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Introduction



. . . and yet I am greatly mistaken if the verdict of more familiar acquaintance by the American people with America is not, that here,—among these central ranges of continental mountains and these great companion parks, within this wedded circle of majestic hill and majestic plain, under these skies of purity, and in this atmosphere of elixir, lies the pleasure-ground and health-home of the nation.

—SAMUEL BOWLES, *The Switzerland of America: A Summer Vacation in the Parks and Mountains of Colorado* (1869)

AS EDITOR BOWLES OF THE *Springfield Republican* made his way through Colorado's parks and mountains during his memorable 1868 visit and recorded his impressions, the comparison he repeatedly made was to the Swiss Alps. "We saw enough of it in our stage ride across the Continent in 1865," he wrote in his preface, "to suggest that it would become the Switzerland of America . . . ; and now, after a new visit . . . we find our original enthusiasm more than rekindled, or original thought confirmed." Not surprisingly, such a prediction struck a responsive chord in the popular imagination of the nation and, in the years that immediately followed, Bowles's book played an important role in promoting the scenic wonders of Colorado and the Rocky Mountain West.

Within a decade of Bowles's visit, Colorado's parks became a favorite destination for those seeking pleasure and health. For many of these visitors, the destination of choice was not Colorado Springs and nearby Manitou Springs—the "Saratoga of the West," where the fashionable found, or at least pretended to find, a social scene comparable to anything in the East or even Europe—but the upland valley of Estes Park, some seventy miles northwest of Denver. The Denver press had decided by 1880 that this valley was "the gem of the mountains," a place easy of access and without social pretension

where Americans of all ranks could feel at home. This has not changed. For nearly a century and a half the Estes Valley has been one of Colorado and the West's most visited places. For ninety years the village of Estes Park has served as the eastern gateway to Rocky Mountain National Park, from its beginning the most popular national park west of the Mississippi. This book is concerned with this special region of north-central Colorado—town, valley, and national park during their years of greatest growth and development, from 1903 to 1945—a story I began in "*This Blue Hollow*": *Estes Park, The Early Years, 1859–1915* (1999) and *Mr. Stanley of Estes Park* (2000).

Occupying an area of nearly six square miles, Estes Park, Colorado, is a world apart. The town sits at 7,500 feet above sea level in a semi-arid 32-square-mile upland meadow that also bears its name. To the east across twenty miles of undulating foothills and winding valleys and canyons are the historic railroad towns of Lyons and Loveland. Fort Collins, the county seat, lies forty miles to the northeast. The Estes Valley is watered by two major rivers and their tributaries, Fall River and the Big Thompson River, which rise in the high country to the west.

The geologic story of Estes Park is a complex one. Yet, thanks to the forces of uplift and erosion that created the Rocky Mountains, Estes Park is surrounded by scenic beauty that few North American towns can rival. To the south towers 14,256-foot Longs Peak, flanked by Mount Meeker and Mount Lady Washington; to the west and the northwest along the Continental Divide are the spectacular peaks, jagged knobs, and rugged projections of the Front Range and the Mummy Range. The sub-alpine portion of this mountain world is one of U-shaped valleys, rocky amphitheatres, and crystal clear lakes. Its flowering meadows are separated by heavily wooded stands of ponderosa and lodgepole pine, douglas fir and engelmann spruce, intermixed with aspen and willow of shimmering green or gold. Since 1915 some 417 square miles of this wilderness west of Estes Park has been set aside in Rocky Mountain National Park, a full third of which lies above 11,500 feet in harsh, wind-swept tundra. Across the Divide, on the park's western slope, rise streams that form the Colorado River.

My narrative begins on September 4, 1915, with the dedication of Rocky Mountain National Park, a day of new beginnings, and provides a brief summary of the discovery and early development of the Estes Valley and the beginnings of its tourist industry. The modern history of town and region properly dates from June 1903, when Freelan Oscar Stanley, a consumptive from Newton, Massachusetts, brought his small steam car up the North St. Vrain Road and down into Estes Valley. Stanley's arrival, in the words of his friend Enos Mills, was an "epoch making event," establishing a relationship

and presence felt for more than four decades. After chronicling Estes Park's early growth, the community that developed around it, and the critical role that F. O. Stanley played in both, I take up the early, formative years of Rocky Mountain National Park, the efforts made at its promotion, and the decade-long controversy over roads and transportation that shaped and retarded its development. Subsequent chapters trace the history of town, park, and their relationship chronologically through the expansive years of the 1920s and the difficult years of the 1930s and early 1940s. The book concludes with V-J Day in August 1945, which brought to an end the austerities of war and ushered in a yet another era of growth and development.

Beginning in 1915, the relationship between Rocky Mountain National Park and the village of Estes Park has been an interdependent one, and for this reason I have resisted the temptation to write two histories rather than one. As in "*This Blue Hollow*," I have tried to place their shared history in its larger regional and national context. What happened in Estes Park and in Rocky Mountain National Park between 1903 and 1945 are part of a decidedly "American" story involving an increasingly mobile, affluent, and leisure- and recreation-oriented nation, its discovery of western tourism, and its continuing love affair with national parks and the Colorado mountains.

