

Local Places, National Spaces: Public Memory, Community Identity, and Landscape at Scotts Bluff National Monument

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When President Woodrow Wilson signed the proclamation creating Scotts Bluff National Monument in 1919, the occasion represented a clear victory for residents of the surrounding community, who had long been campaigning for federal recognition of the site. The following year, Will Major Maupin, a local newspaper editor and first volunteer custodian of the monument, excitedly wrote to National Park Service (NPS) Director Stephen T. Mather,

With the rapid settlement of the surrounding country and with constantly increasing facilities for travel, Scotts Bluff National Monument is becoming more and more a scenic resort, and with proper development and advertising will in a comparatively short time become one of the most popular scenic resorts in the entire West.¹

Like much booster rhetoric in the American west, Maupin's hyperbole was understandable. Although unlikely to compete with the majestic landscapes of Yellowstone or Yosemite, Scotts Bluff was, and remains, a striking sight, rising dramatically from the prairie grasses of the North Platte River Valley. (Figure 1) Composed of buff-colored layers of rock and topped by dark green Rocky Mountain juniper and ponderosa pine, the bluff reaches an elevation of nearly

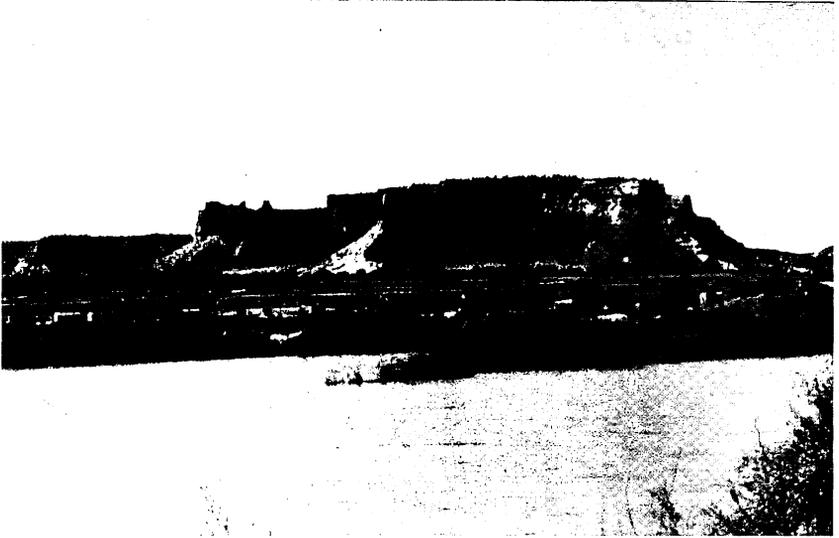


Figure 1: An impressive geological and historical landmark, Scotts Bluff rises high above the north bank of the North Platte River. Courtesy Scotts Bluff National Monument Archives.

5000 feet, making it one of the highest points in the state of Nebraska. On a clear day, the view of the surrounding region can include Wyoming's distant Laramie Peak, approximately 100 miles to the northwest.

However impressive the view, it was not the landscape itself but the cultural significance of Scotts Bluff that prompted federal commemoration. After first identifying the bluff (inaccurately, as it turned out) as “the highest known point within the State of Nebraska, affording a view for miles over the surrounding country,” the official proclamation explained that “Mitchell Pass, lying to the south of said bluff, was traversed by the old Oregon Trail” and that the bluff had been used “as a landmark and rendezvous by thousands of immigrants and frontiersmen traveling said trail en route for new homes in the Northwest,” specifically those journeying westward on the Oregon, California, and Mormon trails, from the 1830s through the 1860s. As with other national parks and monuments, the announcement concluded that reserving the land as a national monument would promote the “public interests.”² Unlike the others, Scotts Bluff was recognized not primarily for its unique physical qualities, but for its representative role in a larger story of Anglo-American progress. As one Park Service official would explain fifteen years later, “The Scotts Bluff National Monument memorializes not so much the historic significance of the few square miles of actual monument area, but rather the numberless migrations that have passed, since time immemorial, over the many trails that converge on the North Platte.”³

This distinction between the “few square miles” of the bluff, on the one hand, and its representative role in western migration, on the other, reveals two different frameworks for viewing the bluff: as a distinct local place and as one component of a larger national process. As a national space, Scotts Bluff became a symbolic repository for public memory of the process of westward migration. This is memory with a purpose; John Bodnar defines public memory as “a body of beliefs and ideas about the past that help a public or society understand both its past, present, and by implication, its future.” The dissemination of such shared stories plays an important role in generating the perceived connections that bind a nation together as an “imagined community,” creating the impression, if not the reality, of common experience. As Michael Kammen explains, public memory changes over time, and as “a slowly shifting configuration of traditions, is ideologically important because it shapes a nation’s ethos and sense of identity.” Clearly, then, the National Park Service defined the story of the Oregon Trail, symbolized by Scotts Bluff, as significant to the nation’s identity in 1919. Whether as a monument to manifest destiny or to pioneer fortitude, it became a national space invested with national meaning.⁴

At the same time, however, the bluff remained a specific physical place, located literally in the backyard of the neighboring towns of Gering and Scottsbluff. Whether described as “sense of place,” “topophilia,” or simply the feeling of “home,” the connection of individuals to place is personal, formed through a period of continuous interaction with one’s natural or built environment. The collective memory that derives from a specific group’s combined experiences of place, most famously described by Maurice Halbwachs, is vastly different from the abstractions of beliefs, ideas, and traditions that comprise public memory.⁵ Residents of the communities neighboring Scotts Bluff had no individual or collective memory of the westward migration; their towns had been founded decades after the original pioneers passed through. Rather, local perceptions of the bluff’s significance stemmed primarily from residents’ individual and collective experiences there as well as, eventually, from their communal recognition of the national appeal of the larger story it helped to tell.⁶ Although undeniably proud of their area’s heritage, the community was interested, quite openly, in what that heritage could provide for them—not simply a “usable past,” but a deliberately profitable one. Like others across the country, residents here quickly recognized the potential for exposure and assistance presented by the newly-formed National Park system. Local residents lobbied to make Scotts Bluff a national monument, used and modified the landscape for their own recreational purposes, and, as Maupin’s quote indicates, were heavily invested in its future development and promotion.⁷

Over time, these competing national and local views of the same landscape complicated negotiations over development of Scotts Bluff. Throughout the National Park system, the parameters of proper use and development were more straightforward when involving specific landscape features or objects of historic

interest. However, in trying to fix a national memory in a representative landscape, as at Scotts Bluff, the Park Service faced a number of unforeseen questions. For instance, if a monument's landscape were primarily symbolic in scope, to what extent was the historical significance of the site embedded in the landscape itself? How did the need to preserve heritage dictate how much the landscape could be modified, and by whom? Where, exactly, does public memory reside?

Through the 1920s and 1930s, as the National Park Service began to incorporate the story of the American republic into its system, official recognition immediately endowed local landscapes across the country with national significance. The dual roles subsequently played by these landscapes, as both national and local, led to frequent disagreements over their meaning, purpose, and acceptable usage, as locals continued to feel a sense of ownership over newly federalized spaces. When local residents or their ancestors have played a role in the larger historical narrative being commemorated, ideological differences are bound to emerge over the proper presentation of that story.⁸ However, and perhaps more surprising, if the local community does not share a collective memory of that larger story, the conflicts can be even more difficult to resolve, and the story itself more difficult to convey.

Although widely considered a "minor" national monument, Scotts Bluff provides useful insight into what happens not when public and collective memory collide, but when they simply do not intersect. National Park Service sites created in the early years of the agency varied greatly in type, from sweeping natural landscapes like the Grand Canyon to Civil War battlefields like Gettysburg. What they shared was the sudden elevation of a particular place to national status, with varying political, social, economic, and physical repercussions. Conflicts over land use in the National Park system have gained more scholarly attention than conflicts over meaning, and the two are generally considered separately. But in the case of local places designated to recognize national stories, meaning and place are often inextricably intertwined.

Scotts Bluff National Monument is such a place. The public memory initially commemorated at Scotts Bluff did not involve specific individuals or stories to which the local community, or the public in general, could easily relate. For residents of the small towns surrounding the bluff, any direct connection to the public memory being commemorated there—that of the historic westward migration—required an act of the imagination. Connected much more directly to the physical place itself, as an extension of their community, locals resisted ceding complete control of the site to the government, even as they pursued and profited by the national recognition it had brought them. In the process, while their collective distance from the national story may have weakened the monument's overall narrative power, their struggle to gain federal recognition for the site, and their continuous interactions with it, even when acting in apparent opposition to National Park Service goals, both shaped and strengthened community identity in ways they could not have foreseen.

From Local Landmark to National Monument

Local interest in developing Scotts Bluff for tourism was not unusual in the early twentieth century, as American communities had been capitalizing upon the attraction of sublime and striking landscapes for decades.⁹ Even before the formal establishment of the National Park Service in 1916, the federal government's official designation of parks and monuments as "nationally significant" provided communities of all sizes, as much as railroad companies and concessionaires, with new avenues for pursuing tourist dollars. Through their proximity to such sites, even the smallest "gateway" community could aspire to national visibility and visitation. By 1900, the economic potential of tourism in the American West was clear, particularly in some of the earliest national parks like Yosemite and Yellowstone, whose impressive peaks, lakes, hot springs, and geysers attracted legions of curious Easterners. By 1908, before the machinery of mass tourism was even in place, Yosemite was receiving nearly 13,000 visitors a year.¹⁰ But tourists were increasingly interested in more than the natural environment.

