

REVIEW ESSAY

THE FIGHT FOR A PERMANENTLY  
PROTECTED WILDERNESS

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*M*ark Harvey. *Wilderness Forever: Howard Zahniser and the Path to the Wilderness Act*. (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2005. Pp. xviii, 325, foreword by William Cronon, acknowledgments, notes, selected bibliography, index, cloth \$35.00, paper \$24.95.)

Thomas G. Smith. *Green Republican: John Saylor and the Preservation of America's Wilderness*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006. Pp. x, 404, acknowledgments, notes, bibliography, index, cloth \$40.00.)

Among the growing pantheon of heroic environmentalists stand two native Pennsylvanians, Howard Zahniser, born and raised in Tionesta, and Congressman John Phillips Saylor of Johnstown. In two excellent biographies we see their parallel efforts to save America's original natural phenomena. Both men emerged as national leaders in a new conservation philosophy when they formed the opposition to the Colorado River Storage Project from 1954 to 1956, a controversy that established the battle lines for the nation's post-World War II land and water conservation legislation. The subsequent eight year struggle for passage of the

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1964 Wilderness Act was the culmination of their alliance because Zahniser died four months before President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the law. The enactment is a major turning point in both books.

Howard Zahniser was raised in the Free Methodist faith, in which both his father and uncle were ministers. After graduating from Greenville College in Illinois he moved to Washington, D.C. and worked in public relations for the Departments of Agriculture and Interior, handling biological and agriculture related matters until the end of World War II. The terrors of that era, especially the atomic explosions, strengthened his love of nature and led him to accept a position as editor and headquarters supervisor of the Wilderness Society. By popularizing its periodical, *Living Wilderness*, he enlarged the society's membership from a small number of radical zealots to a large group of interested ordinary citizens. Through essays and editorials he placed in many magazines and newspapers, speaking presentations, and contacts with federal departments and congressional figures, he advocated protecting and enlarging existing national parks and forests. Like Congressman Saylor, he vigorously opposed federal hydroelectric dam projects, roads that invaded forests, private enterprise lumbering, livestock grazing, lavish tourist facilities, and mining operations on these federal lands. Encouraged by his role in blocking the construction of a federal dam at Echo Canyon on the Colorado-Utah border, Zahniser, in 1956, suggested legislation to create a permanent national wilderness program. Congressman Saylor was his strongest ally in the House of Representatives, although other sympathetic congressmen submitted variations of the Wilderness bill. A few days before Zahniser's death, which occurred May 5, 1964, a compromise was reached with the resistant Interior and Insular Affairs Committee chairman, Colorado's Democratic Representative Wayne Aspinall. Although "Zahnie" had to yield on certain details he apparently died believing he was victorious. Having known since 1955 that he had a weak heart, Zahniser nevertheless had continued to take many camping and hiking vacations through numerous wilderness territories, and he was thoroughly familiar with the areas he wanted to legally protect. Mark Harvey vividly describes Zahniser's wilderness journeys.

The author delves deeper into Zahniser's motivation in Chapter 10, "In Search of Community." At one point Zahniser wrote "We not only exist but we are immortal on the Earth only as members of a great community [of species]." Harvey believes Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) inspired Zahniser to embrace this concept of a community of natural phenomena. Although by the 1950s Zahniser seems to have ceased active church

membership, he never became a pantheist. One extremist viewpoint he shared with Saylor was that human experience in the wilderness was psychologically therapeutic, although neither reduced the belief to a truly scientific explanation. Harvey suggests Zahniser's certainty of psychological benefits may have arisen from his enthusiasm after reading Martha Reben's *The Healing Woods* (1952). Zahniser's beliefs are more disturbing when we learn how, in 1947, he responded to the criticism that federal legal protection for wild areas would only mean access to the land for people with the wealth and leisure time to go on excursions. In response, he quoted a remark Bob Marshall had frequently uttered: "wilderness is important even to those who may never use it."