As I discovered long ago while researching the Estes Park region, comparatively little exists in the way of reliable published material. This is particularly true for the town of Estes Park where for the period in question no history currently exists. The situation is somewhat better with respect to Rocky Mountain National Park. Here, Curt Buchholtz's *Rocky Mountain National Park: A History* (1983) provides a useful overview. But his is a relatively small, selective book, which in 228 pages takes on the formidable task of telling the history of both Estes Park and Rocky Mountain National Park from Native American times to the date of publication. Of necessity, Buchholtz devotes less than fifty pages to the period under discussion here—enough to make its outlines clear but not enough to provide the kind of informed detail that its history deserves. Also helpful is Lloyd Musselman's older *Rocky Mountain National Park, Administrative History: 1915–1965*, published by the National Park Service in 1971. Musselman's mimeographed paperbound book is organized topically rather than chronologically, however, and it develops its themes selectively, often with little regard for the larger context in which the events took place, including the evolving history of the National Park Service itself.

Fortunately, the literature that frames my study is far more robust. Particularly useful is the expanding body of scholarship on tourism and travel, their role in shaping American values, and the ways they have affected development

west of the Mississippi, including the development of national parks. These works allow us to better understand the history of places like Estes Park, where for nearly 150 years taking care of tourists has been the economic focus of community life. I have in mind full-length studies like Hal K. Rothman's *Devil's Bargains, Tourism in the Twentieth-Century West* (1998) and the essays contained in his *The Culture of Tourism, The Tourism of Culture* (2003), both of which explore the impact of tourism on western communities; David Wrobel's *Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West* (2002) and *Seeing and Being Seen* (2001), the former a study of the ways in which promoters contributed "to the process of identity formation among westerners and to the construction of a 'West' in the national imagination," the latter an important collection of essays on various aspects of western tourism, including the influence of the automobile; as well as more general studies like Marguerite S. Shaffer's *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880–1940* (2001). These works expand the insights offered by Earl Pomeroy in his pioneering *In Search of the Golden West: The Tourist in Western America* (1957) by demonstrating not only how tourism became part of America's consumer culture and redefined our relationship to nature but also how tourists and tourism have contributed to the larger dialogue about our national identity. As demonstrations of the ways in which the once neglected (or looked down upon) study of tourism has become a subject for serious inquiry, such works offer important perspectives on the story I wish to tell here.

I have also used a wide variety of primary sources. These include local, county, state, and federal records; letters; diaries; journals; oral histories; reminiscences; and photographs, some of which remain in private hands. All provide bits and pieces of this complex story. For the history of Rocky Mountain National Park I have made extensive use of park archives that contain the unpublished monthly and annual reports of successive superintendents, letters, legal files, documents, maps, photographs, and other materials as well as a wide variety of specialized studies and reports, most of them unpublished. The completeness of these records—and their ease of access, particularly with respect to the cede jurisdiction controversy and the lawsuits it generated—limited the need to use the archives containing National Park Service documents in Denver, Kansas City, and College Park, Maryland.

As in my earlier books, I have found Colorado newspapers—particularly the *Estes Park Trail* and those published in Denver and the valley towns along the Front Range—to be an invaluable and largely untapped resource. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century as in the last half of the

nineteenth, these papers demonstrated an ongoing interest in events taking place in Estes Park and later in Rocky Mountain National Park and are particularly valuable for the years before 1921, when Estes Park had no permanent year-round newspaper.

Once again my indebtedness is great. The materials that have gone into this book, collected over a period of almost two decades, reflect the help of literally hundreds of people, many of whom have become friends. I cannot possibly acknowledge them all here, although I trust that each will recognize his or her contribution and approve of the way in which it has become part of a larger narrative. Some debts, however, are simply too great and extend over too many years to be allowed to pass unnoted. These include my indebtedness to Frank Hix and Pieter Hondius of Estes Park, who have been gracious enough to read and comment on the manuscript and who have done so in the context of the history of their families whose roots in Estes Park predate the twentieth century. Betty Kilsdonk and the staff of the Estes Park Museum (Lisel Goetze Record, J. J. Rutherford, and Robin Stitzel) have been of great help, as have Judy Visty, Joan Childers, Christy Baker, and Ferrel Atkins at Rocky Mountain National Park, where I have had ready access to the park's library in McLaren Hall and to the materials in the Museum Storage Facility. Many hours have also been spent at the Estes Park Public Library, the Colorado Historical Society, and the public libraries in Denver, Boulder, Longmont, Loveland, and Fort Collins, and their staffs have been of great help. Sybil Barnes, who is the local history librarian at the Estes Park Public Library as well as park librarian, has been an invaluable day-to-day resource. At the University Press of Colorado I am greatly indebted to both acquisitions editor Sandy Crooms, who made important suggestions about revising and strengthening the original manuscript, and project editor Laura Furney, who meticulously copyedited the final manuscript and prepared it for publication. I would also thank Dan Pratt of the University Press of Colorado for his skillful handling of both layout and design. There is also Patrick Sartorius of Westminster, Colorado, a friend since my Michigan days, who has read every word of the manuscript, made corrections, and offered the suggestions of a good editor.

