



# the Grand Tetons

**A**LTHOUGH the Lewis and Clark expedition passed well north of the Teton Range, the first white man to see it was a member of that expedition. John Colter joined Lewis and Clark in 1803 and traversed the . . .

*The rugged peak of Mount Teewinot, often confused with the Grand Teton, as seen from one of several small lakes at the base of the Teton range.*

**Article and Photographs  
by Boyd Norton**

rugged northern Rockies to the Pacific shore, returning over nearly the same route in 1806. Before the party returned to civilization, Colter left the group to join two trappers bound for the upper reaches of the Yellowstone River. Unfortunately, there is no record of this trio's wanderings. Colter mysteriously appeared alone in the spring of 1807 in time to join an expedition led by the celebrated trader Manuel Lisa near the confluence of the Platte and the Missouri rivers. Then, once again, he set out for the upper Yellowstone.

There is ample evidence concerning the 1807 journey. Sent ahead by Lisa to notify Indians of his arrival, Colter passed east of present-day Yellowstone National Park, traveled south to the Wind River and followed it northwest to its source. From there he crossed Union Pass and entered Jackson Hole from the southeast. He spent the winter of 1807-1808 in Pierre's Hole at the base of the western slope of the Tetons.

The next journey into the region was also a commercial venture. John Jacob Astor, seeking to control the fur trade, funded an expedition to follow the Lewis and Clark route from the Missouri River to the mouth of the Columbia River, there to establish a fort to serve as a center of commerce and exploitation of the Northwest. Wilson Price Hunt was the leader of this party.

In 1811 Hunt began his trip, but he soon departed from Lewis and Clark's route because of hostile Indians. He proceeded overland, ascending the Wind River as Colter had done four years earlier. In the vicinity of Union Pass, according to the account in Washington Irving's *Astoria*: "They came to a height that commanded an almost boundless prospect. Here one of the guides paused, and, after considering the vast landscape attentively, pointed to three mountain peaks glistening with snow, which rose, he said, above a fork of the Columbia River." The peaks were, of course, the Tetons. Hunt gave them the name "Pilot Knobs." The fort later established by the party on the Pacific Coast was

*A seldom-seen view of the Grand Teton (right) from Lake Solitude.*

named Astoria, after John Jacob Astor.

In the early summer of 1812 another party, headed by Robert Stuart, left Astoria and, traveling eastward, traced Hunt's route in reverse. In 1818 or 1819 a party headed by Donald McKenzie explored the Teton and Yellowstone country, also approaching from the west. Their first glimpse was of three pointed peaks, which prompted some French-Canadian trappers in the group to name them *Les Trois Tetons* (the three breasts).

**F**ASHION influenced the fate of the Teton country for the next 20 years. Fortunes were made from beaver pelts as tall beaver hats became the rage of society in the East and in Europe.

The "mountain men" came by the hundreds, working for such companies as the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, Hudson's Bay Company and John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company. Some of the men became legends in the history of the West: James Bridger, Jedediah S. Smith, Joseph Meek, David Jackson, Nathaniel J. Wyeth, Captain Benjamin L.E. de Bonneville.

The fur trade provided quick fortunes for some. But as Bernard DeVoto pointed out, it was not solely profit that spurred on the mountain men. There was new country to be explored, lands never before seen by white men.

