

Colter Bay Village: Understanding the Historic Significance of the Recent Past in Grand Teton National Park

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My research at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) was conducted to inform a National Register of Historic Places nomination for Colter Bay Village in Grand Teton National Park. Dedicated in 1957, Colter Bay Village centralized visitor services in the park, offering rustic log cabin accommodations, one of the first trailer camps in a national park, an innovative “tent village,” a cafeteria and general store, the first Laundromat in a national park, a shower building, a marina and boat ramp, a picnic area, an amphitheater, two service stations, and a visitor center and museum, all in one fully planned and carefully designed site. Jointly funded by the National Park Service and the Grand Teton Lodge Co., a wholly owned subsidiary of the John D. Rockefeller founded and Laurance S. Rockefeller led non-profit Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc., Colter Bay Village was immediately praised as “the first [effort] toward a completely rounded and integrated series of facilities” in the national park system, and a pilot project in the nationwide Mission 66 program.¹ What I hoped to understand through research at the RAC was whether Colter Bay Village was historically significant and eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

Evaluating Colter Bay Village for historic significance posed a few challenges from the start. First, the National Register of Historic Places requires that properties must be at least fifty years old or older to qualify for listing, making exceptions only for properties of “exceptional

importance.” While Colter Bay Village was dedicated in 1957, the area continued to expand through the 1970s. Minutes from the Grand Teton Lodge Co. and Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc. annual meetings show that between 1953 and the mid-1960s, not a single summer construction season passed without some improvements and enlargements occurring at Colter Bay Village.² The Indian Arts Museum addition to the visitor center was not completed until 1974. In this case, then, it was critical to prove that Colter Bay Village gained significance in its early years of development rather than the later years.

Another challenge in evaluating Colter Bay Village for historic significance is the lack of guidance and scholarship on the National Park Service Mission 66 program. Launched in 1956 by National Park Service director Conrad Wirth in response to deteriorating and overwhelmed conditions in the parks, Mission 66 was a 10-year program of improvements to park facilities to be completed by 1966, the 50th anniversary of the National Park Service. A billion-dollar park planning, landscape and architectural initiative, Mission 66 effectively redefined how Americans experienced the national parks. As more and more properties constructed during the Mission 66-era reach the fifty-year National Register cut-off, it will become clear that some exemplify the program, while others may not. Colter Bay is one of the first Mission 66 districts to be evaluated, presenting the challenge gauging where the development falls in the spectrum of Mission 66 developments, and how to determine its significance.

The collections at the RAC were critical in addressing these challenges and understanding the development and influence of Colter Bay Village. The papers of Laurance S. Rockefeller, president of Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc. while Colter Bay was being developed, and Harold P. Fabian, the Rockefeller’s representative in Jackson Hole, were especially useful. These collections included, among other documents, the agendas and minutes for the annual

meetings of the boards of both Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc. and the Grand Teton Lodge Co., which between the two illuminated the intentions of the officers and the unique relationship between the private concessioner and the National Park Service. Through my research at the RAC, several important facts and trends were revealed.

First, while the development took twenty years to complete, the final product was planned from the start. The holistic planning of Colter Bay Village and original intention of Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc. and the Grand Teton Lodge Co. at Colter Bay Village was made exceptionally clear in a memorandum written by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. in 1952. Outlining his intent for Jackson Hole and Grand Teton country, Rockefeller listed as his sixth objective: “To make Coulter [sic] Bay on Jackson Lake the great center for tourists camping in their automobiles, coming by trailer or looking for cabin accommodations for a few nights or several weeks.”³ This statement was closely followed by several maps of the proposed development, all showing winding campground loops, a large cabin area, and trailer camping sites as specified by Rockefeller. As early as 1956, plans drafted by Spencer & Ambrose Architects of San Francisco reveal a layout nearly identical to the one completed in the 1970s.

