Grand Staircase National Monument: It's a New Name — But an Old Idea

GRAND STAIRCASE-ESCALANTE MONUMENT

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A1

BY CHRISTOPHER SMITH
THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

■ Kane County Is betting on tourist dollars A-22

The governor of Utah was worried. The president wanted to create an Escalante National Monument, and he was considering an end run around the state's congressional delegation.

"Some morning we may wake up and find that . . . the Escalante Monument has been created by presidential proclamation, and then it will be too late to forestall what we in Utah think would be a calamity," former Gov. Henry H. Blood wrote.

It was July 1940.

Somewhere in the Great Beyond, the late Gov. Blood is shaking his head, muttering, "I told you so."

If you tuned in to President Clinton's Sept. 18 executive declaration of the 1.7 million-acre Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, you might think this idea came out of nowhere.

"There has been no consultation," an irate Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, railed. "No hearings. No town meetings. No TV or radio discussion shows. No input from federal land managers on the ground. No maps, no boundaries, no nothing."

Sen. Bob Bennett, R-Utah, said it was "incredible, absurd, appalling. Pick your adjective."

In truth, there have been scads of meetings, maps, studies, hearings, comments and news reports on creating an Escalante National Monument. It's just that most of them happened when Hatch and Bennett were toddlers.

And while the Escalante Monument idea was hatched in the 1930s, none of the proposed boundaries ever included the coal-rich Kaiparowits Plateau and little-known Paria River drainage in the new monument created by Clinton.

At the Utah State Archives in Salt Lake City, there are thick files labeled Escalante National Monument. Reams of similar reports, studies, notes and photographs are on file with the National Park Service.

Some of the documents date back decades. Others are not as musty.

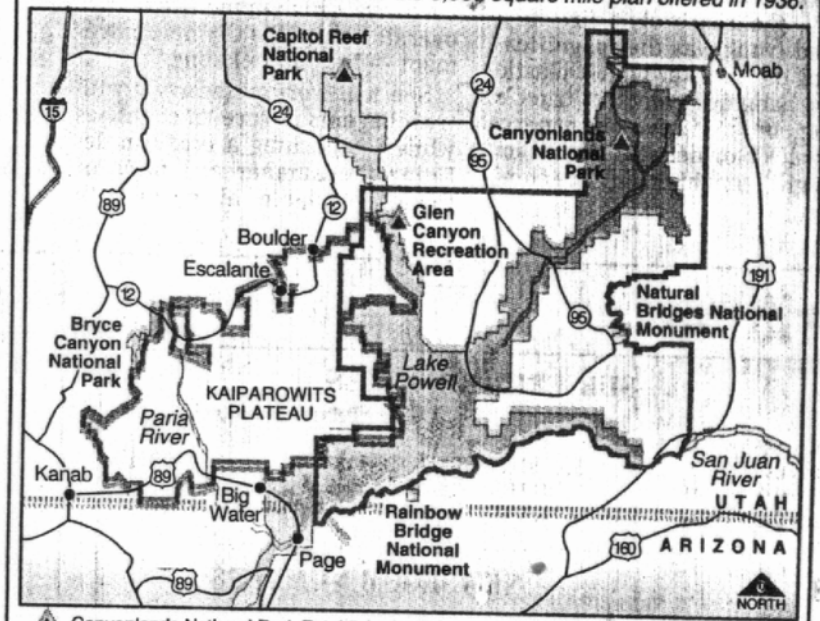
Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt's July 1994 "conceptual paper" seeks to "give national recognition to the region through congressional designation of the general boundaries of a 'Canyons of the Escalante: A National Eco-region.'"

There also is a copy of a bill introduced in June 1992 by GOP Rep. Jim Hansen (co-spon-

See **MONUMENT**, Page **A-20**

The Evolution of Escalante

A proposal for an "Escalante National Monument" was first developed to boost tourism in the wake of the Depression. Utahns protested and the plan was eventually defeated. Today, the combined monuments, national parks and recreation areas are similiar in size to the 6,968-square mile plan offered in 1936.



Canyonlands National Park Established 1964, expanded 1971
Glen Canyon National Recreation Area established 1972, expanded 1975
Capitol Reef National Park established 1937, expanded 1971

Canyons of the Escalante and Grand Staircase National Monument, established 1996
Outline shows Escalante National Monument, proposed in 1936

Rhonda Hailes Maylett / The Salt Lake Tribune

Monument: New Status, Old Idea

Continued from A-1

sored by then-Sen. Jake Garn) to create the "Canyons of the Escalante National Conservation Area."