Even though he ceased to practice Free Methodism, Zahniser drew from it his characteristics of humility, gentle argument, and a pastor's respect for ideas of others even when they bluntly contradicted his own. This seems consistent with his veneration for the lives of all creatures. Unlike many earlier environmentalists, Zahniser praised the American free enterprise system and its consumer culture. Another concept important to him was a sense of living in a continuum. He advanced this viewpoint to deflate the accusation that his plans for establishing "wilderness forever" were products of his and his generation's conceit.

We can easily see Zahniser in an intellectual chain descending from John Muir and Bob Marshall, but the John P. Saylor presented by Thomas G. Smith in *Green Republican* is far more complex. Saylor's basic beliefs and goals were enigmatic and frequently contradictory. In public discussions he often appeared blustering and compulsive. The son of a Johnstown lawyer, city solicitor, Pinchot Republican, and outdoorsman, John graduated from Dickinson Law School, married, and became Johnstown's city solicitor when his father died of an unexpected heart attack. Through the second half of the depression John remained a fiscal conservative who deplored the growth of federal bureaucracy, yet he accepted the main thrust of the New Deal's make-work projects and its robust pro-labor policies. In 1942, after five years in office, patriotism compelled him to join the Navy; he served until the end of the war. Following the accidental death of the Democratic congressman for the 26<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania District (Cambria, Indiana, and Armstrong Counties), Saylor, in 1949, won a special election to fill the vacant seat. Rather than discussing district problems, he campaigned against weaknesses he saw in the Truman administration. Through charm and energy he won handily. National GOP leaders at first hailed him as the harbinger of a counter-revolution, but

in his first unofficial reception in Washington he suggested that Republican politicians were not catering to working class desires. This alienated House Republican leader Joseph Martin who accordingly assigned him to the Interior and Insular Affairs Committee. There he soon became a towering figure and would continue as such for the rest of his life. Appointed to the committee at the same time was another freshman congressman, Democrat Wayne Aspinall of Colorado, who would be Saylor's nemesis for the next twenty-two years.

Aspinall (1896-1973), believed the American West's development depended on enlarged water accumulation and continued controlled use of national lands for lumber, mining, and cattle grazing enterprise. By placing on the landscape dams that created enormous reservoirs, there would be more water for population growth and for land reclamation that would increase agriculture. From the same dams would come hydroelectric power to keep the cost of power low and eventually take economic leadership away from the eastern United States. Although he sometimes agreed with Saylor's arguments for preserving scenic lands untrammelled by man, he stood firmly against allowing that principle to prohibit the economic development that might arise from exploiting resources found on national lands.

To retain his seat Saylor had to support unionization and protect jobs. This led him to oppose federal hydroelectric dams because they diminished the market for Pennsylvania bituminous coal. Their enormous reservoirs also destroyed scenic and wilderness areas, and the combination of these two evils led Saylor to become an expert in environmental legislation. Probably the decisive moment came in 1953 when he took a rafting trip, accompanied by Aspinall, through the Green and Yampa River valleys that were scheduled to be destroyed by a dam planned for Echo Canyon. Opposition to dams was also tied to his hatred of communism; he often pointed out that big hydroelectric projects were part of the Soviet Russian system. Since most of the controversies in which Saylor took part before the Wilderness Act of 1964 had to do with the western states, it is surprising that the industrial workers so dominant among his constituency consistently returned him to office.

Overlapping with the eight year campaign for passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act were battles over two proposed Pennsylvania river dams, Tocks Island at the Delaware Water Gap and Kinzua on the upper Allegheny. Saylor vigorously opposed both, although he was the son of survivors of Johnstown's 1889 disaster and could well remember the St. Patrick's Day Pennsylvania floods of 1936. Scenic beauty, public recreational convenience,

and the Seneca lands guaranteed by the Pickering Treaty of 1794 motivated Saylor, but in both cases Thomas G. Smith suggests that he withheld his fullest thunder against the dams to avoid weakening his position in other legislative battles. Alternatives to the Kinzua Dam were never fully examined because a January 1959 western Pennsylvania flood militated that construction must occur. Saylor knew that further resistance would make him appear too hot-headed and radical, which in turn could weaken the fragile popular support for the Wilderness Act. Saylor's subsequent efforts to enlarge the settlement with the displaced Cornplanter tract, nevertheless, gave him good press coverage. Similarly, when the House considered the Tocks Island Dam appropriation, Saylor withheld criticism because, at the same time, he led the resistance to the Burns Creek water project in Idaho. Congress approved the Tocks Island Dam but agitation by organizations of property owners dissatisfied with the compensation the government offered, not by Saylor's polemic, halted the project.

