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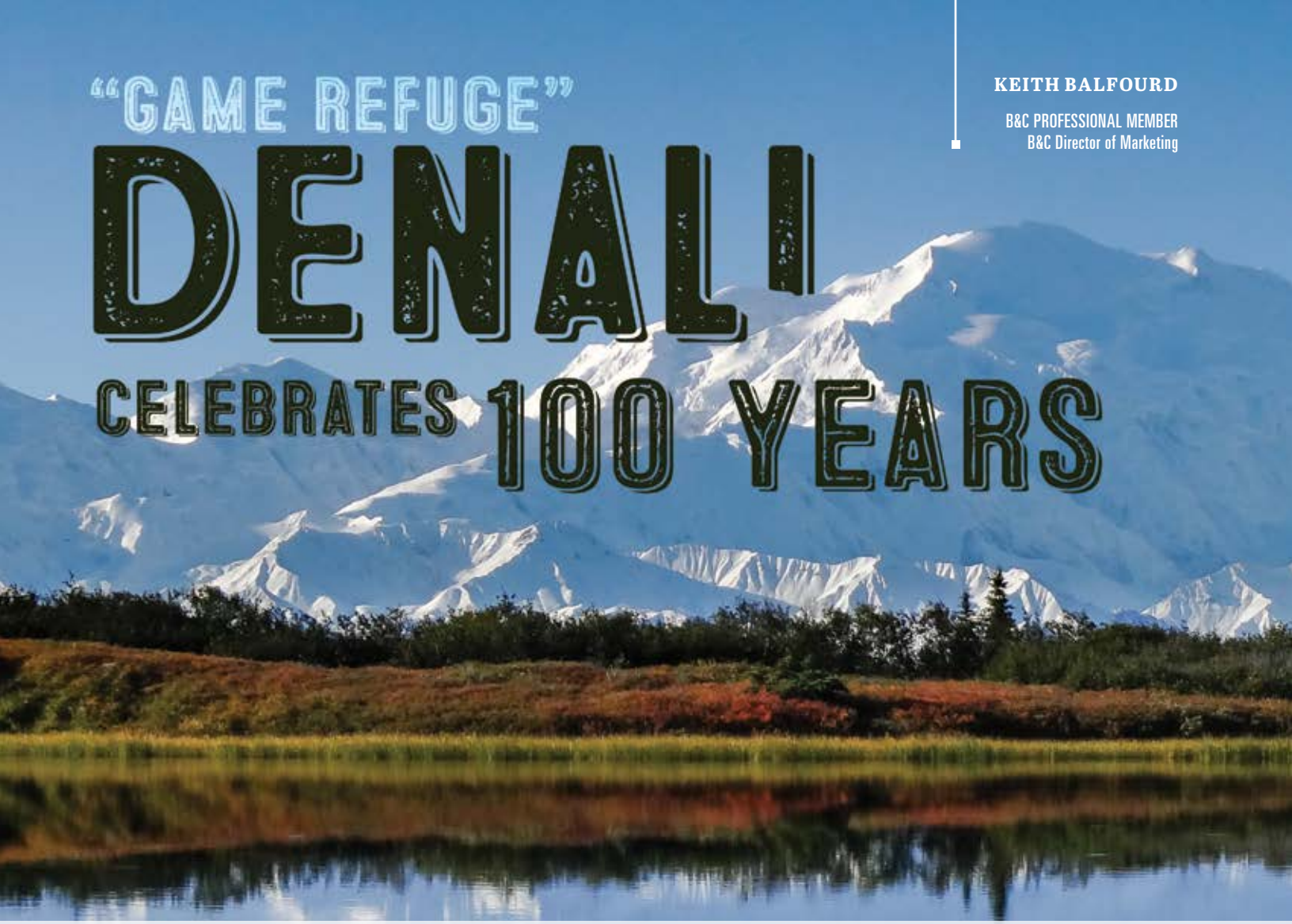