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Of equal importance have been my encouragers: those in Estes Park who have invited me to speak and then listened to my talks in a variety of venues; my good friends and trail companions Alex Drummond, Terrell Dixon,

and Tom Collingwood; and my sister Nancy Pickering Thomas, whose efforts in helping the national park to arrange, catalog, and preserve its materials has greatly facilitated my own work. Above all there are the members of my immediate family to whom I owe so much for their interest, support, and forbearance: my wife, Patricia; my son, David; my daughter, Susan Pickering Byrd; and my son-in-law, Richard Byrd. One writes books for many reasons. This one allows me to give back to those who care about the history of this remarkable mountain region in partial exchange for what Estes Park has given to me and to my family over what is now a half century.

JAMES H. PICKERING
ESTES PARK AND HOUSTON

Chapter 1

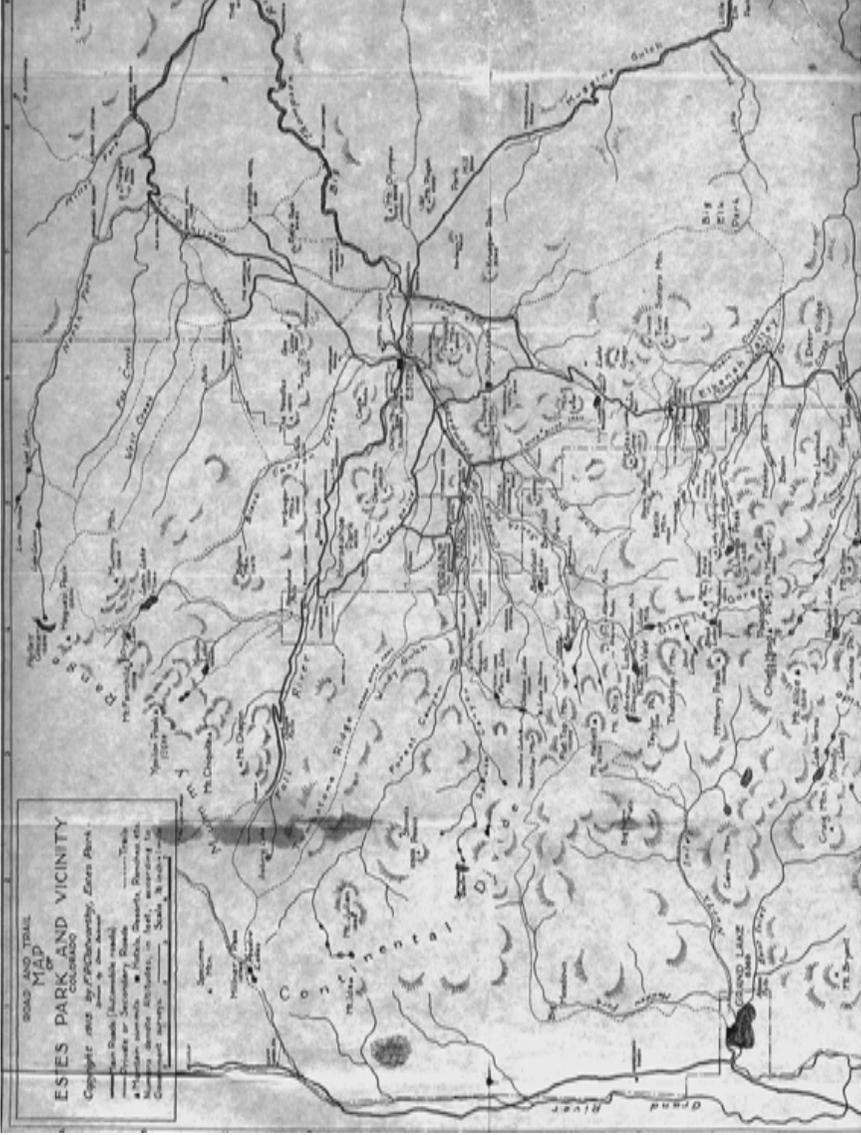


Estes Park in 1915—New Beginnings

AS THOSE BRAVING THE UNCERTAIN WEATHER TO ATTEND the dedication ceremonies were well aware, the afternoon of September 4, 1915, was a watershed event in the life of Estes Park. Rocky Mountain National Park was at last a reality. With the passage of the park bill, signed into law by President Woodrow Wilson on January 26, 1915, came significant changes to town and region, including the continuing presence of the federal government. Although the size and impact of that presence were at first small, both would inexorably grow, and the history of Estes Park would be shaped accordingly.

