

The Fight to Save **THE REDWOODS**



A History of
Environmental Reform,
1917–1978

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Progressives and Scenic Preservation

ON AN August afternoon in 1917, three men drove north from San Francisco in search of "a forest wall reported to have mystery and charm unique among living works of creation." Madison Grant, Henry Fairfield Osborn, and John Campbell Merriam left from the Russian River in Sonoma County to camp in the northern redwoods, made accessible that year by a new highway. The trio had first swung west to the Pacific Ocean and followed the coastline to Fort Bragg. Below Shelter Cove they crossed inland over low coastal mountains and descended into the valley of the South Fork of the Eel River. They turned north on the dusty new highway as it followed the South Fork over hilly, wooded terrain. Merriam said of this stretch, "Dark masses of fir gave place now and then to redwood, or a patch of ripened grass-land rested like a golden brooch in the deep green velvet of the forest."¹

Soon they were in dense forest. A few miles above the junction of the South Fork and the main Eel River, they turned south into the valley of Bull Creek. They left the highway and "dropped down a steep slope into primeval redwood timber," their car quietly rolling over the "leafy carpet." Merriam recalled how the three proceeded on foot, as the "shade deepened into twilight." Between close-set trunks, they looked as if "through windows framed in shadow, often darkening till all detail disappeared."²

Their dismay that none of the groves they would visit were in public ownership grew as sounds of logging filtered into their camp. They resolved to rescue Bull Creek.³ Their decision can only be fully understood in the context of these scientists' lives, the trees' unique character, and the emergence of the preservation movement.

Citizen Reform: California's State Park System

IN THE summer of 1919, in response to accelerated western logging and the concern of the Save-the-Redwoods League, Congress passed a resolution directing the secretary of the Interior to investigate the advisability of a redwood national park.¹ A year later the secretary recommended a park along Del Norte County's lower Klamath River, a broad waterway lined with sweeping green hills.² But neither the resolution nor the report led to federal financing—nor had anyone, including Stephen Mather, National Park Service director and author of the resolution, anticipated they would.³ Existing national parks were areas that had never been removed from the public domain.

The redwoods of Del Norte and Humboldt counties had passed into private ownership, and there was no federal inclination to purchase them back. The resolution and the report could only express the hope that "public-spirited" individuals might donate the purchase price. Mather's annual report for 1920 also indicated that he expected the league—an organization similar to those he "god-fathered" in Oregon and Washington—to encourage the state of California to protect the trees lining the projected north-south Redwood Highway and rescue high quality groves there. The American motorist could then journey along California's scenic highway north from San Francisco, pause at various state parks, and eventually reach the federal reserve in Del Norte County.⁴ But Mather's vision was only partially realized, and twenty years later the sweeping Klamath stands were logged. The House resolution of 1919 was significant only as a prelude to the search for alternate sources of funding.

The twenty-six men who signed the league's articles of incorporation in 1920 adopted the funding scheme outlined in the director's report.