By the time of Scotts Bluff's commemoration in 1919, growing interest in America's heritage, along with the democratization of tourism, had prompted the creation of many sites devoted to so-called "national" stories like westward migration, colonization, and settlement as well as to local and regional stories deemed national in significance.¹¹ Still, the federal withdrawal of a natural landscape in order to commemorate an aspect of the American nation's story represented something of a new direction for the National Park Service in 1919. From the creation of Yosemite, in 1864, the establishment of national parks had reflected the nineteenth-century search for America's unique heritage and scenery, in order to provide a sense of national identity and tradition, and to distinguish American cultural contributions from the legacies of Europe. However, the Park Service had previously pursued this goal through the recognition of magnificent natural landscapes that in and of themselves were thought to demonstrate America's grandeur and proof of "national greatness"—what historians refer to as "scenic nationalism."¹² Eventually, the National Park system would include many sites specifically commemorating prominent developments and individuals in the history of the American republic, such as battlefields, cemeteries, and presidential birthplaces. Yet, at the time of Scotts Bluff's commemoration, any such sites remained under the jurisdiction of other federal agencies, primarily the War Department. The existing Park Service monuments recognized tangible natural, scientific, and archeological treasures, as at Devils Tower in Wyoming and Petrified Forest in Arizona.

The exposure that such recognition could provide local communities became more apparent in the first decades of the twentieth century, as the Interior Department began lobbying Congress to create the National Park Service. Beginning in 1915, as assistant to the Secretary of the Interior, Stephen T. Mather initiated a broad publicity campaign inspired by the popular "See America First"

movement. Mather in turn hired Robert Sterling Yard to be his chief of publicity for the parks, leading to the production of various maps, bulletins, feature articles, and photographs highlighting the parks' varied landscapes. Ultimately Yard was responsible for the production of two pivotal publications, both profusely illustrated with photographs, both hoping to persuade the public of the intrinsic value of the national parks. *The National Parks Portfolio*, first published in 1916, was provided to every member of Congress and potential supporters of the Park Service bill; the less expensive *Glimpses of Our National Parks* booklet provided similar information to tourists.¹³

Inspired by such measures, residents of the North Platte Valley demonstrated their eagerness to gain federal recognition for Scotts Bluff almost from the moment they arrived in the region. Permanent Euroamerican settlement of the western Nebraska panhandle did not begin in earnest until the turn of the twentieth century, as farmers and ranchers accompanied the extension of the Union Pacific and Burlington railroads into the area. Scotts Bluff County was created in 1888, and the towns of Gering and Scottsbluff were incorporated in 1890 and 1900, respectively. With the population of the entire county reaching just 2,552 by 1900, the pursuit of monument status occurred in tandem with the building of these communities.¹⁴

Between 1914 and 1918, community leaders sent Washington a flurry of requests for national recognition of their historic landmark. State senators and congressmen, local newspaper editors, business owners, and community organizations sent individual letters and petitions, including one in March 1918 that was signed by the mayors of Gering and Scottsbluff, the president of the Scottsbluff Commercial Club, the Gering Community club, and the Secretary of the Scotts Bluff Country Club. These coordinated local efforts, not federal initiative, prompted an official consultation with the Commissioner of the General Land Office to determine whether the land was of "sufficient historical interest" to justify presidential invocation of the 1906 Antiquities Act.¹⁵

That act's creation of the "national monument" category had provided local communities with a more feasible strategy for gaining federal recognition of nearby landscapes. Unlike the designation of national parks, which required congressional approval, the "Act for the Preservation of American Antiquities," enacted in 1906, authorized the President to designate single-handedly national monuments of "historic landmarks, historic and prehistoric structures, and other objects of historic or scientific interest that are situated upon the lands owned or controlled by the Government of the United States...."¹⁶ Language referring to "ruins," "monuments," and "archeological sites" made clear the types of "antiquities" the act intended to protect. Still, there was great variety among the sites so designated, a fact recognized by Commissioner Fred Dennett of the General Land Office, who noted in 1908 that the act's language created "practically no limits as to the character of the object to be reserved."¹⁷ By 1919, the monuments under Park Service jurisdiction included not just geological anomalies like Devils Tower and Petrified Forest, but the archeological treasures

of Chaco Canyon and the Gila Cliff Dwellings, and fantastical landscapes like Jewel Cave and Natural Bridges.¹⁸

Considering the unique nature of such marvels, federal designation of Scotts Bluff as a national monument was not an obvious choice. Even as a historic site, the bluff was only one of countless possible Oregon Trail landmarks, a collection that included the arguably more renowned neighboring formations of Chimney Rock and Courthouse Rock. Although Scotts Bluff did appear in many early guides, narratives, and depictions, it seemed to disappear from national accounts after the Oregon Trail was rendered nearly obsolete by the completion in 1869 of the transcontinental railroad, which was located approximately 40 miles to the south.¹⁹

However, Scotts Bluff had something other landmarks lacked: motivated boosters. What local residents recognized was that while Scotts Bluff may have been fading into obscurity as the nineteenth century came to a close, public memory of the Oregon Trail was not. Soon after its close, the westward journey began to gain popularity as a national myth, with images of the pioneers transformed into national heroes and civilizers of the continent. Thrilling accounts and paintings, from Francis Parkman's first-hand descriptions to artist Albert Bierstadt's 1869 gold-infused depiction of *The Oregon Trail*, romanticized manifest destiny and those who implemented it, while nostalgia suffused the 1871 Crofutt guide's description of the "western frontiersman" who "shone superior to all others. . . ." Historian Frederick Jackson Turner not only endowed the pioneers with fortitude but also attributed to them the very origins of the American democratic impulse as he made his case for the "significance of the frontier in American history" in 1893.²⁰

As public interest in the story of the Oregon Trail increased in the first decades of the new century, pioneer stories gained widespread national attention. Much publicity accompanied the two-year journey of former pioneer Ezra Meeker, as he traveled the length of the Oregon Trail backwards from 1906-1908 in an ox-drawn covered wagon. Meeting with President Theodore Roosevelt in Washington, D.C. at his journey's end, Meeker enjoined Roosevelt to approve a national highway along the route and to name it "The Pioneer Way."²¹ Celebration of the westward migration continued with the surge of patriotic fervor during and following World War I, as leaders of the National Park Service were considering Scotts Bluff's case.

Despite the increasing national popularity of the Oregon Trail, and pioneers in general, not all Park Service officials were convinced that Scotts Bluff was itself worthy of national commemoration. Publicity chief Sterling Yard and Horace Albright, then Assistant Director, both expressed their doubts about Scotts Bluff's national significance.²² But Stephen T. Mather became an early advocate of federal recognition; in late 1919, after one of his administrative assistants scoffed at Scotts Bluff's bid for monument status, calling it "but a bump of land," Mather wrote back,

It is true Scott's Bluff [sic] is only a bump of land, but it is some bump. It's [sic] historic associations, coupled with the fact that it is possible of development for the tourist and visitor, make it attractive for national monument purposes. The Old Oregon Trail, the pathway of the settlers of the Northwest, passing through Mitchell Pass within its limits, and the fact that the bluffs served as a landmark and rendezvous for the early pioneers make it . . . worthy of preservation. . . . It is time that a few of these historic spots be properly marked and kept in their original state. Without such forethought the march of economic development westwardly will before many years make such reservations impossible. I think the reservation of this monument will be a step ahead, and in the right direction.²³

In this recognition of the site's potential for tourist development, Mather demonstrated not only his interest in strengthening the public memory of the pioneers, but also his belief that the public memory could be sited effectively at the bluff. Just two months later, President Woodrow Wilson signed the monument's official proclamation.