Despite the gray and glowering weather, the dedication was a festive affair. Many arrived early to visit, picnic, and take full advantage of the day's offerings. Estes Park residents and those staying at local ranches and hotels came on foot and on horseback, as well as by bicycle, carriage, wagon, and automobile. By mid-morning a steady stream of cars from the valley towns had begun to arrive. The road coming up Fall River from Estes Park village was steep and narrow, creating something of a logistical problem. But by the time the official ceremonies began at 2:00 P.M. some 267 automobiles and a large, enthusiastic gathering of spectators and guests—by one count numbering as many as 2,000¹—had managed to crowd into Horseshoe Park near

1.1 Estes Park in
1915. Map by Fred
Clatworthy. Courtesy
Estes Park Museum





1.2 Rocky Mountain National Park dedication, September 4, 1915. Courtesy National Park Service—Rocky Mountain National Park

the eastern portal of the new road being built up and over the Continental Divide. The “horizon was one vast rainbow effect of automobiles,” the reporter for the *Denver Times* noted, “the black cars and yellow and white and red and brown being so closely parked as to create the effect of a bit of scenery all their own.”² It was, the *Rocky Mountain News* added, “the greatest automobile demonstration ever seen in Colorado.”³

Not surprisingly, the largest contingent of visitors was from Denver, but other towns were also well represented. For the Denverites the day had begun early with a 7:30 A.M. rendezvous at the Majestic Building at 16th and Broadway, headquarters of the Denver Motor Club. There club members queued up drivers for an automobile procession to the park, led by shiny new Packards carrying Colorado governor George Carlson, congressman Edward Taylor, Assistant Secretary of the Interior Stephen Mather, his young deputy Horace M. Albright, and other notables. Additional autos joined enroute, including a number of big Stanley Mountain Wagons, whose introduction to the mountain roads of Colorado in 1908 had done much to improve the transportation of tourists to and from Estes Park and other towns. The vehicle attracting most attention, however, was the “unaphone” touring car

belonging to George E. Turner of the Turner Moving and Storage Company. Its built-in bell organ regaled spectators along the way with sprightly music.

Although the speakers of the day would talk of Colorado and the nation, local competition and boosterism were decidedly in the air. Not wanting to be outdone by Loveland and Lyons, each poised to declare itself “the gateway to the park,” the Fort Collins press urged its readers to put pennants and banners on their automobiles and get an early start so that it is “evident to Denver that Fort Collins is on the job and that the National park is not owned by Denver.” Residents of the county seat apparently needed little encouragement. Despite the dedication ceremonies’ conflicting with the closing of the Larimer County Fair, “no less than 400 people, including the city officials and other prominents, went to the exercises.”⁴ Two hundred more came by auto caravan from Loveland.

To the knowledgeable observer, the presence of so many automobiles in Horseshoe Park was an instructive reminder of the way in which the automobile and automobiling had revolutionized tourism, offering an increasing number of middle-class Americans the ability to see the wonders of the West. Once a plaything for the rich, automobiles had improved in size and comfort and decreased in cost, making possible a leisurely and flexible travel experience. Automobiles encouraged an individualized relationship with place. Introduced into national parks as early as 1908, automobiles not only quickly broadened and democratized access but became the chief means by which many Americans would come to experience and understand nature. By 1915, motorists and the organized clubs and associations they belonged to were well on their way to becoming a powerful force in national park affairs. In the years that followed these motorists and their automobiles would influence, in turn, the ways in which the nation’s parks, struggling to reconcile use and preservation, developed their infrastructures. Automobiles would also significantly affect the way in which gateway towns like Estes Park conducted the business of tourism.⁵

The new arrivals were greeted by the ladies of the Estes Park Woman’s Club, whose members distributed button souvenirs and provided picnic-style box lunches and hot coffee. Their husbands, members of the Estes Park Protective and Improvement Association, handed out ice cream cones to the children. The coffee was particularly welcome for the day was cool. Serenading close by was the 25-piece Fort Collins concert band, which had arrived in Estes Park the day before. Robert Sterling Yard, who Stephen Mather had persuaded to give up his job as editor of the *New York Herald’s* Sunday magazine to help publicize the nation’s parks, circulated among the crowd with his photographers to capture the moment on film. He had been

in the new park for a month gathering information. Particularly visible were the newsreel cameramen from the Denver offices of Pathe Studios, with whom Yard had arranged “to film the run of the motorists and the dedicatory ceremonies so that they may be shown in every state in the Union.”⁶

