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*America and the Public Domain*

T. H. WATKINS and  
CHARLES S. WATSON, JR.

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of*

GEORGE KELL

1905–1968

Friend, defender, and advocate for the American land

*“We are waking now from the American dream to realize that it was a dream few Americans lived in their waking hours. The history of the New World has turned out to be not so different from that of the Old. The peril that threatens the last of the American wilderness arises not from the reckless dream, but from the same historic forces of rapacity and cruelty that laid waste the land in the Mediterranean Basin, in Arabia, India, and the treeless uplands of China.”*

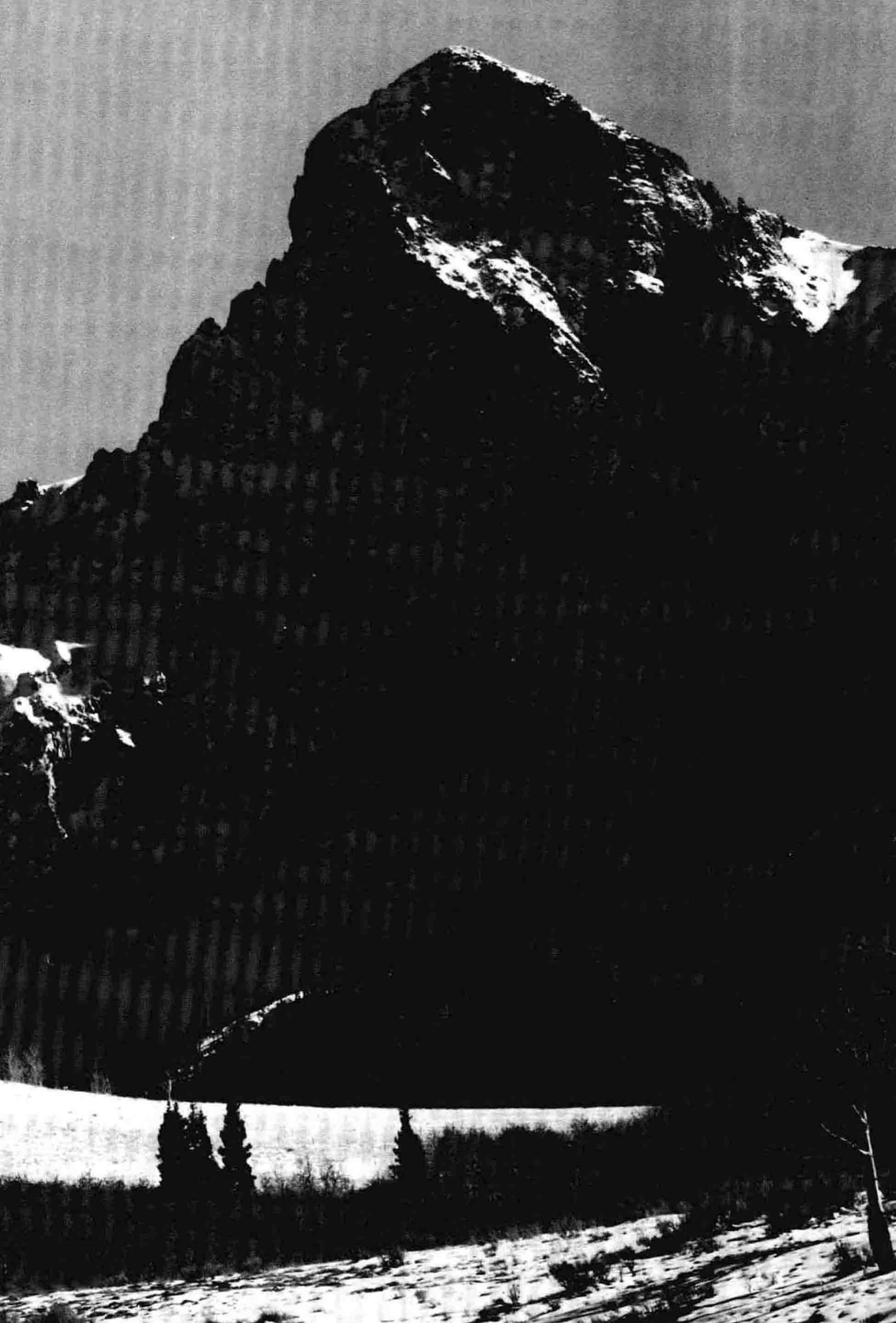
GERARD PIEL



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# PREFACE

WHAT FOLLOWS is the story of a squandered inheritance, an inheritance vouchsafed the citizens of this country nearly two hundred years ago: the public domain, a theory that became fact by proclamation of the Continental Congress in 1779. Next to the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, it was probably the single most important development to emerge from the rancorous years of national organization that accompanied and followed the Revolutionary War. Like those two venerable legacies, the public domain has been harried by generations of misinterpretation, confusion, subversion, and abuse. Unlike them, much of the public domain did not survive. We are the poorer for that fact.