Tourist Dreams and Community Schemes

Mather's faith in the national popularity of the Oregon Trail seemed borne out by the appearance of the mythic journey in popular depictions and celebrations across the country. The laudatory nature of such depictions can be encapsulated in the tagline for the epic pioneer-themed 1923 Paramount production *The Covered Wagon*, which read, "The cowards never started...the weak died on the way."²⁴ That same year, President Warren Harding commemorated the eightieth anniversary of the arrival of the first of the trail's pioneers in Oregon at a celebration in Meacham, Oregon, a former campground for westward-bound pioneers. There, he dedicated a memorial, attended a series of pioneer pageants and reenactments, and delivered a stirring speech in which he valorized the pioneers as "heroes" whose "victory proclaimed the strength of resolute purpose and the human genius, confident in itself and eager to achieve on its own account."²⁵ A few weeks later, the irrepressible Ezra Meeker, now 93 years old, made national headlines when he announced his plans to travel the Oregon Trail path yet again by automobile, train, and airplane.²⁶

Eager to receive such recognition, residents of the towns neighboring Scotts Bluff proceeded to link their community identities directly to the national story. In 1924, residents of Gering announced the founding of "Oregon Trail Days," after concluding that "a region so steeped in pioneer lore should boast an appropriate celebration." The community had established a one-day festival the previous year, with activities that included a small parade with a number of floats constructed by local businesses. It had been an incredible success, attended

by more than 8,000 people, an extraordinary number for such a small community. With the event's new name in place, residents scheduled the 1924 celebration for July 17, the date that the first Euroamericans were said to have traveled past Scotts Bluff in 1830, thereby linking the civic celebration to the landmark's national story.²⁷

Locals expanded this association by linking their community founders to those original pioneers, all under the umbrella of Oregon Trail Days. In 1925, the event's officials inaugurated a tradition of documenting the names of the area's so-called "Old Settlers," who were defined as those local individuals who had lived in the region for at least 45 years. Although this classification at first provided for the inclusion of only the town's original settlers, its chronological shift every year ensured an endless supply of newly-minted "old settlers," indefinitely perpetuating the pioneer heritage. Old Settlers associations had been established throughout the Midwest since the 1870s, but the Gering organization was distinctive in its direct link not just to the heritage of the local community but to all the pioneers who had passed through the region in the previous century.²⁸

At the same time, residents knew that simply linking the bluff's national story to local events was not enough to create a popular national destination. The community was also interested in "improving" the bluff itself, a pursuit made possible by minimal federal oversight of the national monuments through the 1910s and 1920s. Long predating its federal status, locals regularly had climbed and even ridden horseback up a rough foot trail to take in the view or to picnic at the summit. For many years after its federal commemoration, as at other sites, local residents were literally in charge. The supervisory role of custodian was for many years little more than honorary and was filled by prominent local businessmen who were paid a token amount of \$12 a year to patrol occasionally, post signs, and notify the Park Service of any infringements. No one lived or worked on the lands, and no buildings were located there.²⁹

Through the 1920s, local residents repeatedly lobbied the National Park Service for funds to develop the monument grounds, but federal money was scarce. Throughout most of the decade, the monuments were generally neglected, considered less significant than the vast national parks like Yellowstone, and relegated to a second-class status.³⁰ Scotts Bluff was an especially low priority, as many of the other monuments, such as Muir Woods and Casa Grande, required much more attention, and subsequent funding, for upkeep and protection of their scenic treasures.³¹ Through 1924, most of the funds appropriated for monuments were being utilized to preserve prehistoric ruins or historic structures in the southwest. In July 1923, when a total of \$12,500 was available for maintenance of all 28 then-existing national monuments for salaries, protection, road improvements, and all other expenses, the Park Service allotted just \$50 to Scotts Bluff for the construction of a few tables, benches, and fireplaces.³²

This did not seem sufficient to locals, who wanted to encourage extended use of the monument grounds by visitors. They were inspired by increased usage

of the bluff following its federal commemoration. Custodian Will Maupin estimated that between April and October of 1920, 2500 people had used the rough foot trail at the bluff, and that approximately 5000 had picnicked on its slopes. In 1923, the monument reportedly attracted 20,000 visitors, making it a distant third most visited monument after Muir Woods (91,253), which benefited from its close proximity to San Francisco; and Petrified Forest (45,475). Still, locals believed that more development must follow. With the eastern slope of the bluff literally in the backyard of the town of Gering, townspeople first began to develop the lands on that side. By 1921, the Scotts Bluff Commercial Club financed the installment of several picnic tables at the foot of the trail.³³

This in itself did not necessarily contradict National Park Service policy. Local development of federally-owned sites in the early years was not uncommon, nor was it generally discouraged by the Park Service, which was also interested in increasing visitation but long lacked the funds to construct amenities itself. Privately-operated concessions had long existed at the larger parks such as Yellowstone and Yosemite. At New Mexico's Carlsbad Caverns, designated a national monument in 1923, local entrepreneurs built concessions above ground and, later, a cafeteria inside the cave, all with Park Service approval. Still, although the Park Service was interested in making "national resorts" of its sites, the agency's growing concern for wildlife preservation made its representatives wary of local attempts to modify its protected landscapes.³⁴ As Horace Albright had stated in a pivotal 1918 policy letter, "In the construction of roads, trails, buildings, and other improvements, particular attention must be devoted always to the harmonizing of these improvements with the landscape."³⁵ The founding document of the National Park Service set the stage for many such debates, prompting endless interpretations of how best, as it dictated, "to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."³⁶ Through the first few decades of its existence, the Park Service was still trying to determine how best to reconcile the competing demands of recreation and conservation in its protected landscapes, leading to much more involvement by local communities than later regulations would allow.

No major railroad companies or corporations volunteered to develop the site at Scotts Bluff. Instead, in the absence of federal dollars or moneyed organizations, community groups and individuals, including Maupin himself, personally funded many improvements to the original picnic area and the foot trail to the summit. Locals installed a rifle range and modest country club, complete with nine-hole golf course, all on monument grounds.³⁷ But most threatening to the broader federal dictate that NPS properties be left "unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations" was the continuing local desire for an automobile road to the top of the bluff. Despite increasing visitation numbers and the addition of a rough foot trail, picnic tables, and fireplaces, the community surrounding Scotts Bluff recognized that the key to the monument's success

still lay in providing motorists with access to the summit and the impressive view it provided. History might have provided the impetus for national commemoration of the bluff, but locals knew that its chief attraction was its relative height, something visitors could appreciate regardless of their interest in the history of the westward migration.

In this respect, locals were keenly aware of where tourism was headed and were eager to take advantage of current trends. By the time of the monument's creation, auto tourism was already a reality. In 1910, 458,000 private automobiles were registered nationwide. Ten years later, that number had skyrocketed to eight million.³⁸ And these new motorists were increasingly embarking on cross-country pleasure travel, prompting some writers to refer to them as the new pioneers, as the freedom of the open road, and liberation from train tracks, enabled motorists to explore new routes. As one reporter observed in 1913, "Where the ox-hauled prairie schooner plodded not so many years ago, scores of motor tourists now make the trip from ocean to ocean." Writers and tourists alike seemed inspired by the early pioneers, as some early auto travelers used their new freedom to follow the historic routes of the Oregon Trail and other earlier pathways across the continent.³⁹

Boosters of Scotts Bluff hoped to attract these very people, those interested in American heritage and liberated by their private cars to explore these interests. By the 1920s, cheaper automobiles and better roads may have increased the numbers of motor tourists criss-crossing America, but the monument was still at a disadvantage. Like the transcontinental railroad before it, Lincoln Highway—dubbed the unofficial "main street" of the nation—did not extend as far north as Scotts Bluff. This kept the monument out of many well-publicized accounts of cross-country travel.⁴⁰ However, area roads were improving. By 1921, the road from U.S. 30 at Ogallala through Scottsbluff westward had been selected as a post road, U.S. 26, and became part of more than 5,000 miles of such post roads in the state.⁴¹

To locals, their distance from well-traveled auto routes meant that they needed to present Scotts Bluff as well worth the effort of a detour. But to the Park Service, it was critical that automobiles not be favored too exclusively. Thanks to the rising number of privately-owned automobiles in America, many of the parks and monuments were now more accessible than ever before, a fact on which the Park Service was eager to capitalize, but this correspondingly made federal landscapes more vulnerable to damage.⁴² Scotts Bluff may have been recognized officially more for its historic importance than for the value of its topography, but it was still equally subject to Park Service landscape standards, which soon led to conflicts over just how the bluff could be developed while still remaining "unimpaired." As locals pursued, and funded, various developmental activities, there seemed to be no governing incentive for them to keep the landscape pristine and unmarked.

Federal concern about potential damage to the landscape seemed warranted, considering that a road to the bluff's summit would be a substantial undertaking.

Maupin continued to assert that such a project would make Scotts Bluff National Monument the greatest tourist attraction in the plains region, by combining historic interest with a magnificent view.⁴³ In 1921, he spearheaded the campaign to develop the top of the bluff, suggesting to the Park Service that a private corporation be allowed to build a toll road, as well as a pavilion and café on the summit. Through the next several years, other individuals and organizations, including the Scottsbluff Chamber of Commerce, repeatedly asked the Park Service for road funding, or the permission to finance and construct one themselves.⁴⁴ Still acting as Park Service director, and with landscape preservation his priority, Arno Cammerer rejected all of these requests, asserting that the agency might be able to build a road within the next few years, and only then, if tourist travel warranted it, could the Park Service arrange for the construction of “proper concessions and conveniences at the summit.”⁴⁵

Locals were somewhat appeased in 1927 when the government agreed to provide some funds and engineering assistance for the construction of an improved foot trail to the top of the bluff. A 1926 interbureau agreement between the National Park Service and the Bureau of Public Roads (BPR) had enabled a massive initiative to improve road and trails throughout the National Park system.⁴⁶ Although there was not enough money for a road, the Park Service agreed to contribute \$500 from its Road and Trails appropriation for a trail, contingent upon the local community’s ability to raise an equal amount. They quickly complied, and, under the direction of NPS civil engineers, members of area Boy Scout troops assisted in the construction of a series of switchbacks that culminated in a series of wooden steps leading to the summit. Conveniently accessible from the town of Gering, the pronounced switchbacks were highly visible in the open terrain of the east side of the bluff, giving the footpath another popular nickname: the “zigzag trail.” Locals continued to mark the landscape with their own “improvements,” including a large stone and stucco commemorative arch erected at the foot of the trail in 1928 by the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. (Figure 2) That same year, the towns of Scottsbluff and Gering collaborated in funding the extension of a power line into monument grounds, enabling lights to be erected at the picnic area and at the summit. The county then joined the effort by grading a road to the picnic site at the foot of the bluff. Motorists occasionally pressed the boundaries of this new access by attempting to drive their cars up the foot trail, to the frequent consternation of the custodian.⁴⁷

