanking the Lord "who hath . . . been pleased to turn one of the most Hideous, boundless and Unknown Wildernesses in the world . . . to a well-ordered Commonwealth." In 1697 John Higginson described the unconquered land as "a place where . . . [there] had been nothing but Heathenism, Idolatry and Devil Worship."[2] Johnson's attitude survived two hundred years as a justification for the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. His words are echoed in pious pronouncements by William Gilpin, an early governor of Colorado, about "Progress as God."[3] It seems that influential politicians supported by the religious right hold similar positions today.

Houses in the classical styles of architecture that flourished in the 18th and 19th centuries signified a sense of success in the struggle to overcome such darkness. They remained aloof from their natural surroundings, clearly symbolizing the triumph of civilization over the wilderness. Even the more picturesque and romantic styles popular after 1850 expressed elevated culture rather than affinity with nature. The first vision of the western landscape for many Americans was seen through the eyes of artists. Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran proclaimed in their canvases the heroic quality of the American landscape. They created images of wild andmountainous scenery from the realms of the sublime. The settlers who flocked westwards in the last decades of the 19th century may have been moved by such art, but wherever they settled they aimed to civilize the savage land. As soon as they could progress from primitive log cabins, the pioneers were eager to build in the latest styles of architecture.

Only a few eccentrics were drawn to the wilderness for its own value. Eastwick Evans, who traveled 4000 miles through the western states in 1818, wrote: "How great are the advantages of solitude! . . . How sublime is the silence of nature's ever-active energies! There is something in the very name of wilderness, which charms the ear, soothes the spirit of man, there is religion in it."[4] Charles Fenno Hoffman, the first to extol the virtues of the Adirondacks, experienced "a singular joyousness in a wilderness." "I have felt among some scenes a kind of selfish pleasure, a wild delight, that the spot so lovely, so lonely, bloomed for me alone."[5]

But such men as these did not generally build in the wilderness. Thoreau, author of the dictum "in wilderness is the preservation of the world," built his cabin, only a short walk from the far-from-wild town of Concord.[6] The first to build deliberately rustic lodges that responded to the scale of the mountains and forests were not poets, artists or philosophers, but capitalists interested in exploiting wild places for financial gain. The romantic return to the backwoods was urged on by the profit motive.

William West Durant who led the way in the creation of an Adirondack style of architecture was the son of the president of the Adirondack Railroad Company. Charged with the development of the Raquette lake area he built, between 1876 and 1900, four rustic camps in which he conveyed the magic of the backwoods to wealthy urbanites. Alfred Donaldson described his Camp Pine Knot as: "the first of the artistic and luxurious camps. . . . It was a unique blend of beauty and comfort. . . . the showplace of the woods. Men took a

Figure 3. The Idaho Building at the World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893. Architect: Kirtland Cutter.

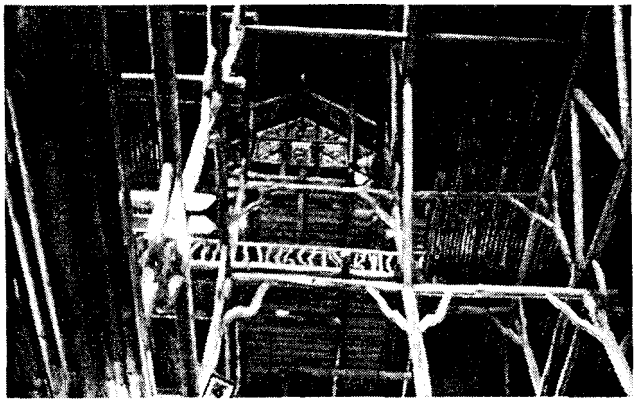

Figure 4. Old Faithful Lodge, Yellowstone National Park 1903. Architect: Robert Reamer.

circuitous route to gain a glimpse of it and to have been a guest within its timbered walls and among its woodland fancies was to wear the hallmark of the envied." Camp Pine Knot combined elements of the pioneer cabin and the Swiss chalet. The log walls were surrounded by verandahs and balconies protected by broad roofs. The delicate latticework of supporting columns, handrails and cross-bracing cut from unpeeled branches gave the buildings their woodland character. They appeared as folk art, harmonizing with the forest, creating for the wealthy an illusion of the simple life.'