At the appointed hour the band from Fort Collins struck up “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” and the ceremonies began on a small knoll, near what is now the Lawn Lake Trailhead. Overhead, suspended between two tall pines, hung a banner proclaiming the occasion. A fortunate few found seats in front of the low bunting-draped platform reserved for dignitaries and special guests; most stood. Enos Mills, chair of the “Celebration Committee,” the man whose tenacious advocacy had already earned him the title “father of the park,” presided over the day’s program. It began with a chorus of “America” sung by the schoolchildren of Estes Park accompanied by the band, the crowd patriotically joining in on the second and third verses, and included the reading of congratulatory telegrams, the introduction of special guests, and a number of speeches focussing on the future prospects of park and region. “We should enlarge this park,” Mills told the audience with his customary expansiveness. “It ought to extend from Wyoming on the north to the Pike’s [sic] Peak highway to the south. I am sure all here want to do their share toward bringing that about.”⁷ When his turn came, Secretary Mather, who within a year would head a newly created National Park Service, congratulated the people of Colorado “upon a work so well begun” and briefly outlined the government’s plans for the new park, expressing his hope that it would help increase the number of tourists in the West and awaken Americans “to a realization of the wonders of their own land.”⁸ As he spoke there was a deluge of rain: “an absolute downpour washed over his bared, silver haired, tanned face, and almost worthless raincoat.” Because of the weather, Governor Carlson “cut his speech short and graciously backed up to his seat in a hastily contrived canvas shelter.”⁹

The program of the day, made available in advance, listed the names of nine speakers (each “limited to five minutes”). Of the nine only one declined. This was sixty-four-year-old F. O. Stanley, the owner-builder of Estes Park’s largest hotel and a man who had invested heavily during the previous decade to build and expand the infrastructure of the village. When his turn arrived, the self-effacing Stanley quietly told Mills “to make a bow for him.” Mills did as told, making the “the bow so nicely that he received a round of applause.”¹⁰ Within an hour the ceremony was over. Because of the rain the crowd dispersed quickly.

Despite the drizzle, a number of brave souls stayed behind to inspect the new Fall River Road. Although the road as yet covered only some three



1.3 Rocky Mountain National Park dedication. Left to right: publicist Robert Sterling Yard, Enos Mills, F. O. Stanley, Colorado representative Edward Taylor, park booster Mary Belle King Sherman, and Colorado governor George Carlson. Courtesy National Park Service—Rocky Mountain National Park

miles and five switchbacks, its completion promised a further boon to regional tourism by opening “one of the most wonderful roads in the world” directly linking Estes Park to Grand Lake and Middle Park. “The view is a grand one indeed,” one participant from Fort Collins noted, “as the splendid timber below you adds a wildness to the scene that thrills you.”¹¹

Not everyone’s thoughts that day were focussed on the future and its prospects. For Charles Boynton, the veteran editor of the *Longmont Ledger*, the dedication ceremonies brought reflections that took him backward in time. In March 1877 Boynton had come to Longmont from Denver, where three years later he incorporated the *Ledger*. As he listened to the various speeches, Boynton found his attention wandering to the slopes of Deer Mountain across the valley and to thoughts of just how much Estes Park had changed in the last two decades before. The vista, he wrote two days later, brought

back old time memories when we camped near the spot now made famous by this gathering, in 1885 and 1887: when the cattle were wild

and when an occasional bear would make a sensation that shook the waves of sound to Longmont. Those were days worth living. We remember that we had to put four horses to our empty wagons to get them over the steep and rocky roads. Now the autos glide over better grades.¹²

Editor Boynton was surely not alone in his reflections. Others photographed in Horseshoe Park that day had similar reasons to be retrospective, among them sixty-five-year-old Abner Sprague and his eighty-four-year-old mother Mary, the oldest of the spectators and said to be the oldest resident in the park district. The Spragues, mother and son, could see the many changes that the last half century had brought to Joel Estes's valley. Save, perhaps, for the introduction and quick dominance of the automobile—an event that Enos Mills suggested in 1912 was “probably the most influential thing in the development of Estes Park”¹³—most of those changes were incremental and imperceptible; so much so that those who came back year after year were hard-pressed to tell the difference. But for authentic pioneers like the Spragues the differences were obvious and in some cases dramatic, even profound.



Mary Sprague first saw Estes Park in the fall of 1864—the same year she and her husband, Thomas Sprague, together with their three children, including fourteen-year-old Abner, crossed the prairie by ox-team from Illinois to settle in a sod-roofed cabin in the Big Thompson Valley, below the future site of Loveland. Within a decade Mary and Thomas Sprague would establish themselves on a ranch in Willow (Moraine) Park, where she would become Moraine Park's first postmistress—a position she would occupy for 30 years.

The Estes Park that she encountered was a virtually empty valley. The only signs of permanent settlement were the crude log buildings and corrals that Joel Estes and his sons had erected on lower Willow Creek (now Fish Creek) to house themselves and their ranching operation. Although the Esteses, who had taken up residence the previous year, found few signs of Indian life, Native Americans and their ancestors had inhabited the park on a seasonal basis for more than 10,000 years. Later residents and visitors would discover projectile points, scrapers and other tools, and pottery shards at various places, as well as the remnants of game-drives (low stone walls following the contour of the land behind which hunters crouched in ambush) on the tundra of Trail Ridge and Flattop Mountains, providing clear evidence of use by the indigenous Northern Ute and Northern Arapaho

Indians, the latter latecomers who arrived sometime after 1800. Cheyenne, Shoshone, and Apache Indians may also have been occasional visitors. As late as 1914, in fact, the Northern Arapaho told stories about a spirited fight with a band of Apaches who had taken refuge behind rock walls of a hillside “fort” at the upper end of Beaver Meadows.