Testing the Limits of the Imagination: The Argument for National Significance

All of this work, and its visible results, increased the local community’s sense of connection to, and even ownership of, the bluff. Just as they were responsible for the monument’s designation in the first place, it was only through local initiative that the grounds were being developed at all. And yet they knew

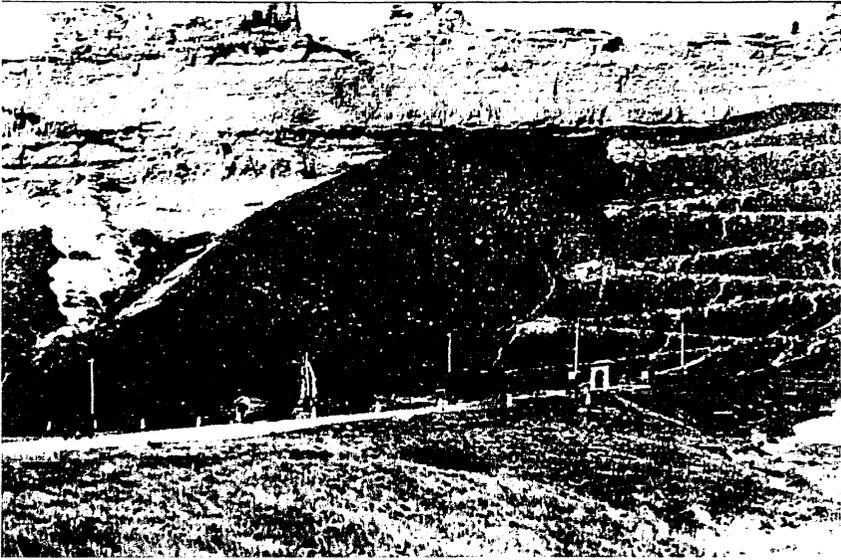


Figure 2: An arch erected by the Daughters of the American Revolution marked the foot of the zigzag trail. 1932 photograph courtesy Scotts Bluff National Monument Archives.

that the bluff could not reach their desired level of popularity without additional financial help. The lack of significant federal funds continued to frustrate many Nebraskans, who believed the bluff was not receiving the national attention or the developmental assistance it deserved. In 1928, the National Conference of State Parks went so far as to propose to the Park Service that they transfer Scotts Bluff to the State of Nebraska for the purpose of making it a State Park.⁴⁸

However, the majority of local residents still believed in the bluff's potential as a national attraction. The benefits of federal status to local communities were becoming more obvious with increasing federally-sponsored marketing of the national parks and monuments. After having received brief mention in Park Service brochures since 1916, national monuments received more specialized attention with the 1926 publication and subsequent editions of the booklet, *Glimpses of our National Monuments*, which provided tourists with descriptions and information regarding existing national monuments.⁴⁹ The difficulty inherent in conveying Scotts Bluff's larger meaning is revealed in the monument's entry in the 1930 edition, which describes the landmark's historical context, but mentions no specific features related to that history, other than the pass and the bluff as a whole. Instead, the entry prominently features the consistently popular attraction that *can* be seen at the bluff: the view. As the entry reads, "Each summer thousands of persons make the ascent to its summit for the magnificent views from its elevation of 4,662 feet. Nestled in the North Platte Valley, six

towns with many miles of surrounding irrigated acres of green alfalfa, golden grain, and other crops greet the eye.” The historical routes taken by westward settlers had to be imagined; the “modern foot trail” and “magnificent panoramic view of the surrounding country” did not. Tourists, it was clear, favored the tangible. In contrast to such emphasis on the fantastic view, the fact that auto tourists could “still follow the route of the old Oregon Trail through Mitchell Pass” elicited no similar superlatives, just a reference to a “stone marker” that the Nebraska State Historical Society had placed at the pass.⁵⁰

Some motor tourists may have been following the route of the Oregon Trail, but the bluff’s lack of concrete historic features, or visual and textual interpretations of its larger significance, earned it less attention than other sites related to the story of westward migration. As a result, in 1930 the monument was absent from widespread national coverage of the anniversary of the departure of the first wagon train on the Oregon Trail from St. Louis. At the urging of the Oregon Trail Memorial Association, a group founded by former pioneer Ezra Meeker four years earlier, President Herbert Hoover announced the period from April 10 to December 29, 1930 as the “covered wagon centennial.”⁵¹ As President Harding had in 1923, Hoover reasserted the importance of the public memory of the pioneers, urging Americans “to recall the national significance of this centenary of the great westward tide which established American civilization across a continent.”⁵² After observing the celebration, a *New York Times* reporter acknowledged it as the story of all Americans, writing, “For a nation made by pioneers and largely peopled by their descendants, the commemoration is one of the great periods in their own past. If the present celebration...can do more to rouse a nation-wide interest in the history of its westward progress it will have served a fine purpose.”⁵³ This link of pioneers to patriotism would continue throughout the 1930s, particularly in the American Midwest.⁵⁴

In its evocation of pioneer fortitude in the face of adversity, Scotts Bluff would seem to have been a perfect symbol for both the anniversary and the age, a figurative and literal reaffirmation of American perseverance. But although the national commemoration linked the pioneer experience to all Americans, the physical commemoration of this historic American process did not take place at the national monument. Instead, the country sited the public memory in other places, just as they had in 1923, when President Harding dedicated the pioneer memorial in Meacham, Oregon. In 1930, a pageant of mule-drawn prairie schooners gathered in St. Louis on April 10, commemorating the date a century before when ten wagons and 81 men began the journey westward. Boy Scouts from across the country converged on Independence Rock, Wyoming, on July 3 for a three-day encampment, as “some of the old pioneers who [were] still alive” told them stories of days on the trail.⁵⁵

Locals recognized that Scotts Bluff needed to be better interpreted in order to earn attention as a focal point for the public memory of the nation’s “westward progress.” In this effort, they benefited perhaps more than any other site from the promotion of Horace Albright to Director of the National Park Service in

1929. Under Albright, the Park Service directed its efforts toward educating and inspiring Americans through transmission of their cultural heritage at the historic sites of its expanding park system. With this initiative, narratives of the nation's development, which many monuments commemorated, received increasing attention, and interpretation was systematically undertaken for the first time.⁵⁶

But perhaps even more encouraging to locals was that Albright also understood the need to appeal to auto tourists. In 1931, after visiting Scotts Bluff on a tour of western sites including Independence Rock and Fort Bridger, Albright decided to approach the monument "with a view both to making it a tourist attraction and to help stimulate interest in historic preservation." Scotts Bluff's "historic background," he recalled, "was to be emphasized in our promotion of it."⁵⁷ Impressed by the view from the summit, Albright recalled the journey his own grandmother had taken to California over the Oregon Trail.⁵⁸ Recognizing that increasing numbers of tourists were retracing the historic route in their private automobiles, he also realized that the Park Service needed to use the resources at its disposal to create attractions that would gain widespread interest and prompt repeat visits year after year.

By the end of his visit, Albright had verbally approved the construction of an automobile road to the summit. But achieving this objective would necessitate balancing both local desires and Park Service standards, and his support came on one condition. In March 1932, Albright endorsed the project only "if it is possible to build a road to the top of the Bluff without in any way impairing its landscape values." He decreed that it should be constructed "in order that all western travelers following the historic Oregon Trail may enjoy the view from the summit that I had the thrill of observing last year. . . ." Funding came through in 1932, and upon his return to Gering that September, Albright was greeted with a crowd of 2,000 for a public reception and picnic, complete with a municipal band, on monument grounds. Sponsored by the Associated Chambers of Commerce of the North Platte Valley, the event was attended by representatives of the Bureau of Public Roads and National Park Service, including the superintendents of Rocky Mountain and Wind Cave National Parks.⁵⁹ Finally, with Albright's commitment to building a road, members of the community were getting what they wanted. Thirteen years after the monument's creation, the Park Service had committed to the major developmental projects at Scotts Bluff that could earn the monument the national audience its boosters desired.