Durant's furnishings completed the transformation of his guests intomake-believe backwoodsmen. Gnarled and twisted branches were fashioned into chairs and tables around rough stone fireplaces. Beds sometimes gave the impression that their tenants were held aloft in the branches of trees. At Camp Kill Kare, one of the bed posts continued up to become a treetop in which stuffed birds of prey roosted above the heads of sleeping guests. The taxidermist's art, proudly displayed on walls announced the abundance of game in the forests, waiting to be slaughtered by the cream of society. Durant inspired an astonishing number of rich and influential Americans to forsake thecomforts of New York and Newport for the Adirondacks. Many of them built elaborate camps there. Spending a short season each year hunting and entertaining their friends, they made sure that the rigors of the forests were softened by imported luxuries.

The first building designed to convey the heroic scale of the western landscape to a wider audience may have been the Idaho building at the World's Columbian Exhibition at Chicago in 1893. Standing out among the Classical Revival buildings of the "White City," this massive, three story cabin of cedar logs caught the public imagination by powerfully evoking the frontier. The architect, Kirtland Cutter modeled it after the Swiss châlet, but gave it an unprecedented vigor. The Idaho Building spoke more of the rugged mountains and the pioneer spirit of the Northwest than of the neat and orderly settlements of Switzerland. Built on a heavily buttressed base of craggy basalt, it was firmly rooted to the ground. Sturdy brackets of corbelled logs supported the deeply overhanging eaves of the low-pitched roofs, as well as the surrounding balconies. The ends of the projecting logs and the balustrades of rustic wood stood out against the shadows behind, enhancing the sculptural quality of the structure. Ten thousand visitors a day entered through a cavernous arch in the foot of the tall chimney, to experience a miner's lodge and a trapper's cabin, and displays of Idaho's natural resources as well as Indian crafts. One critic wrote: "It was primitive, signifying undeveloped resources, and at the same time artistic beauty and harmony were reflected in its rustic appearance."

The Idaho Building won the prize for the State building that best expressed the character of the state erecting it. Since nothing like this had ever been built in Idaho before, it is clear that the judges were rewarding symbolic power. Its real purpose, however, was to show theeconomic potential of land that was still wilderness.[8] It stood as an architectural expression of the doctrine of Manifest destiny. While it romanticized the life of the Indians in some of its exhibits, it displayed the resources the white man could exploit while banishing them to barren reserves.

Old Faithful Lodge, built in 1903 at Yellowstone National Park, is an outstanding example of architecture celebrating the wilderness. As we stand in awe of its rugged form we can easily forget that the cavalry was still routing Indians within the park boundaries, while early visitors were admiring the landscape. It was built by the Northern Pacific Railroad to help attract passengers to their line.

Designing the lodge "while coming shakily out of a monumental submersion in malt," the architect, Robert Reamer, conceived a vast shingled lodge whose steeply pitched roof rises through six of its seven stories.[9] Massive piers of battered log cribbing support a broad balcony, above which branching tree-like columns bear the weight of the overhanging roof. The visitor, humbled by the vast scale of the structure, enters the hotel under the porte cochère and after passing through an area with a low ceiling, experiences the drama of an interior space eighty-five feet high, with galleries on several levels. A gigantic chimneystack of rough stone with fireplaces on all four sides rises the full height of this central lobby. Columns branch out like human figures with outstretched arms to carry the upper galleries. Compared with

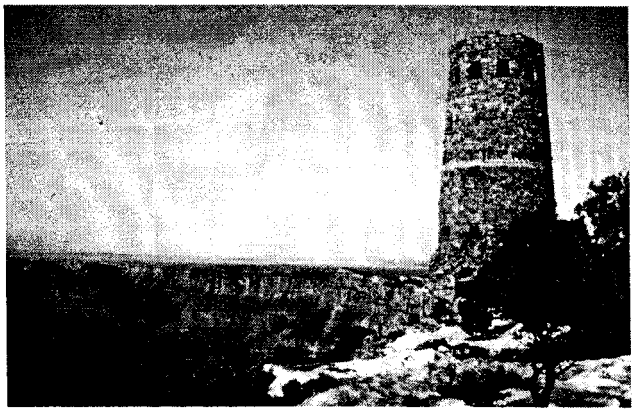

Figure 5. Desert Watchtower. 1935 Grand Canyon. Architect: Mary Colter.

the mighty exterior timbers these appear delicate and linear as they extend upwards to support the roof. Staircases and walkways overhanging the abyss lead to the "crow's nest" at the apex where musicians once played for the guests below. Light filtering in through many small dormers, throws the skeleton of the building into sharp relief, and changes with the time of day and the weather. This unique space suggests one of Piranesi's Carceri engravings transformed from monumental stone to fragile wood; it conveys grandeur, but also exploits detail.