It was not that the Estes family lacked occasional visitors, some of whom became temporary lodgers. In August, 1864, just weeks prior to Mary Sprague’s arrival, the Estes family had been visited by William Byers, the founding editor of the *Rocky Mountain News*, who spent the night at their ranch with three companions on their way to attempt to climb Longs Peak. That effort proved an almost comic affair. After stumbling around the slopes of Longs Peak and adjacent Mount Meeker for the better part of two days, the party gave up in disgust, Byers assuring readers of the *News* that “not a living creature, unless it had wings to fly . . . would ever stand upon the summit.” In the process of recounting their adventures he named the valley after his host, confidently predicting that “Eventually this park will become a favorite pleasure resort.”¹⁴

The Estes family entertained a variety of other visitors, including prospectors, who periodically arrived in hope that the great mineral belt of Colorado—which had brought so much wealth, excitement, and scarring to Boulder and Clear Creek counties to the south—extended into the picturesque valley. Although signs of their efforts were visible in various places, the prospectors invariably departed disappointed, fortuitously leaving the natural mountain world much as they found it.

Abner Sprague first came to Estes Park four years later, in 1868, the year that saw one-armed Civil War veteran John Wesley Powell and six others, including the ever-determined Byers, make the first successful ascent of Longs Peak. Sprague, now a young man of eighteen, arrived with two school chums, who, having ridden their ponies westward following a cart track through the foothills into the mountains, stumbled upon Estes Park. “We pushed our ponies to the Divide,” Sprague would later write, groping for words adequate to express the memory of the view from Park Hill. “The surprise of it made us speechless. Thousands of people have seen this view of Estes Park but . . . only a few came onto it unexpectedly as we did.”¹⁵

Joel Estes was gone, having left two years before in April 1866. Seven years of solitude and isolation were enough. After the rigors of a particularly hard winter, he abandoned his squatter’s claim to seek a more temperate climate, leaving behind his crude log buildings and his name. But as Sprague and his two youthful companions soon discovered, the valley was not empty. Descending from the crest of Park Hill, they came across Estes’s successors—

two rather surly and initially uncommunicative mountaineers—setting posts for corral fences. One was Griff Evans, a usually jovial Welshman who had taken possession of Estes's ranch and buildings. The other was James Nugent, a small-time rancher who made his home in a crude cabin in nearby Muggins Gulch. Nugent would soon gain worldwide fame through the pages of Isabella Bird's *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* (1879) as the "desperado Rocky Mountain Jim." The two were not expecting visitors. "To our questions," Sprague later admitted, "Griff and Jim answered freely enough after they found out we were not looking for Estes Park, but had stumbled into the place."¹⁶

Any lingering ambivalence, let alone hostility, toward outside visitors of the kind Sprague and his friends encountered would change quickly in the next decade as Estes Park opened to the nation and the world. It began with the arrival of the Windham Thomas Wyndam-Quin, the fourth Earl of Dunraven, who came up from Denver during the 1872 Christmas season to hunt. Dunraven had money from coal and other interests and like so many of his wealthy English countrymen found good investment opportunities in post-Civil War America. Although his initial visit was brief, the unspoiled beauty of Estes Park appealed to the Earl, and he soon began planning to make a large part of it his own.

These plans advanced rapidly during the winter and spring of 1874 as the valley was surveyed and opened for settlement. Foreigners could not directly file homestead claims, but they could own land. To that end Dunraven secured the services of Theodore Whyte, a young and talented Irish Canadian mining engineer. And it was Whyte, using means that were clearly questionable if not patently illegal, who within months helped the Earl of Dunraven gain effective control of almost 10,000 acres of the best land in Estes Park.

In the years that followed the story would be repeated—so often, in fact, that it soon was considered historical fact—that the Irish earl had acquired Estes Park as an exclusive hunting preserve for himself and his aristocratic friends. Had this been Dunraven's motive, by 1874 he was too late, and by at least a decade. By then the recreational and scenic attractions of Estes Park had been well reported in the press as far away as London, and each summer since the late 1860s had witnessed ever-larger groups of summer vacationists. Although the existing roads were roads in name only, that did not stop the influx of visitors coming up from the hot and dry towns along Colorado's Front Range and, increasingly, from places further east and even Europe. In August 1873, for example, almost a year before Theodore Whyte had actually set in motion Dunraven's plan to acquire land in the park, a reporter for

the *Larimer Press*, enjoying the hospitality of Griff Evans's ranch, found among his fellow guests "representatives of Chicago, Philadelphia and New York, and our own towns of Denver, Longmont and Greeley."¹⁷