This large planning effort was paired with a deliberate implementation plan, proposed by National Park Service director Conrad Wirth: “Another innovation which Wirth suggested and which we think is good is what we labeled the “cell system,”” Grand Teton National Park landscape architect Frank Mattson wrote his superintendent in 1953, “that is, the cabin area, the campground, and the trailer camps would not be complete units in themselves, but would be half or third or fourth the normal size and, as they get used to their capacity a new area would be developed.”⁴ With an eventual 5000 nightly occupancy in mind, Colter Bay Village was intentionally constructed in phases in anticipation of the dramatically increasing number of

visitors to the park. The campground, for instance, was constructed in three phases: the first loops, loops A-G were opened in 1956, the next, H-L, were opened in 1959, and finally the last, N-P and the group sites, were completed in 1965. The conscientious and deliberate planning that went into the Colter Bay Village development was expressed by Grand Teton Lodge Co. manager Raymond Lillie at the Colter Bay Village dedication in 1957, where he stated, “Colter Bay should become a symbol of sound planning because this is a project that looks to the future; one that is not just ‘catching up,’ but is a ‘anticipating.’”⁵

Another revealing piece of information that documents in the RAC made apparent was the relationship between the planning of Colter Bay Village and of its slightly southern neighbor, Jackson Lake Lodge. Constructed between 1953 and 1955, the Jackson Lake Lodge was designed by Gilbert Stanley Underwood under the direction of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc. It was designated a National Historic Landmark, the highest historic designation in the United States, in 2003. Planning documents show that when Underwood was hired, his original task was to draft plans for Jackson Lake Lodge and Colter Bay Village, complementary developments that would offer the widest range of accommodations to park visitors. While Jackson Lake Lodge would serve an older, middle class public, Colter Bay Village was intended for younger families traveling on a budget. By planning for a range of budgets, Grand Teton would be able to accommodate more visitors, a goal reiterated over and over in newspaper articles praising the Rockefeller family for their extraordinary “gift to the American people.”⁶ The result of Rockefeller involvement in Grand Teton National Park, these articles emphasized, was to open the park to as many people as possible without damaging the natural scenery.

By understanding the Grand Teton Lodge Co. and the National Park Service's approach to the planning of Colter Bay Village and the overall holistic view of Colter Bay Village and Jackson Lake Lodge as complementary developments, it became clear that the significance of Colter Bay Village was rooted in the 1950s planning efforts. The early planning was important, while the later work was primarily implementation of the planning. In addition, Colter Bay Village's relation with the nationally significant Jackson Lake Lodge increases the importance of the district's formulation and initial construction by associating it with a much larger project of improving the visitor experience in Grand Teton National Park.

In considering the historic significance of Colter Bay Village, the documents at the RAC also provided insight into the role Colter Bay Village played in the larger Mission 66 program. As the collection of brochures and newspaper clippings, uncovered at the RAC, highlighted the significance of Colter Bay Village in many ways paralleled the significance of Jackson Lake Lodge. Jackson Lake Lodge was designated a National Historic Landmark because it served as a design precursor to the transformative Mission 66 program, and because it was the first modern building in a national park. Like Jackson Lake Lodge, Colter Bay Village was an early prototype for Mission 66, and like Jackson Lake Lodge, innovations in its architecture and more dramatically in its planning and layout separate it from other similar developments. Colter Bay Village "is considered a key project in the "Mission 66" program," the dedication brochure stated.⁷ Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc., "was pioneering in its national park work and was setting a pattern for other parks and for other situations. Colter Bay in particular represented pioneering, being an experiment in high concentration," Laurance S. Rockefeller told the board of trustees of Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc. in 1956.⁸ "A New Concept in National Park Facilities..." the 1957 Colter Bay informational brochure boasted. The newness of the development was recognized

beyond the park and Grand Teton Lodge Co. material as well. “The \$1,500,000 in new facilities on the lakeshore will serve as a model for modern vacationing in other national parks under the Mission 66 development,” the *New York Times* reported.⁹

While Jackson Lake Lodge introduced modern architecture into the national parks, Colter Bay Village became a testing ground for the ideals outlined in Conrad Wirth’s Mission 66 plan. Charged with centralizing visitor services to reduce impact in the park and pursuing new ways to handle the increasing crowds of automobile dependent tourists, Gilbert Stanley Underwood and his successors, Spencer & Ambrose Architects, produced plans for Colter Bay that addressed the demands of the modern park visitor. “Traffic problems require solution by modern methods; for example, some alternative must be provided for the huge open parking spaces now required,” Conrad Wirth wrote in the 1955 Annual Report of the Director of the National Park Service to the Secretary of the Interior.¹⁰ At Colter Bay, these issues were solved with two long road spurs lined with parking and a core commercial area modeled after the increasingly popular shopping mall. Similarly, the trailer specific camping at Colter Bay Village was one of the first of its kind in the national park system, and the Laundromat was the first laundry facility in a national park. The dispersed parking, trailer camping, laundry facilities, and winding circulation pattern at Colter Bay became typical features in national park developments, in many ways gaining their footing at Colter Bay Village.