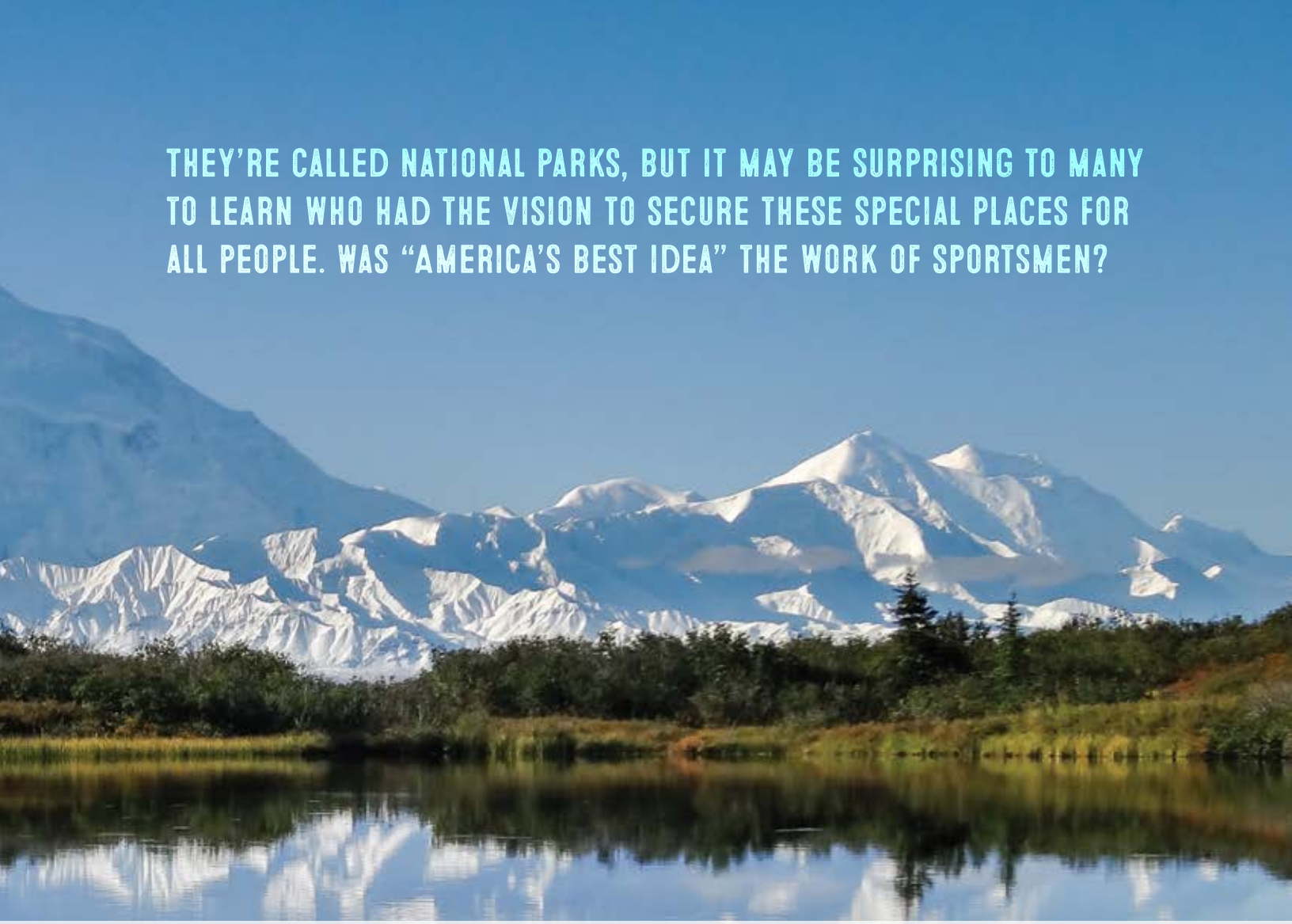
"GAME REFUGE" DENALI CELEBRATES 100 YEARS