Shortly before Clinton stood at the cusp of the Grand Canyon and signed the proclamation, Leavitt told this newspaper it was "pretty clear" the monument idea was spawned by groups "outside the government."

He is right.

The concept was hatched by a Denver oil geologist named Harry A. Aurand.

On March 19, 1934, Aurand wrote a letter to a National Park Service official named Roger Toll. "Mr. Aurand urged an investigation of various areas in southern Utah which he believed to be of national-park quality," reads a 60-year-old report by federal park planner Merel Sager. The superintendent of Grand Canyon National Park, M.R. Tillotson, decided to check out Aurand's claims.

Jobs Program: In 1935, the Utah Senate created a "State Planning Board" to help federal officials identify projects to create jobs for Depression-era Utahns. The planning board suggested immediate development of tourist attractions in southern Utah.

The board's April 1936 report said that "an extension of authority, especially of the National Park Service, would be beneficial to the people of Utah."

Those Utah visionaries dreamed up a 570-square-mile national park in Wayne County called "Wayne Wonderland." The idea, which would have included what now is Capitol Reef National Park, was immensely popular, according to Washington State University historian Elmo R. Richardson, whose detailed research into the Escalante Monument controversy was published in the September 1965 issue of the *Utah Historical Quarterly*.

"It would be a fine thing if we could have another national park in Utah based upon this inspiring region," declared U.S. Sen. Elbert D. Thomas, a Democrat from Utah.

In 1936, Utah had eight National Park Service sites — Arches, Bryce Canyon, Cedar Breaks, Dinosaur, Hovenweep, Natural Bridges, Rainbow Bridge, Timpanogos Cave and Zion. Today, counting the new Grand Staircase-Escalante Monument, there are 14. And most of the early eight have been enlarged.

Empire Builder: Depression-era dreams of increased tourism for southern Utah were not lost on then-Interior Secretary Harold Ickes, a Democrat whose name Clinton invoked as one of the inspirations for the newly created monument. Ickes was in the midst of building the Park Service empire, plotting new parks such

grazing and mining privileges in such a tract would erase the faint livelihoods being scratched out in southern Utah.

"This is just a little harder rap than we can take without putting up a battle," a rancher said at a Park Service hearing in Price held in May 1936. "You can make it legal, but you can never make it moral."

Even within the Park Service, questions were being raised about the size and quality of the proposed Escalante monument.

"It is frankly admitted that the boundary as outlined in the original report undoubtedly includes a much greater area than is absolutely essential for park or monument purposes," concluded a

Gov. Henry H. Blood

and the superintendents of Zion and Bryce national parks meeting in Salt Lake City on July 13, 1936.

Sager, the national-park planner, also concluded that beyond the canyons of the Colorado and Green rivers "there is little of national-park caliber."

Ironically, much of Ickes' original 7,000-square-mile Escalante Monument plan since has been set aside by the creation of Canyonlands National Park, Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, Grand Gulch primitive and Dark Canyon wilderness areas, and the expansion of Capitol Reef National Park. Clinton's Grand Staircase-Escalante Monument includes only a slice of Ickes' original pro-

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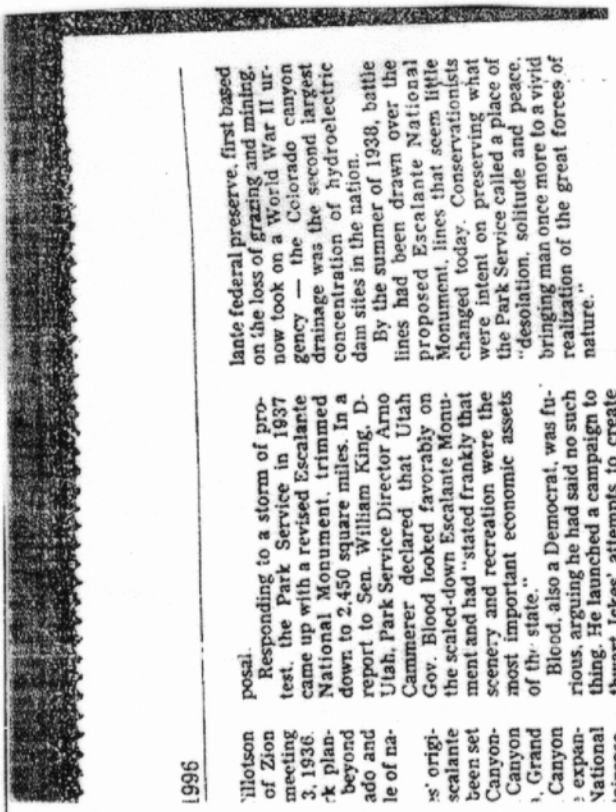
Ickes had seen an August 1935 report from Tillotson, the Grand Canyon superintendent, who did his own survey of the Colorado, Green and Escalante river drainages that carved deep canyons into the Grand Staircase of mesas leading to Grand Canyon. Tillotson had coined the name "Escalante National Park" because "it can be confused with no other area and certainly Father Escalante, who first explored the area in 1776, is worthy of the tribute."

