

Biographical Portrait

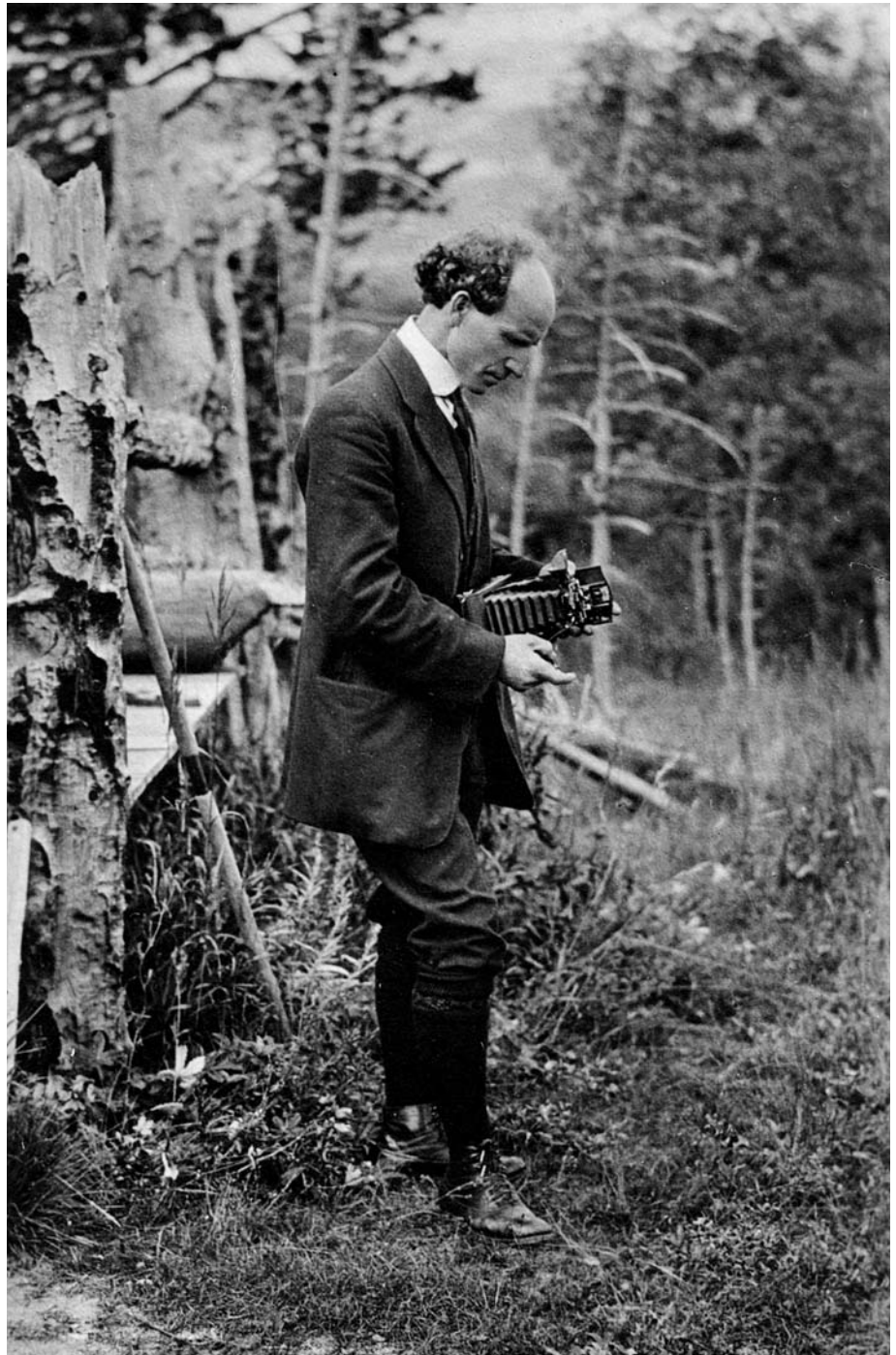
ENOS ABIJAH MILLS

THE “FATHER” OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK (1870–1922)

Enos Abijah Mills, naturalist, conservationist, nature guide, businessman, and author, is most noted for being the “father” of the Rocky Mountain National Park. Mills was born and raised near Pleasanton in southeastern Kansas. Little is known of his parents, Enos A. Mills, Sr. and Ann Lamb Mills. It is known that they were accompanied by their cousin Elkanah Lamb to the gold fields of Colorado in 1860 before returning to Kansas. The memories of this were passed on by the mother to the son, and this constituted Mills’ single most vivid recollection of his childhood. He was a sickly child with a major digestive disorder, and doctors were unable to provide a cure. They thought that a change of climate might help him, so at the young age of fourteen, Mills set out on his own for Colorado. His health returned after eventually eliminating wheat from his diet.