The public domain was land, held in trust by the federal government and owned by the people of the United States—all of the people of the United States. At its greatest, this patrimony of land included 2.1 billion acres in the continental United States and territories and Alaska, together with all the mountain ranges, hills, forests, woods, meadows, rivers, lakes, ponds, estuaries, grazing and agricultural lands, and deserts appertaining thereto—all of this ideally to “be disposed of for the common benefit of the United States.” Over the past 194 years, more than half of this national inheritance has indeed been “disposed of” in one manner or another, but to whose “benefit” is a question still rattling around in the coffin of history. Most of it was simply given away in chunks and dribbles—by grants to states and railroad corporations, by direct sales at bargain rates to mining, farming, ranching, and timber interests and to land jobbers who reaped spectacular profits with the connivance of local, state, and federal officials, by legitimate land laws whose rules and spirit were honored more often in the breach than in the observance, and by illegitimate land laws whose only visible purpose was to carve out pieces of federal land for the enrichment of a few.

Today, the federal government owns and administers approximately 765 million acres of public lands; 312 million acres are

under the control of the National Park Service, Forest Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, Bureau of Reclamation, Department of Defense, Department of State, Atomic Energy Commission, Tennessee Valley Authority, and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. The remaining 453 million acres, aptly dubbed the “National Resource Lands” in federalesse, are administered by the Bureau of Land Management and comprise the present public domain. The largest portion of this land—nearly 300 million acres—is in Alaska, but it also makes up some two-thirds of the state of Nevada, half or more of Utah, nearly half of New Mexico and Wyoming, and significant portions of California, Idaho, Arizona, Oregon, Colorado, and Montana, as well as smaller parts of many eastern states. In acreage alone, the remaining public domain obviously is one of the nation’s most valuable assets, yet it continues to be victimized by ignorance, neglect, conflicting uses, contradictory regulations, and confused and confusing management practices.

In the past, even in the pit of what historian Vernon L. Parrington called “The Great Barbecue” of the nineteenth century, the public domain had its champions in and out of government. Among them were Major John Wesley Powell, whose *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States* in 1878 advocated the division of the West along geographic rather than political lines and a rational use of the land’s resources; Land Commissioner William Andrew Jackson Sparks, whose attempt to protect the public domain from the sundry agents of plunder caused his dismissal in 1887; Gifford Pinchot, a public servant whose advocacy helped create those public domain reserves that later became our National Forest system; Representative Edward I. Taylor of Colorado, author of the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934; and closer to our own time, Bernard DeVoto, who in the years following World War II leveled the howitzer of his splendid prose in the pages of *Harper’s* magazine to help stifle the attempt of those whom he called “Two-Gun Desmonds” to wrest the national lands from the federal government and place them in the control of the individual states. To the efforts of such men—and there were many more—we owe the very existence of that part of the original public domain that has survived the generations. But there are generations to come, and if we hope to bequeath this legacy intact, we will need the insight, determination, and strength of similar men.

Which brings us to the point of this preface. Although the text for *The Lands No One Knows* was written by myself, the name of Charles S. Watson, Jr. appears on the book as co-author for

good and sufficient reasons. Watson would be the last man in the world to compare himself to Major Powell, or even William Andrew Jackson Sparks, nor would he willingly maintain that he has stood alone against those who would dismember the public domain. Yet the fact remains that for more than twenty years he has been profoundly involved with these lands—as an amateur explorer with a professional's knowledge of geology and cartography, as an advocate of reform with a zealot's persistence and a lobbyist's comprehension of the intricacies of the governmental labyrinth, as a stand-up, out-front public spokesman with an athlete's disregard of verbal abuse and physical threats, of which he has enjoyed more than his share. Short, bald, blue-eyed, and built like a Sherman tank, he is a formidable opponent and an intensely informed representative of lands that cannot speak for themselves.