As we pass another milestone in the conservation movement with speeches, ribbon cutting, and photo ops, such commemorations honoring places and people always seems to have a layer that gets lost over time. Men's names are mentioned, of course. After all, it takes champions—individuals who took it upon themselves to secure places special to them for the rest of us. In fact, there is not a national park or monument that exists today that did not have its champions, and many of these special places bear their names. Denali had its champions. The layer that likely won't get much mention in our era of correctness is the fact that these champions were hunters, and most were members of a coalition bonded together for one purpose: to save wildlife.



THEY'RE CALLED NATIONAL PARKS, BUT IT MAY BE SURPRISING TO MANY TO LEARN WHO HAD THE VISION TO SECURE THESE SPECIAL PLACES FOR ALL PEOPLE. WAS "AMERICA'S BEST IDEA" THE WORK OF SPORTSMEN?

The Boone and Crockett Club has a rich history with the concept of game refuges and national parks, including Denali in Alaska. If your sole purpose in forming was to save what was left of dwindling big game populations, setting aside critical habitats to secure a future for wildlife is one route you would take. This path would lead to wherever the work needed to be done, and by the late 1800s that path lead to Alaska.

The Club's engagements in Alaska took place long before Denali was designated as a national park on February 26, 1917. The rich game fields of Alaska were being drained. The same Manifest Destiny that had swept across the Great Plains had reached the Last Frontier. Game was being slaughtered, mostly by commercial market hunters under the guise of subsistence, and the need to feed hungry gold miners, railroad workers, etc.

In 1902 the Club secured passage of the Alaska Game Law—a first that would become a model law for other states in the Lower 48. It prohibited the slaughter of wildlife for commercial purposes, established hunting seasons, prohibited the hunting of endangered species, and required export permits for the shipment of meat, hides, and horns. The Club's Executive Committee urged congressional passage of this bill based on intimate knowledge of the Alaskan environment provided by Club members who had participated in scientific and exploratory expeditions throughout Alaska during the mid 1870s. Key Club members campaigned diligently for the law, educating congressional leaders on its rationale. One of these members was Charles Sheldon.

A New Englander by birth, a Yale-educated engineer by vocation, and a hunter by choice, Sheldon was on a short list of those who were not drawn to Alaska by the sirens of precious metal. Sheldon was deeply interested in the scientific research of wild sheep. He retired from the business world in 1903 at

Charles Sheldon feeds a gray jay near his cabin in Alaska.

DENALI'S CHAMPIONS

Charles Sheldon, B&C Member and Chairman, Game Preservation Committee of the Boone and Crockett Club

Theodore Roosevelt, 26th President of the United States, Founder and first President of the Boone and Crockett Club

George Bird Grinnell, co-founder and fourth President of the Boone and Crockett Club

Madison Grant, fifth President of the Boone and Crockett Club

Steven T. Mather, first Director of the National Park Service, B&C Member

Edward W. Nelson, Chief of the U.S. Bureau of Biological Survey, B&C Member

Belmore Browne, Camp Fire Club of America

John B. Burnham, president of the American Game Protective Association, B&C Member

James Wickersham, U.S. Delegate of the Alaska Territory

Key Pittman, Senator from Nevada

Franklin K. Lane, Secretary of the Interior in the cabinet of Woodrow Wilson

Woodrow Wilson, 28th President of the United States

CHANGING NAMES

Denali, formally known as Mt. McKinley is the highest mountain peak in North America, with a summit elevation of 20,310 feet above sea level. In 1896, a gold prospector named it "Mount McKinley" in support of then-presidential candidate William McKinley; that name was the official name recognized by the United States government from 1917 until 2015. In August 2015, the U.S. Department of the Interior announced the change of the official name of the mountain to Denali. Prior to this, most Alaskans already referred to the mountain as Denali.

REFERENCES:

A History of the Boone and Crockett Club, Milestones in Wildlife Conservation, by William G. Sheldon

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the age of 36 and set off in sporting and scientific pursuit of wild sheep. His searches carried him from the deserts of Mexico to the icy mountains of interior Alaska. Sheldon was truly a pioneer. He studied an animal at the time about which little was known, and he explored regions that seldom, if ever, had been visited by modern man.

In 1903, while planning a hunting trip to Alaska, Sheldon became acquainted with and friends of Edward W. Nelson, chief of the U.S. Bureau of Biological Survey (and a Boone and Crockett Club member). Sheldon and Nelson found in each other kindred spirits. They were individuals for whom hunting and natural history were life's breath. Through Nelson, Sheldon soon became a Boone and Crockett Club member, one whom Theodore Roosevelt came to regard as the very best kind, a hunter/naturalist like him whose knowledge, convictions, and initiative would reap great rewards for wildlife, hunting, and conservation.

Sheldon's 1906 travels up the Tanana River, toward the majestic peaks of the Alaska Range, were one of the first expeditions into that region. Approaching Mt. McKinley, Sheldon was awestruck by the towering, snow-clad mountain. Equally as stunning to Sheldon as the area's natural beauty were its game populations, especially its white sheep—the Dall's, named in honor of an earlier Alaskan explorer, William H. Dall. From July 1907 to June 1908, Sheldon stayed to hunt, explore, collect, and live an extreme adventure.