Mills made his way to Estes Park, a summer resort town in Colorado, in the winter of 1884–1885. By then tourists were already coming to the area. Mills homesteaded on some land approximately nine miles south of Estes Park in what was called Longs Peak Valley. He built a twelve-foot-by-fourteen-foot cabin positioned so that it had a magnificent view of Longs Peak. In the summers he worked for Elkanah Lamb, who operated the Longs Peak House and provided guided tours for guests throughout the valley including summit climbs of the peak. Mills familiarized himself with the terrain of the peak to such an extent that he was able to find his way to the top and back in all kinds of weather. Over the years he logged a total of 297 summit climbs.

The necessity of employment during the winters, not available around Estes Park, took him to Butte, Montana, where he worked for the Anaconda Copper Company. A quick study, Mills worked his way up to plant engineer over the winters.



Enos A. Mills illustrated many of his writings with his own photographs. He preferred traveling with a camera instead of a gun.

PHOTO BY ESTHER BURNELL MILLS. COURTESY OF ENOS MILLS CABIN COLLECTION



COURTESY OF THE WORLD FORESTRY CENTER

Enos A. Mills on a beaver walk with National Library Association librarians.

As the winter of 1889 approached, a fire closed the copper mines and Mills went to San Francisco. While there, he had a chance meeting with John Muir, and a life-long friendship followed. Muir encouraged Mills to write about what he had seen in Colorado “in a manner to make other people believe they had seen it,” Mills recalled. “If it hadn’t been for him [Muir], I would have been a mere gypsy,” a wanderer not a writer. He did wander, however, for the next ten years all over the United States and Europe, but finally settled and began to write. When he did, Mills became to the Rockies what Muir was to the Sierras.

Mills was largely self-educated and became an avid reader. His success in writing—sixteen books and several hundred articles and essays in a span of a little more than two decades, was due less to native talent than to determination and hard work. According to Mills, his success was based on an intense enthusiasm for his subjects, a deep interest in nature, and an unusual array of material about which to write. He wrote to entertain, educate, and help protect nature. His articles of wilderness adventures and wild animals were

printed in both large circulation magazines, like the *Saturday Evening Post*, where he published fifty articles, and more specialized country, outdoor, and juvenile magazines, like *Country Gentleman*, *Country Life*, and *American Boy*. His first book, *The Story of Estes Park and Guide Book*, was self-published in 1905, and later republished as *Early Estes Park* (1959, 1963) by his wife Esther B. Mills. The first commercially produced work, *Wild Life on the Rockies* (1909), was published by Houghton Mifflin, publisher of a number of his succeeding works including: *The Spell of the Rockies* (1911), *The Story of a Thousand-year Pine* (1913), *In Beaver World* (1913), *The Rocky Mountain Wonderland* (1915), *The Story of Scotch* (1916), *Your National Parks* (1917), *Being Good to Bears and Other True Animal Stories* (1919), and *The Grizzly: Our Greatest Wild Animal* (1919). Later works were published by Doubleday Page including *The Adventures of a Nature Guide* (1920), *Waiting in the Wilderness* (1921), *Watched by Wild Animals* (1922), *Wild Animal Homesteads* (1923), *The Rocky Mountain National Park* (1924), and *Romance of Geology* (1926). Selected titles have been reprinted by the University of Nebraska Press.

Stripped to their essentials, Mills’ writings are a mix of scientific information, field observations, and personal anecdote written to provide nature guiding in a more refined, organized, and compact form. Mills was one of the first to bring a description of the Rockies to the rest of the nation and Europe. Often enhancing the writings were photographs taken by the author who preferred traveling with a camera instead of a gun.