As soon became clear, however, local residents would not be in control of that process. That the money for the road, and later, a museum, became available through the programs of the New Deal solidified the federal nature of the imminent development. The stock market crash and ensuing Depression hit Nebraska hard, causing farm prices to plummet and decreasing the purchasing power of the state's farm products. Combined with lower than average rainfall through the early thirties, many area farmers and industrial workers were forced

out of business, a situation of which Albright was from an early point aware.⁶⁰ Work projects on state and federal land would include construction and development of parks, roads, and bridges throughout the country. By 1940, units of the National Park Service would receive a total of \$180 million for construction projects, granted through federal work relief programs including the Civil Works Administration (CWA), Works Progress Administration (WPA), Public Works Administration (PWA) and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC).⁶¹ At Scotts Bluff, the large number of federal agencies ultimately involved in hiring local workers to complete various projects included the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), the PWA, and the enrollees of CCC camp #762, who were stationed in temporary stucco buildings at the monument in May 1935.⁶²

Federalization and its Discontents

The arrival of federal funds and programs transformed both the monument's appearance and its meaning for local residents. In securing much-needed employment for the area's unemployed, the bluff's federal status directly benefited community families more directly than tourism ever could, a completely unforeseen benefit of having a national monument in the backyard. Accordingly, the bluff, formerly a local recreational ground, now became a pivotal component of the local economic landscape. Road construction commenced in spring of 1933, after the CWA announced approval of its plan for the 1.7-mile roadway, which would wind through three excavated tunnels to the summit of the bluff. By December, 596 men, hired through the Scotts Bluff County Re-employment Office, were working on Scotts Bluff County CWA projects, with 170 working at the monument alone. More than 3,000 Scottsbluff men were reportedly on relief by the following September. Most were beet farmers or other agricultural workers who had had no previous construction experience. (Figure 3)⁶³

Throughout this transitional period, locals kept a close watch on all ongoing projects at the monument, by now a critical part of their community. This was especially true during the Depression years, with not only their tourism aspirations but their very economic survival at stake. In January 1934, Francis LaNoue, a former Park Service ranger from Yellowstone who took over custodial duties during the course of construction, wrote that "the most striking part of the CWA work as it pertains to Scotts Bluff National Monument is the interest that local people are taking in both parts of the project."⁶⁴ They periodically expressed their frustration at the frequent delays in work, since every day without federal funding meant another day without a paycheck for local husbands and fathers. Monument officials often spoke at local Chamber of Commerce meetings and other community gatherings to explain the progress they had been making.⁶⁵

Yet, despite this intense local interest and involvement, it was clear that the site was becoming a definitively federalized space, aided by the National Park Service's deliberate movement into the realm of American public memory. With Albright's advocacy of greater interpretation of the sites under the federal



Figure 3: Workers excavate one of the Summit Road tunnels during New Deal-era construction. Courtesy Scotts Bluff National Monument Archives.

umbrella, the objective of many of the historic NPS sites became to educate and to inspire with patriotic sentiments. This trend continued as more stories of the American republic were incorporated into the National Park system with a 1933 reorganization that brought under NPS jurisdiction a variety of federally owned sites that previously had been administered by the War and Agriculture Departments. These included dozens of historic sites, monuments, and battlefields, including the Statue of Liberty, Gettysburg National Military Park, Lincoln Memorial, and Washington Monument.⁶⁶ In the interim, additional historic sites had become national monuments, including the Colonial National Monument and George Washington's birthplace, both in Virginia.⁶⁷ Additionally, like the pioneer images popular throughout the 1930s, the New Deal programs themselves carried a highly nationalistic message, intending to promote American ideals and to affirm the country's ability to surmount obstacles, the very principle Scotts Bluff National Monument was originally intended to convey.⁶⁸

Scenery, Interpretation, and the Struggle to Conform

The federalization of Scotts Bluff's landscape, like the others within the system, was not solely ideological. The movement away from local control of the site was symbolized by the physical location of the new development. For the first time, construction was not occurring on the side of the bluff nearest the towns of Gering and Scottsbluff, but instead established a federal space

unmistakably separate from the local community. Easy access from town was not the Park Service's priority, and with the construction beginning on the south side of the bluff, the developments nearest town began to be abandoned. This process became permanent in 1933, when a survey of monument boundaries by the General Land Office revealed that all the development on the east slope of the bluff, including the picnic grounds at the foot of the zigzag trail, was on privately owned land. This area was therefore allowed to deteriorate, to great public dismay. The monument custodian was forced to submit a public letter to the editor of the local newspaper to explain the situation after a concerned citizen complained about the Park Service's neglect of the area.⁶⁹

Strict attention to landscape considerations demonstrated that this was now unmistakably federal land, and that environmental guidelines would have to be followed to the letter. The Park Service employed the same standards as at national parks, following the philosophy of "lying lightly on the land." Two primary goals governed the Park Service approach: that the educational mission of the monument be maintained, and that development should not in any way impair the natural integrity of the landscape. This translated into a dual approach for development at Scotts Bluff. From the Park Service perspective, two views, potentially in direct conflict, were in need of preservation: the view that the original westward migrants saw when passing by the bluff (befitting the monument's formative role as a landmark) and, in order to fulfill the needs of both education and tourism, the view *of* those trails *from* the bluff. That the trails could not actually be viewed from the bluff, as very few vestiges of them remained, could eventually be remedied by the addition of interpretive markers.⁷⁰

The Park Service established its control by beginning to remove so-called "non-conforming uses" of the landscape by locals. But because residents had constructed so much on the site, this took time, and involved a series of compromises. In 1934, advertisements still featured the unlikely double bill of "Scotts Bluff National Monument and Country Club."⁷¹ By 1935, however, federal efforts had managed to eliminate the club house and to reduce the golf course to nine holes, but it would not be completely obliterated until 1951. In May 1936 the course was still receiving improvements that were being greeted with enthusiasm by the local public. In fact, the federal government even enabled further development of the locally-popular site. An adobe and frame shelter house with a flagstone floor, seats, and fireplaces was constructed there by CCC workers in June 1936 to bring the course into conformity with NPS landscape standards, in return for local approval of a reduction in its size and a complete elimination of the club house.⁷² Moreover, the rifle range, which had opened in 1925 for use by the National Guard, was issued a temporary permit by Albright in the fall of 1931, and it was not completely removed until 1949.⁷³

To the Park Service, one of the most embarrassing components of the monument's landscape was the completely uncamouflaged scout trail, with its highly visible zigzags, which stood completely counter to NPS landscape standards. As a somewhat hurried and poorly-funded project, the trail was later

lamented by the engineer who had overseen the work, who admitted, “At the time . . . the controlling factor in Park Service road and trail work was principally funds rather than landscape and other requirements.”⁷⁴ The majority of a new foot trail, known as the “Saddle Rock Trail,” was engineered and constructed by CWA workers in 1933. That April, Albright approved this project with the understanding that it would proceed under BPR supervision with workers hired directly by the Park Service, using surplus funds from the road allotment. Starting from the bluff’s south side, workers blasted a foot tunnel through the rock of the bluff to complete the trail, which intersected with the existing switchbacks near the top and eliminated the hazardous wooden steps near the summit.⁷⁵

Significantly, like the Saddle Rock Trail before it, the road construction that began under careful federal supervision also originated on the south side of the bluff, not the side bordering the town of Gering. The challenge here was to build a suitable automobile road that, unlike the disastrous scout trail, could not be seen from below. NPS engineers accomplished the camouflaging process through a combination of careful site locations of road cuts and tunnels, revegetation, construction of earth berms to hide the road, and color coordination of the road and tunnels with the natural shades of the bluff—all basic Park Service landscaping practices implemented throughout the country. Thomas C. Vint, since 1927 the Chief Landscape Architect for the National Park Service and the ultimate authority on all landscape matters at national parks and monuments, made a number of visits to the monument from NPS field headquarters in San Francisco to oversee the work.⁷⁶

Although appreciative of the harmonized appearance of the roadway, some locals still did not fully appreciate, or even understand, Park Service landscape standards. Hoping to tie together all of the monument’s main attractions at one location, some hoped that the museum would be built on the summit itself, a plan that one local journalist reported was already underway in May 1932. To correct the record and to keep the local community informed, Albright wrote a firm letter to the editor, expressing the Park Service’s intention that the summit be kept relatively undeveloped and the natural landscape maintained. “Right along,” he wrote, “our main guiding policy has been to keep the summit clear of all man-made structures.”⁷⁷

When a museum was actually constructed, beginning in 1935, the first official structure erected on monument grounds was situated at the foot of the summit road, reinforcing the federal reorientation of the monument. The traces of the original Oregon Trail wagon ruts were still clearly visible just a short walk from the museum, contributing to its interpretive power and further justifying the building’s location. At the time, it was the only Park Service museum in the west dedicated to history. As a result, and in keeping with federal concern for a broader educational mission, the Oregon Trail Museum addressed not the history of Scotts Bluff in particular, but American western migration, in general. A naturalist working at the Berkeley office explained the site’s synecdochic role

in a memo to the custodian, writing that “In the history room we plan to stress the fact that ‘the history of the Scotts Bluff area is an epitome of the exploration, exploitation, and settlement of the Trans-Mississippi West.’”⁷⁸ A local team helped to prepare exhibits for the museum under the auspices of the Park Service’s Field Division of Education in Berkeley, California. Locals played a distinctly supporting role in the construction of various displays on regional history, geology, paleontology, archeology, and ethnography, including more than 150 watercolor paintings and dioramas.⁷⁹

The first unit of the museum was completed in June 1935 and dedicated during Oregon Trail Days the following July, with pioneer artist William Henry Jackson, then 93 years old, serving as the principal speaker.⁸⁰ Although only one room, and costing “less than a small home,” the museum finally allowed the monument’s headquarters to be relocated from Gering to the monument grounds.⁸¹ Permanent exhibits for the historical wing were completed and installed by October 1936.⁸² By the end of 1937, ECW labor built an additional museum wing, comfort stations, and ranger’s residence.⁸³ Planned by federal employees to convey the national story, the museum formalized the monument’s official meaning and rendered it visible, providing an interpretive overlay for the physical bluff. Before the arrival of New Deal funding and the interpretive additions it enabled, the monument had relied largely on visitors’ imagination to direct their own gaze toward the historic sites below and independently to summon up the desired appreciation of them. Now, the message was made explicit for all visitors, regardless of their previous familiarity with the site’s historical context. (Figure 4)⁸⁴

And yet, however much the museum may have codified the monument’s national significance, it was the opening of the summit road in September 1937 that represented the culmination of community aspirations. Announcements in local papers brought a record crowd of at least 850 visitors to witness the event, and approximately 600 automobiles made the ascent on the first day alone. Coinciding with the area’s gradual economic recovery, the completion of the road seemed to represent local hopes for the future, just as the creation of the monument once had. A few days after the opening, a local reporter repeated the familiar claims of monument officials that “the bluff will now become a scenic point of wide interest and win fame as a recreational area.”⁸⁵ Another reporter agreed, predicting that the year 1937 would mark “the entrance of Scotts Bluff national monument into the class of major historical park areas.”⁸⁶ These lofty claims were bolstered by striking visitation figures tabulated before and after the road’s opening. During the 1938 travel season, 90,000 people visited the bluff, compared to 64,000 the previous year, an increase of 42 percent.⁸⁷ Clearly, as both locals and federal officials had hoped, the monument became more attractive once visitors could effortlessly drive to the top on a smooth and scenic road. Numerous postcards featuring the road attested to its popularity and served to advertise the new attraction.