When he left Alaska in 1908, Sheldon took not only the idea for a national park, but maps delineating boundaries around a proposed park area of more than 2,000 square miles he felt best suited as a game refuge. His fellow Boone and Crockett Club members were very excited about the project, but nearly a decade would pass before Sheldon's brainchild would gain the attention and political momentum necessary for congressional consideration.

In the years immediately following 1908, Alaska experienced steady development. Population centers such as Fairbanks were soon springing up within 100 miles of Denali. Explorers, prospectors, adventurers, and (in 1915) the Alaska Railway began to penetrate the area that Sheldon hoped would someday be a park. Just as with Yellowstone, it was the approach of the railroad toward Denali that spurred the Boone and Crockett Club to action. Its Game Preservation Committee, chaired by Sheldon, and the Club's Executive

Charles Sheldon's cabin after a blizzard in March, 1908.

Committee strongly endorsed the idea of a national park in the Mt. McKinley area.

On the very day that Sheldon became a member of the Club, Stephen T. Mather, also a Club member and the first superintendent of the National Park Service wrote to him, enthusiastically inviting him to visit Mather and his colleagues to discuss Sheldon's proposal for a new national park. Consequently, and soon thereafter, Mather became involved in the campaign, using his position and influence to bring into the drama other notable conservation figures who could effectively work for the park's creation. These included Belmore Browne of the Camp Fire Club of America and John B. Burnham, president of the American Game Protective Association (also a Boone and Crockett Club member).

In order to retain and coordinate all these favorable influences, Sheldon called, at his home in New York, a meeting of the Game Preservation Committee of the Boone and Crockett Club, which was attended by a committee from the Camp Fire Club and one from the American Game Protective Association. At this meeting it was determined that the campaign in Congress be entrusted to the American Game Protective Association, with Burnham assuming the active leadership and the various clubs and individuals supporting the measure agreeing to act under his direction.

In drafting legislation to create the park, Sheldon suggested that the park be known as Denali National Park (Denali was the local Native American name for the mountain, signifying "The Great High One.") This suggestion was shelved in favor of McKinley, in honor of assassinated U.S. President William McKinley, an event which made Theodore Roosevelt the nation's 26th president. Otherwise, the bill was almost entirely based on Sheldon's vision, mapping and knowledge of the area. The Club also found a legislative champion in James Wickersham, U.S. delegate of the Alaska Territory who introduced the bill in April 1916 into the House of Representatives. Within days, Senator Key Pittman of Nevada sponsored its version in the Senate.

Immediately after the introduction of these bills in Congress, a widespread campaign was started to accelerate their passage. George Bird Grinnell, then president of the Boone and Crockett Club, took an active part, backed by a number of clubs, associations, and influential individuals. Hearings were held before the Committee on Public Lands in the House, and of Territories, in the Senate.

The Club hosted a banquet in Washington to give advocates of the bill an opportunity to explain to members of Congress the bill's importance to the country. The Club also publish and distributed a timely defense of Mt. McKinley National Park. Effective work in Washington and elsewhere was also done by individual Club members and, above all, by Mr. Burnham.

Once the bills were introduced, the Boone and Crockett Club moved to consolidate favorable public and political opinion and more interested organizations and individuals were enlisted. Edward Nelson of the Biological Survey, Sheldon's mentor, supported the proposal, as did Stephen T. Mather and Thomas Higgs, Jr., later governor of Alaska, but at that time in charge of the Alaskan boundary survey.

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Despite some political maneuvering and skirmishing, the bill was passed by both the House and Senate in February 1917. Charles Sheldon himself took the legislation to the White House and watched as President Wilson signed it into law. It was appropriate that the man who had lived with Denali and had conceived its preservation as a national park, should be present when the mere motion of a pen culminated what for him had been a dream, a cause, and a gift for perpetuity.

The journey for Denali took eleven years and included a long list of champions and political maneuvering. The swing vote, however, was the American people, who had been awakened to the plight of wildlife from the preceding decades of unregulated take. Once the bill was on the table, public sentiment was swift and kept piling up in favor of immediate action in order to save its wildlife while there was still time. Surprisingly, sportsmen rallying to save the wildlife they cherished didn't raise too many eyebrows back then. The North American hunter was viewed as a champion of wildlife in his own right. Somehow this story (or maybe this image) has been lost. Either way, the history of the conservation movement is just that, a matter for historical record, and this, yet another chapter, written by sportsmen. ■

Band of sheep *(ovis dalli)*, mostly young or middle-aged, in the Alaska Range near Denali, July 22, 1926.