Records of the experimental “tent cabins,” the first of which were constructed in 1959, highlight the role Colter Bay Village played as a place for Conrad Wirth to try out his Mission 66 ideas and monitor their success. Relying on Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc. and Grand Teton Lodge Co. to fund such projects, Wirth was personally involved with a number of the developments at Colter Bay Village. It was upon Wirth’s suggestion that Spencer & Lee Architects (the

successor firm to Spencer & Ambrose) drafted plans for the “experimental housekeeping tents,” log, metal and canvas structures with two log walls, a large metal frame and a canvas covering that was removed in the winter. Meant to offer the camping experience to the less adventurous traveler, the tent cabins were an immediate success. “After touring the world, I find this is the “best” way of camping yet,” one guest wrote.¹¹ “We can only wish we had such intelligently built, conveniently arranged, reasonably priced accommodations in California,” another guest commented, unknowingly summarizing the designers’ intent.¹² The success resounded beyond the visitors who stayed in the tent cabins as well. “The most interesting aspect of this development is the wide-spread interest it has created among operators of concessions in other National and State Parks,” the secretary of the board of Grand Teton Lodge Co. wrote in the agenda for the 1960 meeting. “People came here specifically to see the operation from Glacier National Park, Yellowstone National Park, Yosemite National Park and inquiries were received by mail from Virginia, California, and Montana.”¹³ This interest was typical of the designs at Colter Bay Village. Although never as directly expressed, several of the experiments at Colter Bay Village were reproduced in other parks in the form of standardized plans passed on by regional National Park Service design offices.

The collections of the RAC were crucial in understanding both the early significance of Colter Bay Village and its role in the larger Mission 66 program. The information gathered has been critical in my research of the district, and central to determining that the development is, indeed, eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places for its association with “events that have made a significant contribution to the broad pattern of our history,” specifically as a pilot project in the Mission 66 program, and for possessing, “the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction,” specifically as a complete representation of

Mission 66 architecture and planning. The research I conducted at the RAC has fully informed this argument, complementing the collections in the Grand Teton National Park archives to provide a complete picture of this unique development and the partnership under which it was created.

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

ENDNOTES:

¹ "Mission 66 Development in Grand Teton National Park," *Motorland*, July-August 1957, p. 20, Folder 833, Box 90, Series Cultural Interest, Record Group (RG) 2, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), Rockefeller Family Archives, Rockefeller Archives Center (RAC), Tarrytown, New York.

² Agenda: Meeting of the Board of Trustees of Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc., 1955-1975, Box 34-40, Series Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc., RG Rockefeller-Related Special Interest, H. P. Fabian Papers, RAC; Agenda: Meeting of the Board of Directors of the Grand Teton Lodge Co., 1955-1975, Box 21-33, Series Teton Companies, RG Rockefeller-Related Special Interest, H. P. Fabian Papers, RAC.

³ John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (JDR Jr.) Memorandum on Jackson Hole, October 17, 1952, Folder 802, Box 86, Series Cultural Interest, RG 2 OMR, Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

⁴ Frank Mattson to the Superintendent of Grand Teton National Park, April 3, 1953. Grand Teton National Park Archives.

⁵ Remarks by Raymond C. Lillie, Colter Bay Dedication, June 16, 1957, Folder GTLC — Colter Bay Dedication, Box 66[39], Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc.-Grand Teton Lodge Co., Unsorted, RAC.

⁶ "U.S. Park Project Declared Model," *New York Times* (April 1, 1956) 50.

⁷ Colter Bay Dedication Brochure, June 16, 1957, Grand Teton National Park Archives.

⁸ Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Trustees of Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc., Sept. 8-9, 1956, Folder 384, Box 34, Series Jackson Hole Preserve, Inc., RG Rockefeller-Related Special Interest, H. P. Fabian Papers, RAC.

⁹ Jack Goodman, "New Teton Resort: Trailer and Cabin Colony at Jackson Lake Opens Its Doors this Month," *New York Times* (June 2, 1957) 131.

¹⁰ "Annual Report of the Director of the National Park Service to the Secretary of the Interior," 1955, Folder Concessionaries Contract — NPS Grand Teton Lodge Co., Box 4, Grand Teton Lodge Company Records, RAC.

¹¹ Agenda: Meeting of the Board of Directors, Grand Teton Lodge Co., 1960, Folder 829, Box 90, Series Cultural Interest, RG 2 OMR, Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*