Old Faithful Lodge provided a profitable model for other railroad companies, but none of their hotels surpassed it in imagination or structural daring. El Tovar, built at the south rim of the Grand Canyon by the Santa Fe Railway, to the design of Charles Whittlesley, is closer to a Shingle Style resort hotel of the late 19th century. The most significant innovation at the Grand Canyon resulted from the employment of the architect Mary Colter, beginning in 1904, to design a number of smaller buildings there. The Fred Harvey Company discovered that the passengers were fascinated by the Indians and their crafts. Colter, who from her youth, had studied Indian art, built the Hopi House next to El Tovar, as a shop for Indian wares.

Modeling it on the traditional dwellings of the Hopi Indians, she brought to bear both her respect for the native people and an archaeological interest in their building methods. She found inspiration for her Watch Tower, which stands dramatically on the rim of the canyon at Desert View, on the towers of the Anasazi Indians at Hovenweep. Her Hermit's Rest and Lookout Studio, both built of rugged rock quarried nearby, respond directly to the extraordinary geology of their precarious sites.[10]

As in the Idaho Building, Kirtland Cutter modeled his Lake McDonald Lodge at Glacier National Park on the Swiss châlet, which he interpreted in the manner of the American lodge. The interior is a superb example of rustic design of the emerging tradition. In each of the comers of the high central space three vast tree trunks with their bark intact, rise to carry the ends of trusses that span the space diagonally. Smaller logs carry the galleries, which are fronted by delicate balus-

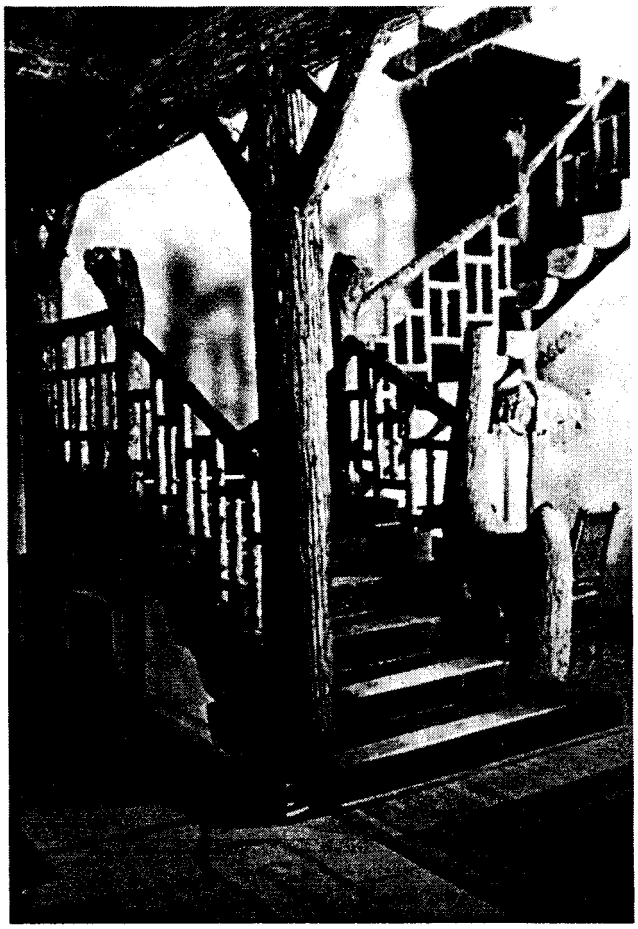

Figure 6. Lake McDonald Lodge. Staircase.

trades. Thus the hierarchy of structural materials is clearly expressed. Cutter's relish for the accidents of nature can be seen in the curious balustrade of the staircase. As I have shown, the two decades around the turn of the century saw the construction of astonishing wilderness retreats for robber barons and grand rustic hotels accessible to the middle class.