In January 1936, the Park Service announced that as a result of the recommendations of the Utah Planning Board, the agency was planning to seek congressional approval for the 6,968-square-mile "Escalante National Monument."

Utah politicos were stunned. What began as an idea for a 570-square-mile preserve had been transformed by Ickes into a huge federal fiefdom. Eliminating



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Responding to a storm of protest, the Park Service in 1937 came up with a revised Escalante National Monument, trimmed down to 2,450 square miles. In a report to Sen. William King, D-Utah, Park Service Director Arno Cammerer declared that Utah Gov. Blood looked favorably on the scaled-down Escalante Monument and had "stated frankly that scenery and recreation were the most important economic assets of the state."

Blood, also a Democrat, was furious, arguing he had said no such thing. He launched a campaign to thwart Ickes' attempts to create the monument.

Utah's opposition to an Escalante federal preserve, first based on the loss of grazing and mining, now took on a World War II urgency — the Colorado canyon drainage was the second largest concentration of hydroelectric dam sites in the nation.

By the summer of 1938, battle lines had been drawn over the proposed Escalante National Monument, lines that seem little changed today. Conservationists were intent on preserving what the Park Service called a place of "desolation, solitude and peace, bringing man once more to a vivid realization of the great forces of nature."

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From Previous Page

Utah politicians and resource-based industry bosses feared the national monument would prohibit development of the river dams needed for future development.

There was a surprising amount of support for the Park Service plan. In August 1938, 200 members of the Southern Utah Association of Civic Clubs met in Monticello and voted to support creating Escalante National Monument. A Brigham Young University professor publicly declared that the federal government must hold potential national-park sites inviolable from power development.

So strong was support that T.H. Humpherys, the state water engineer, told Blood he believed the conservationists were part of a campaign to persuade President Franklin D. Roosevelt, a Democrat, to proclaim the Escalante National Monument at once through executive power.

Fed Fears: The thought of FDR using the 1906 Antiquities Act to arbitrarily designate a new national monument in southern Utah scared Blood and the Utah congressional delegation. Tension grew in the winter of 1939 when Interior Secretary Ickes' staff drew up a bill to expand the Antiquities Act to empower the president to create a new type of reserve, a "national recreation area," without congressional approval.

"I just cannot trust the park officials," Humpherys told Blood. "We have too many examples in this state of double-dealing by them."

The water engineer suggested Utah's congressional delegation offer a counter-bill that would require local approval for all executive proclamations of national monuments. Utah's congressional delegation never drafted the countermeasure.

In the House, Rep. J.W. Robinson, D-Utah, blocked Ickes' bill to expand presidential powers, and offered an amendment to instead preserve future water and power projects inside any national monument or recreation area. The measure never got to the floor.

Still, Ickes was determined.

"I am left with the alternative of asking that a monument be set up in this area or of abandoning the area entirely," he announced.

Blood fired off a letter to Ickes in August 1940.

"We recognize fully the value to the state of Utah of the national-park and national-monument system as now existing," Blood wrote in a last-ditch effort to calante National Monument idea was dead — at least until 1964, when President Lyndon B. Johnson created Canyonlands National Park, encompassing the heart of the Colorado River canyon country that Ickes had proposed in 1936.

"Our past experience should teach us that man's inherent, constitutional determination to vanquish primeval landscape is a force which has thus far never been shackled," reads the 1937 National Park Service study on establishing the Escalante National Monument. "It is well then to take steps early to set the area aside and very definitely determine the limits for its development."

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"We recognize fully the value to the state of Utah of the national-park and national-monument system as now existing," Blood wrote in a last-ditch effort to block a presidential proclamation. "There is a limit, however, to Utah's resources, and it is obvious that future withdrawals for whatever purpose should be carefully scrutinized to determine their probable effect upon the state's development."

Then Came the War: Historian Richardson questions whether Ickes really had the political pull to persuade FDR to snub fellow Democrats in Utah and go ahead with the Escalante Monument. But it became a moot point.

When America entered World War II after the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, support shifted in favor of developing dams on the Colorado. In March 1942, Ickes did an abrupt about-face and wrote Utah's new governor, Democrat Herbert Maw, that Interior supported building dams at several points on the Green and Colorado rivers.

Lake Powell was born. The Es-