

Printable version: Thursday, November 9, 2006

## 10. **PARKS:** Former NPS director Bill Whalen is remembered for great achievements and spirited advocacy

Arthur O'Donnell, *Land Letter* editor

SAN FRANCISCO -- The flag was at half-staff, and an honor guard of four mounted National Park Service police stood outside the Fort Mason Officers Club here Saturday, as family and friends of William J. Whalen III met to celebrate the memory of a remarkable man and an equally remarkable career.

Whalen, who died on Sept. 28 at the age of 66, was the 10th director of the National Park Service from 1977-1980, appointed by President Jimmy Carter. In nearly two decades of NPS service, Whalen also was deputy superintendent of Yosemite National Park and the first superintendent of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA) -- two of the most visited and revered parks in the NPS system.



Bill Whalen became the National Park Service's youngest director at age 37. Whalen died Sept. 28. Photo from NPS archives.

The site of Whalen's memorial service fit the occasion, offering a panoramic view of some of the most popular features of the GGNRA, including Alcatraz Island, the Presidio and, in the distance, the Golden Gate Bridge that connects the Marin headlands with the San Francisco peninsula.

During his tenure with NPS, Whalen not only guided the development of the GGNRA management plan with an unprecedented community outreach process, he charted its future expansion along an 81-mile long stretch of parks and properties that now amount to more than 80,000 acres beside the Pacific Ocean. In 1981, he also helped found the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, a nonprofit membership organization that has raised over \$100 million for the benefit of managing and maintaining GGNRA lands and facilities in partnership with the federal agency.

As the youngest NPS director ever appointed, at age 37, Whalen implemented the Alaska Native Claims Act settlements, and he presided over the federal protection of more than 104 million acres of Alaskan lands in 1980, an action that more than doubled the size of the federal parks system.

Among mementos on display at the service was a large map of Alaska, signed by President Carter, with an inscription from then-Assistant Secretary of the Department of Interior Robert Herbst, calling the action, "The greatest conservation achievement in our nation's history."

Whalen also convinced Coretta Scott King, widow of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., to allow King's birthplace, church and burial site to be brought under NPS's oversight. A framed copy of the 1980 enabling legislation was also on display, featuring a note of warm thanks from Mrs. King.

### 'We might make some mistakes'

Whalen promoted the then-revolutionary concept of establishing urban parks within the NPS system, of which the GGNRA was the first West Coast model.

"No administrative history, no legislation, no books can tell you what it was like to work on this new project," recalled Ruth Kilday, one of Whalen's first-hired staff members when he arrived at the GGNRA offices in 1972. "He walked in with a rolled up copy of the public law and a box of No. 2 pencils. There was nothing else," she told the gathering. "What he meant by that was, 'Folks, we're here. We might make some mistakes, but if we do, we'll correct them.'"



An honor guard of mounted parks police stand outside the site of the memorial service. Whalen was the first superintendent of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, headquartered at Fort Mason in San Francisco. Photo by Arthur O'Donnell.

Kilday said that Whalen taught her to look for "what's not in" the legal documents, as the GGNRA staff began conducting over 125 public outreach meetings in San Francisco and Marin counties to gain support and recommendations for how the park should be managed.

"He recognized the nexus between the urban parks and adding lands in Alaska," said Richard Curry, who was an NPS associate director. Lawmakers from cities, such as Cleveland, Ohio, that won new national parks then became cosponsors and supporters of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, he said. Curry also remarked on the "special relationship" that Whalen developed with California's Sen. Phillip Burton, who despite doubts became the key driver behind the creation and expansion of the GGNRA.

He also convinced Congress in 1978 to set aside the Santa Monica Mountains recreation area, a 155,000-acre greenbelt in Los Angeles and Ventura counties, of which NPS owns 22,000 acres.

But Whalen was not just concerned with land acquisition, Curry told the group. At one point, Whalen was supposed to accept the transfer of a portion of California's Redwood State Parks into the GGNRA; but on the morning of the planned ceremony, he astonished Curry by declaring,

"I'm not going to accept the donation." He said he did not think the Park Service could do a better job than the state in protecting the lands, he explained. "To this day some people are very happy, and others are still very angry at that decision," Curry said.

Whalen was also known for his fierce advocacy of the parks and its employees, even when it hurt his career. In 1980, after the great victory in securing the Alaskan parklands, Whalen found himself demoted from the NPS directorship because of a series of confrontations with politically powerful park concessionaires. He returned to San Francisco for a second term as GGNRA superintendent.

"He'll be remembered, not for his perfection, but for his indomitable courage to face each decision point and take a stand. He took full responsibility for the choices he'd made," Curry said.

## Advocate for urban America

Brian O'Neill, the current GGNRA superintendent, remembered Whalen's "abundant intellect and interest in all things civic." O'Neill, who had served as Whalen's assistant, said, "He was a great advocate of urban America. His contribution was to recognize, for the first time, that if the National Park Service was to be relevant to a changing demographic of America, it would have to touch the lives of the people who visited the parks."

After retiring from NPS, Whalen became a vice president of Kennetech Corp., a developer of wind energy projects in California's Altamont Pass. When it became apparent that many birds, including such protected raptors as Golden Eagles, were being killed in collisions with the wind-turbine blades, Whalen urged the company to take full responsibility. He formed an expert panel to provide scientific research into the problem -- still considered the best set of studies into avian-wind morality, over 20 years later.

As a private consultant arranging licenses and permits for various clients using the parks, Whalen also served as mediator. O'Neill lauded his "ability to teach clients about the culture of the Park Service and the things that weren't appropriate for a national park."

Through it all, he said, Whalen helped define a "culture of collaboration" in the agency that helped employees deal with different cultures of park visitors and users. "Bill understood it and nurtured it," O'Neill said. "Everyone who wears the Green and Grey should feel an enormous amount of gratitude for him," he concluded.

O'Neill also read from a congressional proclamation that San Francisco's Rep. Nancy Pelosi promised to introduce once Congress returns to session. "We will never forget the beauty and riches he brought to our lives and to future generations," Pelosi wrote.

Ever proud of his Irish heritage and possessed with a great sense of humor, Bill Whalen had requested before he died that friends and family members join in singing, "When Irish Eyes are Smiling."



At Fort Mason in San Francisco, and throughout the National Parks system, flags flew at half-staff to honor Bill Whalen. Photo by Arthur O'Donnell