Mary Colter, Kirtland Cutter and Robert Reamer were masters of the genre. They helped to establish a tradition of rustic architecture, which was to endure until the onset of World War I. However during the Great Depression in the 1930s circumstances changed. A new range of lodges and park shelters were put up, not so much to amuse the rich, but to give opportunities to the poor. Under Franklin D. Roosevelt, park development became an important means of work relief. In 1933, 274,000 young men of the Civilian Conservation Corps were stationed in camps throughout the nation. Many of them were soon at work quarrying stone, felling tall trees, and setting up blacksmiths' shops, for the construction of park shelters. The story of the C.C.C. is an extraordinary sequel to the Arts and Crafts Movement of the late 19th century in England. William Morris would have been overjoyed to see that these people, rather toiling in factories, were working with their hands to create simple structures of natural materials. The guiding authority behind their design was the

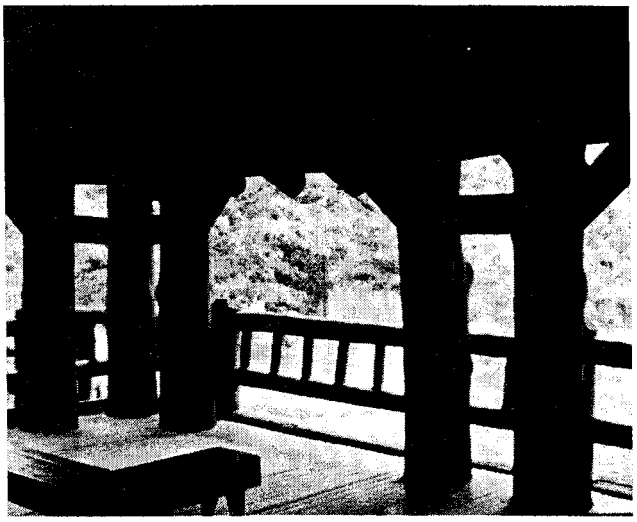

Figure 7. Picnic shelter at Crowley's Ridge State Park, Arkansas.

Figure 8. Timberline Lodge, Mount Hood, Oregon 1937. Architect: W. I. Turner. Engineer: Ward Gano. Interior designer: Margery Hoffman Smith.

National Park Service, which under Stephen Mather, developed the policy that park buildings should relate closely to the landscape.[11]

At Palmetto State park in Texas, for example, the refectory, designed by Olin Smith in 1935 applies the "National Park Style" to the terrain of a swampy region of Texas. Not only did he use local stone as if the building is actually rooted to the ground; he thatched it with palmetto fronds that grow on the site. The park headquarters at Lake Murray State Park, Oklahoma is like the romantic stone cottage of an imaginary pioneer. Cabins for rent, built in the same manner, offer outdoor fireplaces, ideal for cool evenings in a southern climate. In the octagonal picnic shelter with a big communal hearth, massive stone walls support a powerfully constructed timber roof. Beside a stone bridge, now serving as amemorial to E. J. Johnson, the park superintendent and designer of all these works, a structure of huge stones provides a resting place beside the river.

In Arkansas, Crowley's Ridge State Park offers a variant of the rustic picnic shelter. The lower walls of rugged rock support a canopied platform at the upper level, overlooking the lake. The powerful columns that bear the weight of the roof stand with the presence of sculptured figures. Boulder Mountain in Colorado includes outstanding examples of the National Park Style. It boasts the best example in the world of a public convenience built in the cyclopean masonry of the Myceneans.[12]

Of all the depression era park structures, built to give employment to out-of-work architects, craftsmen and artists, none surpasses Timberline Lodge at Mount Hood, Oregon. This W.P.A. projectrepresents the last flourish of the Arts and Crafts Movement with all the original ideology intact. The architect W. I. Turner and the engineer Ward Gano conceived the lodge to exist in harmony with the mountain. They quarried the stone on a nearby slope, and cut giant fir and pine in the forest below. At the heart of the structure they built a lofty, hexagonal space with a central stone chimney. A man wielding a broad ax with a twelve-inch blade fashioned the six hexagonal columns each out of a single tree, and the principal rafters were also formed from whole trunks. Masons took special care to blend the stones of different colors as they built the walls. Craftsmen designed details with an approach reminiscent of the Brothers Greene who had taken the American Craftsman movement to its peak a quarter century before. The interior design, under the direction of Margery Hoffman Smith, combined the work of wood carvers, blacksmiths, furniture makers, artists in glass, painters, and weavers. Few projects in modern times have claimed such allegiance among the participants. As a W.P.A. writer stated in 1937: "[the project's] social values could not be estimated in monetary return for toil, nor man-hours of labor completed."[13] It is sad the names of those who built so well in a time of deprivation are all but forgotten.