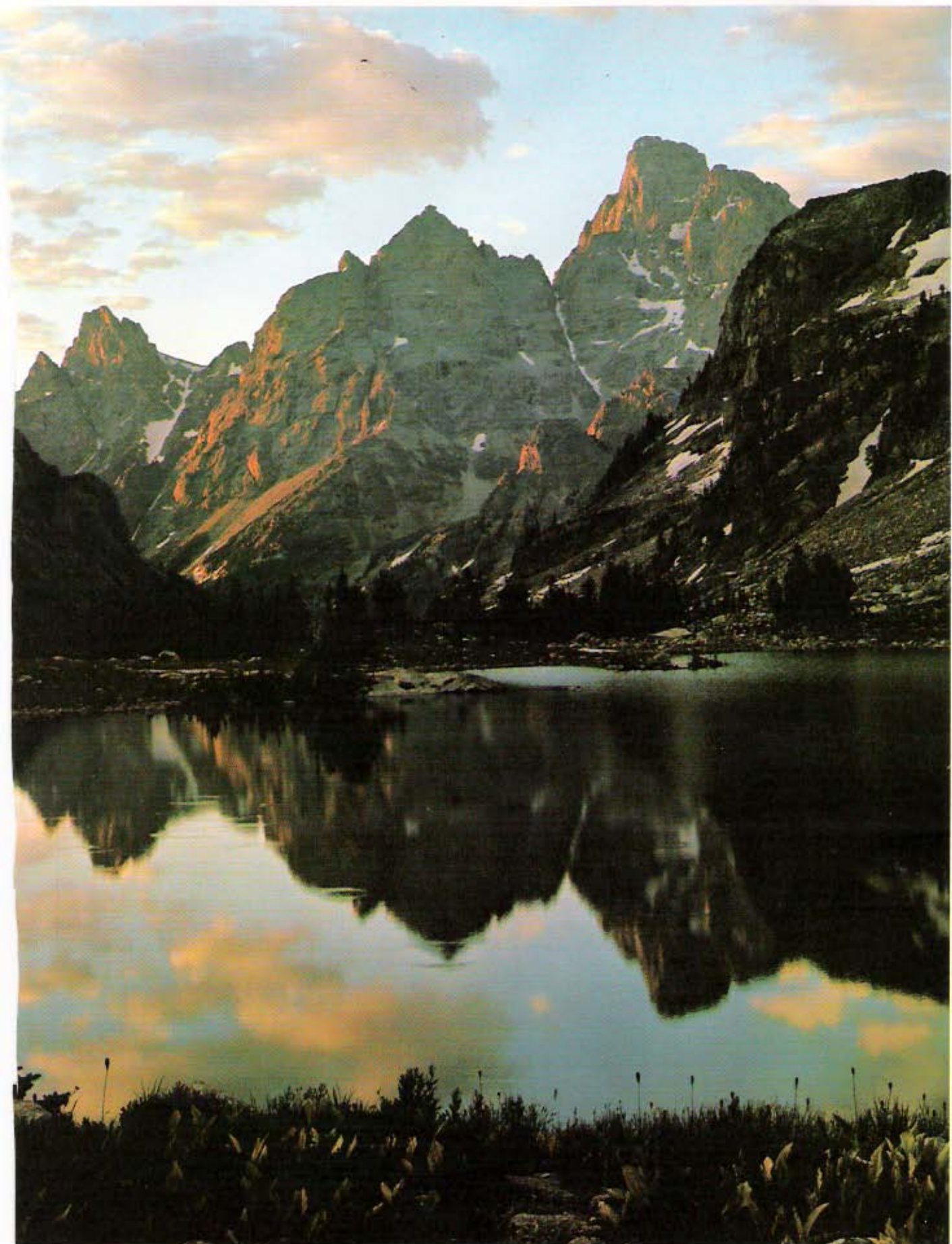
The trappers ranged over much of the northern and central Rockies—farther than they really needed to go for beaver alone. The spectacular valley east of the Tetons held a special attraction for David Jackson, and eventually it was given his name: Jackson Hole.

Unlike the gold seekers to come in a few decades, the mountain men had relatively little impact on the land. Rather than attempting to change it, they adapted. They seemed to share a profound feeling for beauty, wildness and adventure.

Their success as trappers, though, was depleting the resource. And more significantly, the whims of fashion changed, and the market for beaver pelts declined. By the early 1840s the fur trade was a dying industry, and the trappers, with reluctance, were



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*An even rarer view of the Grand Teton near the point where William Henry Jackson made the first photos of it in 1872.*

moving on. The Teton country was left in relative solitude.

**T**HE DISCOVERY of gold farther west had little impact on the Tetons. The trails that carried hundreds of thousands of prospectors to California were situated well south of the range. Fortunately, the Tetons held no mineral wealth. While the insane pursuit of gold swept over much of the West, the valleys of the Tetons remained quiet and untouched by civilization for almost 20 years.

Around 1860 a period of rediscovery began. The government began to fund expeditions to explore the

upper Yellowstone country. Even though much of the West had been roamed and combed, this particular area was still a land of mystery. The tales of Bridger and his colleagues about smoking mountains and boiling springs continued to trickle out of the region.