Museum, Scott's Bluff National Monument

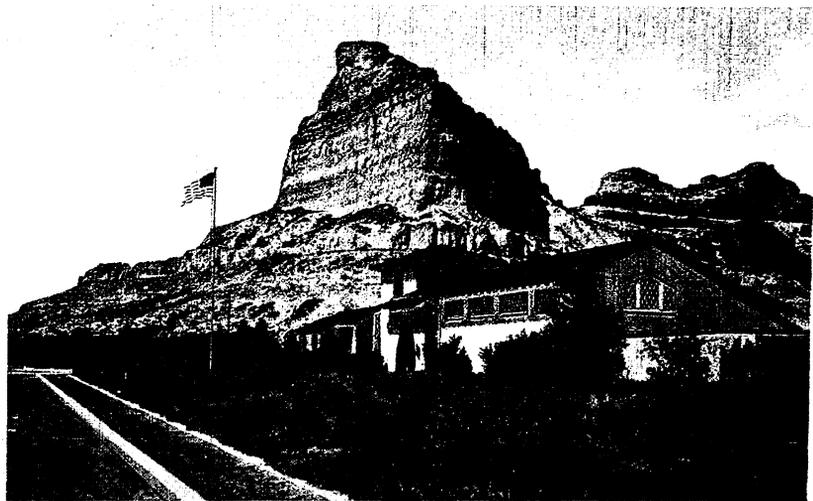


Figure 4: The Oregon Trail Museum offered the first formal interpretation of the monument's historical significance. Postcard ca. 1951.

Both locals and tourists took advantage of the road, and, correspondingly, the monument's visitation numbers continued to rise. By June 1940, monument custodian Merrill Mattes reported that the number of motorists driving the summit road had practically doubled since the previous June. He attributed this statistic to the "skyrocketing reputation of the Scotts Bluff summit road," writing

We have never yet encountered a visitor who was not enthusiastic about the view from the summit, including case-hardened, calloused 'natives' who come back again and again to view the sunset, or the kaleidoscopic [sic] pattern of clouds and distant ridges, and the checkerboard of cultivated fields on the valley floor.⁸⁸

However, as they had before federal assertion of control in the 1930s, locals continued to view the bluff as an extension of their community. As a result, they still wanted to be able to use it as they always had, and the proximity and beauty of the site made it an attractive component of their everyday lives. Area residents used the road and foot trail constantly for family hikes and weekly Sunday drives, as well as for special events, such as Easter morning sunrise services. School groups from Scottsbluff and Gering also took regular field trips to the monument grounds to learn lessons in history and environmental science.

But not all their actions were so innocuous, resulting in some wrangling between locals and Park Service officials over the proper use of monument

grounds. One of the most egregious violations of the monument's environmental integrity, and, tellingly, one of its most popular activities, was the annual regional running of the All-American Soap Box Derby on the lowest stretch of the road. Approximately 10,000 people attended the first annual derby in July 1939.⁸⁹ Parking thousands of vehicles on the fragile grasses of the monument grounds, the local population was obviously more concerned with the action on the roadway than the integrity of the monument's ecological system. (Figure 5) After the 1939 running of the derby, NPS landscape architect Lloyd Fletcher expressed his concern for the environmental damage caused by the approximately 5,000 cars, which resulted in permanent scars on the landscape, arguing that this use of the grounds should be discontinued in the future.⁹⁰ Despite his warning, the second running of the derby, in 1940, brought an even larger crowd, who cheered on local children as they competed for the victor's trophy. In 1941, custodian Merrill Mattes admitted that the derby "does not exactly fit into the scheme of things here, and it is fondly hoped that interest in it will dwindle to zero in 1942. If not, it will probably have to be tolerated again as a good-will gesture."⁹¹ It would be tolerated many times again, held every year through the 1950s, with the exception of the war years, demonstrating the power held by the locals, as the "goodwill gesture" of respecting their interests trumped any ethic of environmentalism.⁹²

It still seemed something of a surprise to monument officials that the view elicited more interest than the museum, despite that fact that it was a tangible



Figure 5: The All-American Soap Box Derby tested the environmental integrity of monument grounds. July 1939 photograph courtesy Scotts Bluff National Monument Archives.

attraction that was easy to appreciate and to consume. In 1940, apparently believing that the summit road had trumped the story of westward migration, Mattes expressed his concern that the main monument objective of commemorating the Oregon Trail was being disregarded in visitors' rush to marvel at the view. Even with the museum in place, the historic narrative was apparently not as prominent at the monument as federal government officials would have preferred. Mattes complained to the NPS Regional Director that although the summit road was originally conceived as an educational feature, it was too often treated "as a mere scenic diversion." He continued,

there is a golf course, a picnic ground, a Soap Box Derby, and a paleontology museum. We don't deny there are excellent reasons for all of these things, but for the purposes of the present argument we must confess that in this jungle of other interests the Oregon Trail theme has had a rather precarious existence.⁹³

Attributing the problem to a "lack of controls," Mattes suggested that a ranger should be located on the summit whenever possible to give impromptu lectures about the bluff's history. Mattes also advocated improving the sign and trail system to attract a larger number of visitors to the north observation point, where a new orientation map could outline the historical significance of the Oregon Trail. He believed the "patriotic theme" could be better expounded once tolls were collected at a central "checking station." The achievement of control, as Mattes asserted, was imperative, as successful interpretation was considered by the federal government, if not by the local residents, to be critical to the success of the historic site.⁹⁴ To aid this effort, short foot trails were built, leading to observation points. In the late thirties, an observation parapet on the North Overlook was built, and bronze arrows identifying significant views were embedded in the parapet. Other historical indicators were also added. Together, these directed the visitor's gaze to the original routes of the immigrant trails, as well as Chimney Rock, the North Platte River, and other historic and geologic landmarks, and placed them in a larger context of the overland trails and relevant geological activity. (Figure 6)⁹⁵

For their part in both their correspondence and in the monument's master plans, National Park Service officials continued to reassert the bluff's larger significance. As at other pivotal moments in American history, the start of World War II prompted increased federal concern with the patriotic messages the National Park system could convey. Visiting Scotts Bluff in 1941, Park Service publicity director Isabelle Story reflected that "At this critical time . . . the people of the United States need high morale to face the dangers which beset them[,] and a realization of the hardship and sacrifice of the pioneers which made America great can do much to strengthen that morale and confidence."⁹⁶ Concurrently,



Figure 6: The addition of interpretive plaques at the summit identified surrounding landmarks to visitors. June 1941 photograph courtesy Scotts Bluff National Monument Archives.

the developmental outline for the monument described Scotts Bluff's "significant theme" in Turnerian terms, claiming that as a landmark on the historic Oregon Trail, Scotts Bluff "symbolizes the westward expansion of the American frontier, and the march of Democracy across a continent."⁹⁷ In its symbolic function, the bluff now represented not just pioneer perseverance or nation-building, but Democracy itself.

The Malleability of Meaning and the Persistence of Place

The Park Service's continuing association of Scotts Bluff with such abstract values may seem to suggest a federal government consumed with the symbolic significance of the bluff's heritage and a local community concerned mainly with the recreational and economic advantages the bluff could provide. However, as time passed, community identity and public memory began, if not to coincide, then at least to intersect in surprising ways. The official interpretation of the monument became more local as the community began to incorporate the federal narrative into its local identity. The local celebration of Oregon Trail Days gradually became a state, and even regional, institution. Now the longest-running annual celebration in the state of Nebraska, the event runs for four days each July, regularly attracting more than 30,000 people.⁹⁸ The Oregon Trail name has itself become increasingly ubiquitous throughout the region. State Highway 86

(now 92), the road that extended through monument grounds from Gering, was designated the “Oregon Trail Highway” in 1936, and realigned the following year to improve access to the monument.⁹⁹ Oregon Trail Park was established in Gering in 1946 as a permanent site for the Oregon Trail Days celebration. Today, the “Oregon Trail” name also graces the names of businesses, including the popular local dance hall (the Oregon Trail Saloon); the racetrack (Oregon Trail Speedway); a barber shop; an eye center; a plumbing, heating, and cooling service; and, perhaps most appropriately, a travel agency. (Figure 7) A wide variety of other businesses have also appropriated allusions to the pioneer heritage, including the Pioneer Animal Clinic, and the ever-popular Pony Espresso. Monument Mall links the community’s identity to the nearby bluff, as do Monument Car Wash, Monument Realty, and Monument Shadows Golf Course. Street names continue the theme, from Immigrant Trail Drive to Oregon Trail Boulevard.