Far from seeking exclusivity—which had all but passed out of the valley with Joel Estes and his family—it seems much more likely that Dunraven, like those who followed him, saw Estes Park not as a place to keep and hunt wild animals but as a place to raise cattle and accommodate tourists. The surprisingly mild winter climate seemed conducive to the former; the cool, if short, summers conducive to the latter; and for a time the Earl of Dunraven seemed to have both the capital and the will to invest in both. Whatever his initial motives, by August 17, 1876, the date he incorporated the Estes Park Company, Limited, as a holding company for his Estes Park investments, Dunraven was using precisely the same language that would be employed during the next three decades by cottage and resort companies to describe their intentions. The Estes Park Company, Limited, intended to

purchase . . . certain lands and to improve and develop the resources of the same, etc. to establish hotels, houses, shops and store[s], to make and provide telegraphs, roads and all other works and means of transport for improvement of property of said Company, to aid, encourage and promote immigration into the property of the Company, to develop and preserve the sporting and fishing, etc. and to sell, lease, exchange, mortgage or otherwise deal with all of the property of the Company.¹⁸

This is not the language of a would-be owner of a private game preserve but the familiar language of an entrepreneur and developer.

Having fenced his land, one of Dunraven's first acts was to bring in a sawmill and begin cutting lumber to build the Estes Park (or "English") Hotel south of the old Estes ranch along Fish Creek. Completed and opened with considerable fanfare during the summer of 1877, the three-story hotel, with its manicured lawns, artificial lake, and nine-hole golf course, would provide a significant presence in the Estes Park resort industry for more than thirty years.

The Earl of Dunraven never, in fact, had the park to himself. Within a year of the survey, Estes Park's other early settlers—the so-called "pioneers of '75"—had entered the valley to take up homesteads on land that Whyte had either overlooked or misfiled upon. Although they came to ranch, farm, and raise families, by the end of the decade the Spragues, Jameses, MacGregors, Fergusons, Hupps, Rowes, Lambs, and one or two others had all discovered that, whatever their original inclinations and intentions, their lives in Estes Park, and in many cases their livelihoods as well, would depend upon their willingness and their ability to cater to tourists.

“The hotel business was forced on us,” Abner Sprague recalled. “We came here for small ranch operations, but guests and visitors became so numerous, at first wanting eggs, milk, and other provisions, then wanting lodging, and finally demanding full accommodations, that we had to go into the hotel business or go bankrupt from keeping free company!”¹⁹ The Spragues’ experience was typical. Their first boarders were passersby from the English Hotel on a trip up Windy Gulch, who told Mary Sprague that if she would fix a chicken dinner they would return to eat it. Soon others were stopping in for dinner, then two people asked if they could spend the winter, and so it began.

Theodore Whyte became the Earl of Dunraven’s resident manager. Initially there were minor conflicts and skirmishes between Dunraven and the other early settlers. Annoyed by the presence and persistence of Sprague and the others who were impediments to the Estes Park Company’s clear and open use of Estes Valley, Whyte and his cowboys tried bluff and intimidation. When the pioneers of ’75 stood firm, peace and accommodation followed.

For the next two decades and more the Spragues and their fellow pioneer families, together with the Earl of Dunraven, had the tourist business in Estes Park pretty much to themselves: the Jameses on Fall River, the MacGregors at the mouth of the Black Canyon, the Fergusons above Marys Lake, the Spragues in Moraine Park, and the Lambs up in the Tahosa Valley at the foot of Longs Peak. Having quickly found ways of turning a profit from scenery, they helped to make Estes Park—the “Gem of the Rockies” as the newspapers soon began to refer to it—one of Colorado’s and the West’s favorite vacation destinations. In so doing they established a tradition of local, family-dominated businesses—one that not only acknowledged a commitment to local community and its values but had a keen sense of the need to protect the wilderness on which so much of their livelihood depended.

Although the roads to and from the valley remained a trial even for those who came prepared, Estes Park’s close proximity to Longmont, Fort Collins, Lyons, Loveland, Boulder, and Denver helped. So did the fact that visitors to Estes Park encountered little of the exclusiveness and pretentiousness identified with Manitou, west of Colorado Springs, Colorado’s most famous resort community. In Estes Park accommodations of some sort, indoors or out, were varied and available. Many, in fact, preferred to forgo the routines of boardinghouse life and erect a tent near the MacGregors or Spragues or in some remote and less congested spot and rough it for the season, only occasionally, if ever, taking their meals with the regular guests. It did not matter. The summer activities and lifestyle of Estes Park were casual, relaxed, and welcoming. And most agreed that the prices were reasonable.

Of course changes came with the passage of the years. Each year brought a new cottage or two, an enlarged dining room, “improvements” of one kind or another, just as each year brought more people into Joel Estes’s valley. But for the most part summers in Estes Park remained consistent and predictable and returning visitors anticipated and relished this continuity. This leisurely pace continued throughout the 1880s and 1890s, and was still very much in evidence in late June 1903, when Flora Stanley, the wife of automobile pioneer F. O. Stanley, arrived with her Swedish maid to nurse her tubercular husband through a summer of convalescence.

Descending Park Hill from whose crest she later confessed to have been “spellbound by the beauty of the scene,” Flora passed by the barns and corrals of the Dunraven Ranch, built on the site of Joel Estes’s squatter’s claim, and then followed the meandering Big Thompson westward. Ten minutes later Flora’s stage had arrived at “The Corners” near the confluence of the Big Thompson and Fall Rivers, a small group of buildings that in 1903 was the extent of the hamlet of Estes Park.