First came the Captain W.F. Reynolds expedition of 1860, with Jim Bridger as guide. It traveled through Jackson Hole and Pierre's Hole on the way to Yellowstone, under the auspices of the U.S. Topographical Engineers. Ten years later the Washburn-Langford-Doane expedition was significant not for its exploration of the Tetons but for the idea it spawned of creating a national park. In 1872 the new concept was realized—Congress established Yellowstone National Park. Curiously, the Teton Range was not included in

the park even though it had long been considered a part of Yellowstone country.

In 1871 Dr. Ferdinand V. Hayden, director of the U.S. Geological Survey, led the first of several expeditions under his direction to Yellowstone. The Hayden surveys were important not only for their thoroughness but for the pictorial records made by the noted photographer William Henry Jackson and the equally renowned artist Thomas Moran. Jackson and Moran captured on film and canvas the beauty of the Yellowstone and Teton country. Jackson roamed over a significant part of the Teton Range, in particular the western slope, where he made the first photographs of the Grand Teton.

In 1872 two members of the Hayden expedition, Nathaniel P. Langford and James Stevenson, made the

first recorded ascent of the Grand Teton. Their route took them up its difficult west flank. After what Langford described as "ten hours of the severest labor of my life," they reached the 13,766-foot summit.

**T**HE PHOTOGRAPHS of Jackson, the paintings of Moran and the words of Hayden, Langford and others unveiled the magnificence of the Tetons to the nation. Soon tourists visited Yellowstone Park, and settlers moved into the lovely valleys surrounding the Tetons. The most obvious characteristic of civilization—the political boundary—divided and subdivided the region. The land itself, which Indians believed belonged to no one and offered sustenance to everyone, was claimed and settled and bartered and sold. Preserving the Tetons was not easy.

To halt destruction by reckless timber barons, President Theodore Roosevelt established a system of forest preserves, the forerunner of the national forests. The Tetons became a part of the Teton Forest Preserve in 1897, but federal protection was minimal. Mining was allowed, and there was no guarantee against commercial development.

Most of Jackson Hole was carved into ranches. Some residents became concerned about callous development and the threat of irrigation schemes that would incorporate the lovely lakes at the base of the range. A small group of Jackson Hole residents met in 1923 with Horace M. Albright, then superintendent of Yellowstone National Park, to discuss means of preserving a portion of the region. There was no immediate action, but the seeds were sown.

John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who owned the JY Ranch near Phelps Lake, began to take an interest. In 1926 he established the Snake River Land Company, which would begin quietly purchasing private lands in Jackson Hole, planning to turn over these lands to the federal government for preservation. In the meantime, support for a park began to grow, and in 1929 President Calvin Coolidge signed into law the bill establishing Grand Teton National Park. The new park consisted of the rugged Teton Range plus a small fringe of valley lands immediately adjacent to the mountains, a total of 96,000 acres—

less than a third of today's park area. It was Rockefeller's plan to continue to acquire many of the valley ranchlands to add to the park. But during the next two decades bitterness developed over the park's expansion.

Cattlemen feared that further encroachment would limit or perhaps curtail grazing rights. Citizens believed that removal of private lands from the tax rolls would bankrupt the county. Several bills were introduced in Congress to expand the park. All these measures failed to pass. Finally, in 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt felt compelled to take action lest the opportunity of acquiring the Rockefeller lands be lost. Under the Antiquities Act of 1906, he issued a presidential

proclamation establishing Jackson Hole National Monument. It comprised the Rockefeller purchases plus federal lands in the northern and eastern portion of the valley.

This move seemed to confirm local suspicions of government takeover and precipitated swift action on the part of Wyoming lawmakers. Bills to abolish Jackson Hole National Monument were introduced almost immediately, and some came perilously close to passage. On one occasion, only President Roosevelt's threat of a veto prevented congressional action. Even as late as 1947,

*John Colter leaves Capt. Meriwether Lewis at Missouri Falls to head south into the Yellowstone-Teton country.*