In early August 1964, three months after Zahniser's death, Saylor rallied the House votes to restore two important provisions Zahniser's supporters had yielded earlier in order to get the bill to the floor, and placed the final touches on the Wilderness Act. Now, with the principle of wilderness legal protection firmly established, Saylor's remaining nine years in office were characterized by his expansion into a wider variety of conservation issues. These included clean air and clean water legislation, protection of California redwoods and Florida cypress, the Endangered Species Act, Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, Wilderness Act, opposition to the Alaskan pipeline and the St. Lawrence Seaway, creation of many national parks and national monuments, and numerous arrangements to purchase additional area for the nation's protected zones. On balance, Saylor in these later years seemed to have been more concerned with the nation's East, and the protection of areas important to human historical past seemed to weigh heavier in his consideration. Furthermore, he was criticized for classifying as "untrammelled by man" eastern forest lands that had long before been scarred by roads, mining, and grazing.

As a Republican, Saylor was a maverick in many ways. Unflinching in several conservative attitudes, he yet interfered with traditional Republican individualism by shutting off certain natural resources to enterprising opportunists. He also catered to blue collar values and aspirations, contrary to Republican tradition. President Eisenhower's policies perpetuated the nation's habit of infrastructure expansion for economic development; Saylor's measures for withholding untapped resources of nature worked against Ike's

goals. Furthermore, although Saylor's pitch to blue collar voters paralleled President Nixon's schemes for building a permanent Republican majority, Nixon, in 1970, accepted the arguments of Saylor's arch-enemy, Wayne Aspinall, and reopened wilderness preserves to lumbering interests because there seemed to be a national housing shortage. Also, despite Saylor's instinctive hostility to growth of government bureaucracy, the operation of the statutory wilderness protection program he built has required such a large work force that it can be said to have taken on collectivist features.

In 1972, his last active year before the onset of a heart condition that led to his death in September 1973, Saylor was just coming to grips with the national energy crisis and the shrinking of the traditional manufacturing economy. His continued faith in bituminous coal as preferable to imported oil or nuclear energy persisted; he expressed enthusiasm for one of the proposed solutions, "gasification" of coal into automobile fuel. In his final years, however, Saylor expressed contempt for environmental alarmists who opposed the Tennessee-Tombigee Rivers Waterway as a potential threat to the ecosystem. Saylor said their "stop the world, I want to get off" approach was "totally ridiculous."

One wonders how Saylor would have dealt with several environmental problems that emerged after his death such as nuclear accidents, AIDS, influenza pandemic, evolving immunities of toxic germs, global warming, earthquakes, and tsunamis. In recent years the cry for "wilderness forever" has lost some of its glow. Environmental crises may reach such proportions that societies cannot afford not to use all available resources, and the Zahniser-Saylor years may take on the appearance of a happy golden era of the past.

Both these books make major contributions to the growing body of American environmental history. Zahniser and Saylor did much to make uncompromising, "nature untrammelled by man" wild lands protection acceptable to the American public and challenged the government's ascendant policy of a conservation that allowed private enterprise to use the resources on public land as long as some renewable residue remained. These books leave, however, several questions that only the passage of time can answer. Neither Zahniser nor Saylor resolved the inconsistency between maintaining land totally untrammelled and maximizing recreational access in order to be of service to the public. Nor did either of these two environmental advocates trace in scientific terms a psychological process through which human presence in the wilderness is of benefit to health.