Within a span of a single decade all of this would change. Where there had once been a quiet crossroads at the Corners, there was now a bustling and rapidly growing, if nondescript, mountain town; while to the west and south, in place of a remote and largely inaccessible mountain wilderness was the new national park. For the creation of the national park there was Enos Mills to thank, together with the broad coalition of individuals and organizations that organized public support and saw the park bill through Congress. Credit for the creation and growth of the town of Estes Park and the expansion of the local resort industry that accompanied it belonged to other equally farsighted men, who within a short period of time concluded land transactions that opened for subdivision and development two major parcels of land long in private hands. The first of these involved the quarter section surrounding the Corners at the confluence of the Big Thompson and Fall Rivers, purchased in March 1905 from postmaster John Cleave by Cornelius H. Bond and three longtime friends for the purpose of laying out a town. The second, and substantially larger transaction, took place three years later, in June 1908, when Burton D. Sanborn, an irrigationist and developer from Greeley, and a fully recovered F. O. Stanley succeeded in gaining title to the Earl of Dunraven’s Estes Park holdings, some 6,000 acres in all, including buildings and cattle. Stanley and Sanborn divided the land between them, Stanley ultimately taking title to the acres lying north of an imaginary line across the northern slope of Prospect Mountain and Sanborn retaining those to the south.

In the years that followed, Bond, Stanley, and Sanborn would all invest heavily in Estes Park and its future. Bond would use his Estes Park Town



1.4 The Corners (Elkhorn and Moraine), Estes Park, 1903. Community building and John Cleave House in foreground; post office across the street. Courtesy Lula W. Dorsey Museum, YMCA of the Rockies



1.5 The Corners in summer, ca. 1903. Courtesy Estes Park Museum

Company to develop a town. Sanborn, who already owned Bear and Bierstadt Lakes, would become involved in several short-lived irrigation and power-generation schemes. F. O. Stanley, who apparently financed most of the

Dunraven purchase himself, had major plans for Estes Park as well. Over the next decade he would use his considerable wealth not only to build the finest resort hotel in northern Colorado but to invest again and again in Cornelius Bond's new town, providing a growing Estes Park with the infrastructure it needed to become a modern community.



The creation of the village of Estes Park and the growing anticipation after 1907 of the coming national park fueled still additional expansion of the local resort industry. Turn-of-the-century visitors could stay at Dunraven's well-appointed Estes Park Hotel, Horace Ferguson's Highlands Hotel by Marys Lake, the Elkhorn Lodge just west of the Corners, or the outlying guest ranches operated by the Spragues, MacGregors, and Lambs.²⁰ By 1915 their choices had widened considerably. Four new hotels—the Hupp (1906), the Manford (1908), and the Sherwood and Prospect Inns (1915)—were located in the village itself. Just beyond and within walking distance were three more: the magnificent Stanley Hotel (1909), the Craggs Hotel (1914) on the northern slope of Prospect Mountain built by Enos Mills's younger brother Joe, and A. D. Lewis's Lewiston Hotel (1914) on the bluff overlooking Elkhorn Avenue. Beyond the village were still other new establishments. These included Willard Ashton's picturesque Horseshoe Inn, built on a gentle knoll at the mouth of Endovalley, and Harry Bintner's equally rustic Columbine Lodge in the Tahosa Valley, which opened in 1908; Mary Imogene McPherson's Moraine Park Lodge above Abner Sprague's old ranch (now operated by James Stead) and Abner Sprague's new lodge in Glacier Basin, which opened two years later in 1910; the Brinwood, at the west end of Moraine Park, built by the son and son-in-law of pioneer Horace Ferguson, and the Rockdale Hotel at Marys Lake, soon be moved up the hill and expanded to become the Lewiston Chalets, which opened in 1913. In 1914 there were still other new resorts: Charles and Steve Hewes's Hewes-Kirkwood Hotel, Ranch & Store near the Longs Peak trailhead in the Tahosa Valley and Burns Will's Copeland Lake Lodge near the entrance of Wild Basin. A year later, in July 1915, Minnie and Dan March opened their Fall River Lodge in Horseshoe Park, strategically located on the as-yet-to-be-completed Fall River Road within a stone's throw of the park's dedication site.

Yet another round of new building followed the establishment of the park, climaxing with America's entry into World War I two years later. Over the next two decades there would be further changes, but these, on the whole, would be far less dramatic. The face of Estes Park would remain much



1.6 Estes Park and Rocky Mountain National Park: Lodges and Resorts, ca. 1940.
 Courtesy David Tanton

the same until the hectic years of the late 1930s and 1940s and the Colorado–Big Thompson Project, which flooded the valley and created Lake Estes. But beneath the apparent sameness of things, there were significant changes and transformations. It is these events—the growth and development of the town of Estes Park and its new national park during the years from 1903 to 1945—that are the focus of the chapters that follow.