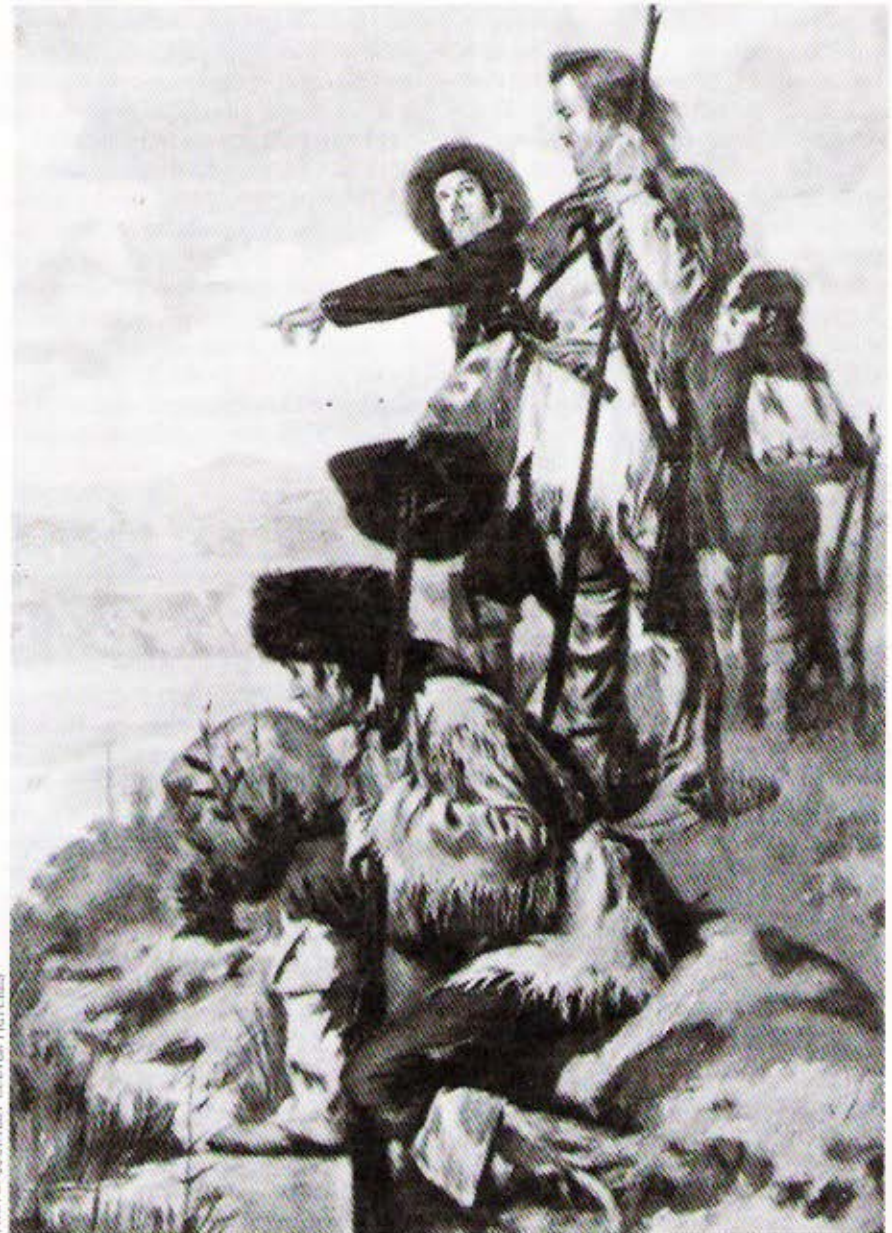


PHOTO: COURTESY OLIVER PICTURES

Congress held public hearings on a bill to abolish the monument.

Throughout this era, a small but solid core of citizens continued to support the preservation of the Tetons and Jackson Hole. Their devotion was rewarded. In 1950 a bill was signed authorizing a boundary change for Grand Teton National Park. The expansion took in nearly all of Jackson Hole National Monument, plus donations from Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc., for a new grand total of 310,442 acres. Permanent protection for the region was finally assured.

Yet backpackers and climbers are discovering that even the wilderness is becoming crowded. For years the detractors of the preservation-of-parks-and-wilderness philosophy have argued that only a "wealthy few" ever venture into wilderness country. But, as one park ranger points out, "There must be a hell of a lot of wealthy people in this country." There are: 939 people successfully climbed the Grand last summer. On an average climbing day, 16 people reach the summit, which measures only about 1,600 square feet. That's equivalent to a population density of 280,000 people per square mile, or 40 times the population density of Los Angeles.

