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Selling Yellowstone: Capitalism and the Construction of Nature. *By Mark Daniel Barringer.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002. viii + 238 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, maps, photographs. Cloth, $29.95. ISBN 0-700-61167-3.

Reviewed by Marguerite S. Shaffer

Yellowstone National Park, with its spectacular landscapes and geothermal wonders, conjures images of preserved wilderness and western scenery, not monopoly franchises, stock offerings, and "convoluted business deals" (p. 83). However, as Mark Daniel Barringer reveals in his richly detailed history, *Selling Yellowstone: Capitalism and the Construction of Nature,* Yellowstone National Park was as much a private business venture as it was a public nature preserve. Tracing the development of the concession industry in the park from 1872 to 1966, Barringer presents a compelling saga of the rise and fall of a family business empire. He reveals how private entrepreneurs, corporate businessmen, and financial advisors, in tandem with National Park Service administrators, shaped and marketed Yellowstone as a commercial enterprise devoted to promoting and selling a mythological landscape of leisure that would provide something for everyone. In the process, the park became a malleable product, more closely tied to profit level and consumer satisfaction and desire than to wilderness preservation and ecological stewardship. As Barringer shows, the inherent tension between promotion and preservation resulted in a series of complex, and at times conflicting, relations between business interests, government administrators, environmentalists, and tourists engaged in a struggle to define and possess the park.

Established in 1872 after intense lobbying efforts by Northern Pacific Railroad, among other private interests, Yellowstone, the nation's first national park, was set aside for the "benefit and enjoyment of the people." Despite the lofty civic language of the act, the legislation provided only indirect funding and administrative support for the development of Yellowstone as a "public park or pleasuring ground" (p. 15). The secretary of the interior was empowered to lease small parcels of land to private interests for a limited period to provide necessary visitor services. The result was a loosely administered and vaguely defined partnership, in which private businesses established

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independent concessions on public lands in order to make the park accessible to the people. The concession policy had profound implications for the development and design of Yellowstone.

In the first decade after the establishment of Yellowstone as a national park, a number of entrepreneurs and companies, ranging from the Northern Pacific Railroad to a group of independent "fly-by-night operators" (p. 23), vied for control of the developing tourist trade. People set up taverns and tent stores to serve the few travelers who ventured to the park. In 1882, the Interior Department granted "monopolistic privileges" to a group of Northern Pacific investors, who established the Yellowstone National Park Improvement Company (YNPIC). Accused of orchestrating a park "steal" (p. 27), the company quickly disintegrated into financial and administrative disarray. After filing for bankruptcy in 1884, YNPIC assets were purchased by another group of Northern Pacific interests, which formed the Yellowstone Park Association (YPA). By the late 1880s, a handful of individuals had emerged with control of the central concessions in Yellowstone; foremost among them was mining magnate and financier Harry W. Child.

Harry Child, according to Barringer, was the man most responsible for shaping and promoting Yellowstone National Park as a brand-name tourist attraction. Beginning with a transportation concession, he assumed control of the YPA in 1905 with the support of the Northern Pacific Railroad, and four years later he formed a partnership with his son and son-in-law to create the Yellowstone Park Hotel Company. Between 1890 and 1916, Child built a family business empire in Yellowstone, including the Yellowstone Park Hotel Company, the Yellowstone Park Transportation Company, and the Yellowstone Park Boat Company. He oversaw the construction of the Old Faithful Inn and the Canyon Inn and supervised the remodeling of the Lake Hotel. Capitalizing on his control of transportation and lodging in the park, he developed a tightly scheduled and scripted tour that promoted Yellowstone as a mythologized western "wonderland" (p. 35).

Over the next five decades, Child and his family members worked in conjunction with National Park Service administrators to serve tourists in the park; their relationship was not always congenial. Early on, the regulatory policies of the Park Service supported Child's strategies for promoting and selling the park. However, after Child's death in 1931, as the nature of tourism in the park changed and the goals of the Park Service

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evolved, business relations between the family and the Service soured. While the family sought continued profit amid a shifting tourist market, the Park Service tried to address the growing demands of mass tourism and began to develop a more preservationist agenda. In 1966, on the verge of financial collapse, the Child family sold the Yellowstone Park Company to the Goldfield Corporation of New York, bringing to an end seventy-five years in the concession business in Yellowstone.

Moving beyond the traditional administrative park history, Barringer provides a comprehensive and absorbing examination of the Child family's role in the concession business in Yellowstone and its impact on the landscape and image of the park. He presents a convincing challenge both to the "worthless lands" thesis proposed by national park historian Alfred Runte and to the image of the parks as sacred national treasures put forth by environmental historian Roderick Nash. His research reveals that commercial interests defined the park as a lucrative consumer product from the start. Barringer adds to a growing scholarship in environmental history that examines the social and cultural construction of wilderness.

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