Born in Ohio and reared in southern California, Watson's love affair with the public domain began as a high school student with field trips into the wilderness of the Mojave Desert, continued during his studies at the University of Nevada's Mackay School of Mines in Reno, Nevada, and was first expressed in 1958, when with a handful of like-minded persons he organized the Nevada Public Domain Survey, whose goal was nothing less than a quadrant-by-quadrant examination of the 48.9 million acres of Bureau of Land Management territory in Nevada, seeking out those pockets and stretches that should be preserved as wilderness or utilized for recreation. The survey launched, Watson entered government service in 1960, first with the Bureau of Land Management in Reno, then with the Naval Oceanographic Office in Washington, D.C., and finally with the Aeronautical Chart and Information Service of the Air Force in St. Louis. He departed the government in 1972 to continue his conservation activities, which had increased during those twelve years, often to the point of open conflict with his superiors, who were no more enthusiastic than such officials usually are at the prospect of a federal employee capable of independent opinion (not to mention action).

In 1965 the little group of public-domain enthusiasts was reorganized into the Nevada Outdoor Recreation Association (NORA), and Watson assembled a separate, though related, organization—the National Public Lands Task Force—as a political and propaganda force. In that same year, he presented an illustrated lecture in Washington that was attended by Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson and members of the staff of Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall, among others—including Bureau of Land Management chief, Eldon F. Holmes—and spent weeks carrying around the Nevada

Survey, which by then included 450 site discoveries and weighed approximately twenty-five pounds, to demonstrate to members of Congress and officials in the Bureau of Land Management and the National Park Service that the public domain was a cornucopia of such wilderness treasures as Leviathan Cave, Blue Lake, Red Rock Canyon, the Goblin Garden, High Rock Canyon, and scores of equally splendid sites—all of these in Nevada alone. He may have started no fires, but sparks were struck; the National Park Service later described the survey as a “monumental achievement in the identification of a state’s public land resources,” and it was no coincidence, one suspects, that in 1968 the Bureau of Land Management issued its own illustrated guide listing 432 points of interest on the lands it administers (Eldon F. Holmes had been more than a little impressed by Watson’s 1965 presentation).

Today, NORA and its political arm, the National Public Lands Task Force, number more than 700 members in seventeen states—no monolith, but an organization whose singleness of purpose has given it an influence beyond numbers and gained it the support of such relatively powerful allies as the Sierra Club, the National Resources Defense Council, the Trust for Public Land, Friends of the Earth, the Wilderness Society, The Nature Conservancy, and Stewart Brand’s “POINT” organization. The original survey is expanding to someday include every state that contains public-domain lands. As Director and Representative-at-Large of the Task Force, Watson continues to promote the activities of the movement that is his child and his love, moving about the deserts and mountains in his miniature cab-over Datsun camper, maintaining a blinding stream of correspondence with congressmen and senators, conservationists and real estate promoters, bureau chiefs and division heads, strangers and friends, badgering Bureau of Land Management officials and testifying at the drop of a gavel, constantly adding to public-domain files that already must be thirty feet deep (surely the most comprehensive such archive outside the Washington headquarters of the Bureau of Land Management), painstakingly keeping up the massive scrapbooks that document the discoveries of his NORA compatriots, holding press conferences whenever he can find a reporter willing to listen, issuing a monthly newsletter, and writing hardnosed polemics for such publications as the *Sierra Club Bulletin* and *National Parks Magazine*.

It is reliably reported that he has been known to sleep, and I can personally testify that he eats, since I once shared a pot of his powerful chili. Still, Watson’s life is quite literally his work. Like

other men with such a clarity of purpose, he has been called obsessed; for myself, I will call him dedicated in the truest, most selfless sense of the word, dedicated to the proposition that the public domain is not some vague wasteland to be ignored or gotten rid of, but a precious national resource, the largest part of what we have left to give to those who must follow us. To him, it is our inheritance and our trust, and to lose it to the ripoff artists of the world—as so much if it has already been lost—would be to lose a good part of what America means. Grown men have spent their lives pursuing less admirable convictions.

“Such is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world,” J. R. R. Tolkien wrote. “Small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere.” It is of the efforts of such men as Charles S. Watson, Jr. that reforms are made, and it is of the dreams of such men that books like this are made. *The Lands No One Knows* was his conception, a vision translated here into another man’s language. The twenty years of his research lie at its heart, and since no one knows more of what has happened, is happening, and is likely to happen to the public domain, his thoughts and perceptions have guided its writing from beginning to end. *The Lands No One Knows*, then, is a genuine collaboration: if the words of the book are mine, its meaning and its purpose belong to him. *Salud*, Charlie.

T. H. WATKINS  
San Francisco  
December 1974



PART ONE:

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THE INHERITANCE