What is particularly notable about this naming trend is that, contrary to what one might observe in other “gateway” communities adjoining popular tourist sites, the majority of these businesses are not themselves tourist destinations attempting to benefit from association with the area’s most celebrated attraction but, rather, civic institutions catering to the local population, in their everyday lives. In a way, this reflects the merging of the national and the local at Scotts Bluff National Monument, which continues to function as both a local and a federal place. At the same time, just as the course of time has transformed Gering’s



Figure 7: The Oregon Trail Travel Agency in Scottsbluff is just one of the contemporary businesses in the area bearing the historic name. Courtesy of the author.

newer residents into “Old Settlers,” the story of local involvement at the federal site, including the activities of the New Deal years, has become part of the monument’s history, incorporated into the national story it commemorates.¹⁰⁰

Additionally, as other National Park Service units such as Homestead (Nebraska) and Whitman (Washington) National Monuments and Fort Laramie National Historic Site, and eventually the establishment of the Oregon National Historic Trail increased national interpretation of various aspects of the westward migration, there was less of a burden on Scotts Bluff to address the entire history of the American West or even the overland trails. Many of the newer national historic sites demonstrated more of a regional than a national significance. Accordingly, the museum at Scotts Bluff began to focus more on the surrounding region, including its natural history, as well as the museum’s growing collection of regional art and photography by William Henry Jackson.

Throughout its development years, the monument’s meaning, like public memory itself, constantly shifted, depending upon a number of factors, including the level and nature of site interpretation, the popularity of the Oregon Trail in American culture, the federal presence at the monument, and the status of heritage tourism nationwide. At the same time, local residents infused the landscape with their own local meanings and uses, seeing the public memory related to the bluff largely as a means to an end rather than the end itself. Through their campaign for national recognition of the bluff, their development of monument grounds for their own recreational purposes, their contribution of physical labor to its construction projects, and their appropriation of its national narrative for purposes of civic identity and local celebration, local residents expressed acts of ownership of the site and its meaning. In the process, the national story became a part of the community’s heritage. Scotts Bluff is likely to remain a “minor” monument in the national arena, but growing up with a national monument in its backyard provided the local community with something neither it nor the National Park Service may have expected: a lasting identity.

Notes

1. Will Maupin to Stephen Mather, 12 June 1920, included in *Report of the Director of the National Park Service to the Secretary of the Interior for the Fiscal Year ended June 30, 1920 and the Travel Season 1920* (Washington, D.C.: GP, 1920), Scotts Bluff National Monument archives, (hereafter SBNM). The title of “custodian” was changed to “superintendent” in 1949.

2. Earl Harris, *History of Scotts Bluff National Monument* (Gering, Neb.: Oregon Trail Museum Association, 1962), 68. Scotts Bluff was later found not to be the highest point in the state.

3. Carl P. Russell, National Park Service Field Educational and Forestry Headquarters, Berkeley, California to Harold Cook, 24 January 1934, SBNM.

4. John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 15; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 13; Hal Rothman, *America’s National Monuments: The Politics of Preservation* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 197.

5. As revealed by the growing canon of literature on our relationship with the natural and cultural landscape, we invest places with meaning, a process eloquently described by Simon Schama, J.B. Jackson, and many others. This connection to, or sense of, place—what Yi-Fu Tuan

has termed “topophilia”—is a product of our individual actions and emotions and the memories we both create and inherit, as members of communities both large and small. Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Knopf, 1995); a collection of excellent essays by John Brinckerhoff Jackson is found in *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); See also John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin, 1977), 11; Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974); Maurice Halbwachs, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Koser, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

6. For discussion of how individuals experience national history in personal terms, see David Thelen and Roy Rosenzweig, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

7. For examples of how local communities promoted historic sites in the interests of economic development, see Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 169.

8. *Ibid.*, 169-205.

9. For examples, see John Sears, *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) and Anne Farrar Hyde, *An American Vision: Far Western Landscape and National Culture, 1820-1920* (New York: NYU Press, 1990).

10. Alfred Runte, *National Parks: The American Experience*, 3d ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 89.

11. Within the National Park system, these would include Colonial and Homestead National Monuments; George Washington’s birthplace; and outside, privately-financed ventures such as John D. Rockefeller Jr.’s 1926 restoration of Colonial Williamsburg and Henry Ford’s Museum and Greenfield Village in the late 1920s. The process has continued to the present day, with such new sites as the Rosie the Riveter/World War II Homefront National Historical Park in Richmond, CA, created in 2000.

12. Runte, *National Parks*, 11-12, 14, 65; See also Marguerite S. Shaffer, *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880-1940* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 13, 329 n.20.

13. Shaffer, *See America First*, 101-106.

14. James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), 327.

15. Senator G. M. Hitchcock to Assistant Secretary Adolph C. Miller, March 28, 1914, SBNM; M. P. Kincaid to Stephen Mather, February 18, 1916, SBNM; Kincaid to Secretary Lane, October 5, 1916, SBNM; Petition to Lane, March 4, 1918, SBNM.

16. Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 170-71; Harris, *History of Scotts Bluff*, 12; Stephen T. Mather to M.P. Kincaid, 18 February 1916, SBNM. For an electronic edition of the Antiquities Act of 1906, see the National Park Service Archeology and Ethnography Program website at http://www.cr.nps.gov/aad/PUBS/LEE/LEE_fpm.HTM.

17. Annual Report of the Commissioner of the General Land Office for 1908, cited in Chapter 8, *The Proclamation of National Monuments Under the Antiquities Act, 1906-1970* by Ronald F. Lee, available online at http://www.cr.nps.gov/aad/pubs/lee/LEE_CH8.HTM.

18. Rothman, *America’s National Monuments*, 233-35.

19. Such accounts included Joseph E. Ware’s popular 1849 *Emigrant’s Guide to California*, a brief mention in Francis Parkman’s *The Oregon Trail*, which was first published in installments in *Knickerbocker* magazine starting in 1846. Noted artist William Henry Jackson sketched Scotts Bluff in 1866 as he camped nearby, and he later completed hundreds of images of the bluff, many of which are kept at the monument today. Unlike Court House and Chimney Rocks, the bluff was not described, nor even mentioned, in George A. Crofutt’s 1871 *Crofutt’s Trans-Continental Tourists’ Guide* (New York: G.A. Crofutt, 1871).

20. Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 17; Crofutt, *Crofutt’s Trans-Continental Tourists’ Guide*, 27.

21. “By Ox Team Cross Country,” *The New York Times*, 12 August 1907, p. 7; “Roosevelt Sees Ox Team,” *The New York Times*, 30 November 1907, p. 9.

22. Office memorandum, Yard to Albright, March 22, 1918, SBNM.

23. Memorandum, Administrative Assistant Joseph J. Cotter to Mather, October 26, 1919, SBNM; Memorandum, Mather to Cotter, undated, SBNM.

24. *The Covered Wagon* (Paramount, Dir. James Cruze, 1923).

25. Meacham is now the site of the Emigrant Springs State Heritage Area. “President Harding’s Speech on the Oregon Trail,” *New York Times*, 4 July 1923, p. 3; Kammen, *Mystic Chords*, 423.

26. “Will Again Travel Old Oregon Trail,” *New York Times*, 16 July 1923, 12.

27. “Trail Days Event Develops into Biggest Celebration in State,” July 1939, SBNM; “Oregon Trail Days is an Annual Event Based on Pioneer Valley History,” *Gering Courier*, One

Hundred Year Anniversary Edition, 30 April 1987, Section V, 1; "Oregon Trail Days to Take Vacation Spotlight of All Nebraska: Parade Featured," May 1940, SBNM.

28. Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 121

29. The first custodian, newspaper editor Will Maupin, was succeeded by Albert N. Mathers, president of the Gering National Bank, in 1925. Harris, *History of Scotts Bluff*, 19.

30. Rothman, *America's National Monuments*, 128-29.

31. Arno Cammerer to Will Maupin, 3 July 1923, SBNM.

32. Arno Cammerer to Rep. Robert G. Simmons, House of Representatives, 11 June 1924, SBNM; Cammerer to Will Maupin, 2 April 1923, SBNM.

33. Harris, *History of Scotts Bluff*, 18; Visitation was, of course, much higher in many of the national parks, led by Rocky Mountain National Park (218,000), Yellowstone (138,352) and Yosemite (130,046). For estimates, see "National Park Attendance," *New York Times*, 14 October 1923, p. XX4.

34. Kammen, *Mystic Chords*, 465; Several good essays on early concessions in the National Parks appear in David M. Wrobel and Patrick T. Long, eds., *Seeing and Being Seen: Tourism in the American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001).

35. Ethan Carr, *Wilderness by Design: Landscape Architecture and the National Park Service* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 81.