The depression era saw the democratization of rustic architecture. The Works Progress administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps, while giving work to artists, artisans and previously unskilled people, developed wilderness areas for public enjoyment. In the process many young people gained work experience that changed their lives. It is tragic that unemployed youth today is offered few such opportunities. Politicians seem to regard the kind of programs that produced superb park structures as pointless make-work ventures that only increase the dependency of the poor on public handouts. It is also unfortunate that in our present period of unparalleled prosperity government cutbacks are endangering the survival of existing park structures. Structures such as Paradise Lodge on Mount Rainier are being allowed to deteriorate rapidly as if they are of no significance

Of course, rustic architecture is still flourishing in another sector. If we could penetrate the estates of the very wealthy in Colorado, Idaho, Montana and Utah, we would find superb rustic retreats. We have come full circle to a time when picturesque building in the wilderness is mainly possible for the elite, as it was in the Adirondacks in the late nineteenth century. Today, most low-income city dwellers will never

stand beneath a vast shingled canopy held aloft by huge timbers and gaze out into a forest. On the other hand there are new opportunities for the wealthy to call the wilderness their own. Armed with fast modems and generous travel budgets, they can realize their romantic dreams of imaginative log structures. The unique tradition of rustic architecture, launched in America by H. H. Richardson in his Ames Gate Lodge, deserves to survive, not just for a privileged group, but for the enjoyment of all.

NOTES

[1] Bett Wetzel, "Kootenai Lodge: Wilderness Waldorf for Copper Magnates," *Montana Magazine* (Helena, 1980). Robert G. Mahrt, "National Register Nomination: Kootenai Lodge Historic District" (Helena, 1983). Judy Clayton Comell, "Kootenai Lodge," *Big Sky Journal* (Bozeman 1, No. 2 (Summer 1994), pp. 56-59. Also Author's interview with Dennis Thomkins, October 1986.

[2] Edward Johnson, *Wonder-Working Providence,* 1654 and John Higginson, *An Attestation to the Church-History of New-England,* 1697. Both quoted by Roderick Nash in *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, 1967), p. 37.

[3] Nash, p. 41.

[4] Eastwick Evans, *A Pedestrious Tour of Four Thousand Miles Through the Western States and Territories During the winter and Spring of 1818* (Concord, NH, 1819). Quotedby Nash, p. 56.

[5] Charles Hoffman, *A winter in the West* (New York, 1835). Quoted in Nash, p. 61.

[6] Henry David Thoreau, *Excursions, the Writings of Henry David Thoreau* (Boston, 1893).

[7] Harvey H. Kaiser, *Great Camps of the Adirondacks* (Boston, 1982), Chapters 2 & 5.

[8] Henry Matthews, "The Search for a Northwest Vernacular: Kirtland Cutter and the Rustic Picturesque," in Nicola Gordon Bowe, Ed., *Art and the National Dream* (Dublin, 1992), pp. 70-72. Henry Matthews, "Kirtland Cutter, Spokane's Architect" in David Stratton, Ed., *Spokane and the Inland Empire* (Pullman, 1992), p. 147. Don Hibbard, "Chicago 1893: Idaho at the World's Columbian Exposition," *Idaho's Yesterdays,* (Summer 1980), pp. 23-29.

[9] David Leavengood, unpublished paper, ca. 1992.

[10] Virginia Grattan, *Mary Colter: Building Upon the Red Earth* (Flagstaff, 1980).

[11] James W. Steely, *The Civilian Conservation Corps in Texas State Parks* (Austin, 1986).

[12] Albert H. Good, *Park and Recreation Structures.*

[13] Works Progress Administration, *The Builders of Timberline Lodge* (Portland, Oregon, 1937). Facsimileedition, nd., Hallwyler Printing Co., Portland.