In the winter of 1901–1902, he purchased the Longs Peak House from the Lambs and renamed it Longs Peak Inn. It burned down in 1906, but he rebuilt it and it became one of the better known hostleries in the nation. Due to his business obligations and writings, he began to train others for the duties of being a nature guide. According to his daughter Edna, the training of nature guides was a unique and significant characteristic of Mills. Until this time no one had formally trained nature guides, and by doing so Mills was able to spread further his love of the outdoors. One of the early guides, Esther Burnell, stayed on to become his secretary, and in August 1918 they were married. They had one child.

Mills gave occasional talks which led to a career as a speaker. His reputation and influence as a writer provided him with the audiences he needed for lecturing on things he believed in. His career as a lecturer assumed a life and momentum of its own. He would talk about his unique life in the mountains, his devotion to the outdoors, and forestry and forest preservation. President Theodore Roosevelt appointed

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him to the position of Government Lecturer on Forestry, a position he held from 1907 to 1909. During that time he gave 2,118 addresses. His talks awakened interest in trees, wildlife protection, and outdoor adventure. He also appealed to his audience to see America first, and with this he campaigned for government involvement in providing better roads into the areas he talked about. His overriding interest as businessman, nature guide, and outdoor enthusiast was to bring people to the wilderness areas he knew and loved.

In 1909, the Estes Park town fathers created the Estes National Park and Game Preserve as a way to attract more visitors. This was a unique approach to the national park idea, and Mills made more than 300 appearances on behalf of the park campaign. For Mills, the broad scope of his work—to have more people enjoy the outdoors—became crystallized in the national

park idea. Though he used a variety of arguments, including keeping tourist dollars at home, there was a lot of opposition from grazing, timber, and water interests, as well as a local group who called themselves the Front Range Settlers Group.

In addition to campaigning for the national park, Mills insisted that the federal government create a separate department to administer the national parks. To Mills, the U.S. Forest Service was not adept to run a national park. Mills argued that a national forest was a business involved with the sale of timber and grazing rights. A forester was a man with an axe. A national park was an open air museum which was meant to be preserved from commercial development. Scenery was a noble resource. These differences created different demands on management, and they could not be met within one department. Mills won his arguments, and was very influential in the resulting legislation. In January 1915, Congress created the Rocky Mountain National Park and a year later the National Park Service.

Ironically, Mills' final campaign was against the National Park Service. Shortly after its creation, the Park Service began granting monopolies on concessions. Mills was particularly irate at the granting of a transportation monopoly within the boundaries of a national park, and became a formidable foe with an uncompromising attitude. He argued that the roads should be free for all, and that transportation companies overcharged and were allied to specific hotels and inns. The Park Service argued that controlled access to national parks was necessary for sound and efficient management. They considered Mills an old-time park booster with vested interests in the Longs Peak Inn. Mills brought a lawsuit, but the Park Service prevailed. It was not until approximately one month before Mills' death that the transportation monopoly was overturned.

In a strange twist of fate, Mills was in a subway accident while in New York and suffered two broken ribs and a punctured lung. This and his exhaustive schedule of travel and lectures lead to his death at Longs Peak Inn on September 21, 1922. He was 52 years of age.

Mills once said, "My chief aim in life is to arouse interest in the outdoors." In this, he was overwhelmingly successful. It has been said that his books reached thousands, his articles and essays millions. In

addition, he was a popular lecturer. In all, he demonstrated that the average individual could be interested in stories of trees, rock formations, the works of glaciers, and wild life. Clearly, the September 15, 1915, celebration dedicating the Rocky Mountain National Park was the high point of Enos Mills' public career, even though its approximate 360 square miles was about half of the size Mills proposed. By the time of the dedication, states were aware of national parks and there was hardly one that did not wish to secure such a park for itself. Moreover, from the success in the United States, the national park idea spread to other countries.

For Mills, nature was universal and its preservation was necessary for the enjoyment of all. The Rocky Mountain National Park was destined to become one of the most visited and most enjoyed of all scenic reservations of the federal government. Additional legacies of Mills include his namesakes found around the Longs Peak area: the Enos A. Mills Grove, Mills Moraine, and Mills Glacier, as well as the Mills cabin, which survives and serves as a family-run museum and store. □

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