36. Quoted in *Ibid.*, 5.

37. Harris, *History of Scotts Bluff*, 14-19.

38. Hal K. Rothman, *Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 143.

39. For the impact of auto tourism on tourism in the American West, see Rothman, *Devil's Bargains*; Shaffer, *See America First*; Virginia Scharff, *Twenty Thousand Roads: Women, Movement, and the West* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003); "To Map Two Trails Across Continent," *The New York Times*, 4 May 1913, p. X11.

40. For useful discussions of the Lincoln Highway, see Drake Hokanson, *The Lincoln Highway: Main Street Across America* (Ames: University of Iowa Press, 1988) and Gregory Franza, *The Lincoln Highway: Nebraska* (Tucson, Arizona: The Patrice Press, 1996).

41. Olson, *History of Nebraska*, 290.

42. For discussion of the relationship between the National Park Service, national identity, and early automobile tourism, particularly in the American West, see Earl Pomeroy, *In Search of the Golden West: The Tourist in Western America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1957); Hyde, *An American Vision*; Shaffer, *See America First: Tourism and National Identity*; Rothman, *Devil's Bargains*.

43. Maupin to NPS Director, 4 October 1921, SBNM.

44. Will Maupin to NPS Director, 10 January 1921, SBNM; Scottsbluff Chamber of Commerce to Stephen Mather, Telegram, 28 May 1924, SBNM.

45. Arno Cammerer to Will Maupin, 17 January 1921, SBNM.

46. Francis LaNoue, Final Report, CWA Project F68, 27 April 1934, SBNM.

47. Albert N. Mathers to Arthur E. Demaray, 23 July 1929, SBNM; Harris, *History of Scotts Bluff*, 21. Ironically, development was often the best route to landscape preservation, in providing clear roads for visitors to uses rather than allowing them to roam everywhere. See Carr, *Wilderness by Design*, 5.

48. Harris, *History of Scotts Bluff*, 24.

49. *The National Parks Portfolio*, by Robert Sterling Yard, was published in 1916, 1917, 1921, 1925, 1928, and 1931, and revised by Isabelle F. Story (Washington: US GPO, 1931). *Glimpses of Our National Monuments* was published in 1926, and again in 1929 and 1930 (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1926, 1929, 1930). A sixth, revised edition of the *National Parks Portfolio*, produced in 1931, contained brief descriptions of national monuments as well.

50. *Glimpses of Our National Monuments* (1930 ed.). Available through the National Park Service online at http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/portfolio/portfolio11i.htm.

51. In 1926, the Oregon Trail Memorial Association issued six million commemorative half dollars, authorized by Congress, to raise funds to restore the Whitman Mission in Oregon to and construct a memorial to Oregon Trail pioneers, and install markers along the Oregon Trail. Merrill J. Mattes, "A Tribute to the Oregon Trail Memorial Association," *Overland Journal*, Winter 1984, 30; "Meeker to Motor over Oregon Trail," *New York Times*, 11 July 1926, p. 24.

52. "Hoover Proclaims 'Covered Wagon Day': April 10 to Mark Oregon Trail Centennial," *New York Times*, 23 February 1930, 28.

53. "The Oregon Trail," *New York Times*, 10 April 1930, 23.

54. Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 177, 126, 136.

55. "Boy Scouts to Celebrate Covered Wagon Centennial," *New York Times*, 30 March 1930, XX9; See also Kammen, *Mystic Chords*, 397-400.

56. See Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 170-79; Kammen, *Mystic Chords*, 466-68.

57. Horace M. Albright, *Origins of National Park Service Administration of Historic Sites* (Philadelphia: Eastern National Parks & Monument Association, 1971). Available online through the National Park Service at http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/albright/index.htm
58. Horace Albright to Albert N. Mathers, 21 March 1932, SBNM.
59. Harris, *History of Scotts Bluff*, 25-26.
60. Olson, *History of Nebraska*, 300; Charles Randels to NPS Director, 3 December 1935, SBNM; Horace M. Albright to Mrs. Robert G. Simmons, 22 October 1932, SBNM.
61. Carr, *Wilderness by Design*, 258.
62. Eventually, 198 CCC camps were constructed on 94 national park and monument sites. John C. Paige, *The Civilian Conservation Corps and the National Park Service, 1933-1942: An Administrative History* (Washington: National Park Service, 1985). Available online at http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/ccc/index.htm.
63. "596 County Citizens on Civil Works Jobs," *Gering Courier*, 22 December 1933; Clifford Shoemaker, Final Report, CWA Project F68, 26 April 1934, SBNM; Harold Cook to Director, NPS, 20 September 1934, SBNM.
64. Francis LaNoue, CWA Summary Progress Report, 25 January 1934, SBNM.
65. "Museum and Road at Monument are Discussion Topics," *Gering Courier*, 22 December 1933.
66. Albright had expressed interest in gaining jurisdiction over War Department sites since 1917. Horace M. Albright, *Origins of National Park Service Administration of Historic Sites* (Philadelphia: Eastern National Parks & Monument Association, 1971). http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/albright/index.htm
67. Runte, *National Parks*, 198.
68. Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 204.
69. Harris, *History of Scotts Bluff*, 31; "Custodian Gives Explanation," *Scottsbluff Daily Star-Herald*, 22 July 1933.
70. The exhibit, "Lying Lightly on the Land: Building America's National Park Roads and Highways" appeared at the National Building Museum from June 1997-March 1998. An overview is available online at <http://www.cr.nps.gov/habshaer/llll/>.
71. Correspondence, February 1934, SBNM.
72. Harris, *History of Scotts Bluff*, 55; Charles Randels, Superintendent's Narrative Report, May 1936, SBNM; Charles Randels, Superintendent's Narrative Report, June 1936; Master Plan, SBNM 1939; Master Plan, SBNM, 1942.
73. Horace Albright to Rep. Robert G. Simmons, 23 October 1931, SBNM; Harris, *History of Scotts Bluff*, 55.
74. Arthur Burney to Frank Kittredge, 14 January 1932, SBNM.
75. Thomas Vint to NPS Director, 5 April 1933, SBNM; Horace Albright to Howard Baker, 11 April 1933, SBNM. The scar left by this trail can still be seen on the eastern slope of the bluff seventy years after its construction and almost fifty years after its official abandonment.
76. Alicia Barber, "Scotts Bluff National Monument Summit Road, Gering, Nebraska." *Historic American Engineering Record Report No. NE-11* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, 2001).
77. Horace Albright to A.B. Wood, 17 May 1932, SBNM.
78. Carl P. Russell, National Park Service Field Educational and Forestry Headquarters, Berkeley, California to Harold Cook, 24 January 1934, SBNM. In 1956 the museum was renamed the Visitor Center.
79. Merrill Mattes to Leila Hallock, 14 April 1936, SBNM; "Scotts Bluff and the Old Oregon Trail," *The Highway Magazine*, November 1940, 256.
80. Harris, *History of Scotts Bluff*, 37.
81. "Saga Told in Museum," *New York Times*, 17 January 1937, 175.
82. Charles Randels, Superintendent's Narrative Report, October 1936, SBNM; Harold Cook, Custodian's Narrative Report, 1 July 1935, SBNM.
83. Charles Randels, Superintendent's Narrative Report, July 1937, SBNM.
84. Rothman, *America's National Monuments*, 197.
85. Superintendent's Monthly Report, September 1937, SBNM; "Road to Top of Bluff is Open for Autoists Today," *Scottsbluff Daily Star-Herald*, 19 September 1937; "600 Cars Climb to Summit of Bluff as Highway is Opened," *Scottsbluff Daily Star-Herald*, 21 September 1937.
86. Qtd. in Superintendent's Report, October 1937, SBNM.
87. Harris, *History of Scotts Bluff*, Appendix B.
88. Merrill Mattes, Custodian's Narrative Report, June 1940, SBNM.
89. Merrill Mattes, Custodian's Narrative Report, July 1939, SBNM.
90. Lloyd J. Fletcher, Monthly Narrative Report to Regional Landscape Architect, August 20-September 20, 1939, SBNM.
91. Merrill Mattes, Custodian's Narrative Report, August 1941, SBNM.
92. A similar situation occurred with the popular "firefall" at Yosemite. See Runte, *National Parks*, 176.

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93. Merrill Mattes to Regional Director, Region II, Memorandum, 16 November 1940, SBNM.

94. *Ibid.*

95. Master Plan, Scotts Bluff National Monument, 1939. SBNM.

96. "Spirit of Pioneers Can Bolster Morale, Parks Writer Avers," 1 July 1941, SBNM.

97. *Development Outline for SBNM*, D.O. NM-SB-3002-E, 1942, SBNM.

98. "Celebration of the Past, Present and the Future," *Gering Courier*, 20 July 2000, 1B; "70th Annual Oregon Trail Days Schedule of Events," (Gering: Oregon Trail Days, 2000), SBNM. David Glassberg observes that "national imagery acquires diverse meanings from the local contexts in which it is displayed," in "Public History and the Study of Memory," *The Public Historian* (Number 2, Spring 1996): 13.

99. Superintendent's Narrative Report, July 1936, SBNM; Harris, *History of Scotts Bluff*, 39; Charles Randels, Superintendent's Monthly Report, September 1937.

100. Such stories have been incorporated at the monument, for instance, in displays about local participation in the construction of the museum and Summit Road.