Recently, there has been much publicity about overcrowding in the national parks. The problems of Grand Teton and nearby Yellowstone seem typical. While a great diversity of pressures plague the parks, most congestion stems from the internal combustion engine. The very dependence of our culture on the automobile, coupled with increased leisure time, has brought increasing numbers of park visitors.

**I**N ATTEMPTING to find a solution, it is probably best to begin by defining the national park concept, or, more specifically, to ask, What is Grand Teton National Park? What is the purpose of the boundary drawn around 310,442 acres?

In recent years the National Park Service has taken serious steps toward solving some of the problems, and one of the most powerful tools was provided by the Wilderness Act of 1964. As stipulated by that act, the National Park Service has conducted a ten-year review of the entire Park System and will recommend some

parks or portions of them as candidates for protection in the National Wilderness Preservation System. In Grand Teton, 116,000 acres, or about 37 percent of the park, have been proposed for wilderness protection. If given this coverage, at least that much of the park will remain free of developments.

Wilderness designation solves only a part of the problem, however. Urgently needed are ways to regulate the increasing numbers who visit the park. The motorist and the backpacker usually have conflicting viewpoints. A widespread assumption has developed that virtually every place in the nation ought to be accessible by car. The auto's impact is even more dramatic when we realize that the nation has paved a greater amount of land than it has preserved in the entire National Park System. An estimated 35 million acres are now paved over by roads, streets, highways and parking lots; there are only 30 million acres in the National Park System.

To cope with the growing problem of the automobile, several national parks have initiated the use of mass transit systems, with some degree of success. Plans are now being developed for a bus system in Grand Teton National Park. A reservation system for the campgrounds there has already been moderately successful.

**B**UT WHAT OF the wilderness users? Should dispersal of backpackers from the high-use portions of the park to the undeveloped sections be encouraged? Certainly the wilderness has much less carrying capacity than valley lands and thus requires more stringent regulation of use. In Grand Teton National Park, it is now necessary to reserve a backcountry campsite. If particular areas are at carrying capacity, visitors are encouraged to change their backpacking itinerary and choose other campsites or destinations. Some backpackers feel that these restrictions are illogical because the National Park Service still allows continued use of horses in these areas, and horses obviously have more impact than hikers and backpackers. Therefore it seems imperative that the Park Service phase out the use of horses in park wilderness.

Another problem is that commercial interests in the region are push-

ing for expansion of the Jackson Hole Airport, the only airport located within a national park, to accommodate large jets. Conservationists argue that the high noise levels would further degrade the park experience.

It is easy to be misled in seeking solutions to the Teton jetport controversy. For example, an alternative jetport location has been suggested for Driggs, Idaho, on the western side of the Teton Range. This would remove the airport from the park, but it would destroy another, relatively unspoiled part of the Teton country. The noise would affect the western slope, which has been proposed for reservation as wilderness or as an addition to Grand Teton National Park. Besides, no matter where it were located, the jetport would not contribute to solving transportation problems in the park itself.

Economic pressure on the park takes many forms. The old Ashton-Flagg Ranch road, a primitive but passable route, traverses the Teton Corridor, the narrow strip of land separating the rugged Teton Range and the plateau area of Yellowstone Park. Ecologists feel that this is a biologically important area. It lies in the path of part of the seasonal elk migration and contains the headwaters of numerous lovely streams and rivers. For years motel and tourist interests have pushed hard to have the delightful, winding Ashton-Flagg Ranch road turned into a modern high-speed highway with massive recreation developments along the route. Conservationists have fought this proposal, but it seems clear that the battle may be won only by adding the Teton Corridor to either of the parks.

**I**T IS POSSIBLE that today's spark of environmental concern may be fanned into a blaze of environmental conscience. By altering our consumption patterns and by wiser use of our present resources, there is hope for our parks and wilderness areas. One would like to imagine that in the year 2029, the one-hundredth anniversary of the establishment of Grand Teton National Park, a visitor there will find it still a lovely and wild place; that through stabilized population and a tripling in size of the National Park System, the parks will be less crowded than they are today. ■