

Role Model for a Conservationist: John D. Rockefeller's Relationship to Nature

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The visitor center at Grand Teton National Park's Laurance S. Rockefeller Preserve displays a large photograph of the Preserve's namesake, posing with his brothers Nelson A. and John D. 3rd and their father, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. In the photo, taken in 1924, during the family's first trip to the Teton Mountains, Laurance Rockefeller is fourteen years old. Before he died in 2004 at the age of 94, Laurance bequeathed 1,106 acres of what had been part of the Rockefeller family's private JY Ranch, located inside the national park, to the National Park Service, for the establishment of the preserve. It opened to the public in 2008. An intriguing quote—attributed to Laurance—accompanies the photo just described: “Father, as his father had done for him, took us on these trips, not only for the thrill that young boys would get from such journeys, but also to inspire in us a portion of his own deep love for wilderness beauty and his interest in protecting it.” The nonchalance of the phrase, “as his father had done for him” may come as a surprise.

Judging from Laurance's statement, the family's commitment to nature's protection did not begin, as is generally accepted, with his much admired father, who, among many things, was an acclaimed conservationist. For Laurance an equally important role model turned out to be his notorious grandfather, John D. Rockefeller, once the most hated man in America. The senior Rockefeller, who founded The Standard Oil Company, was vilified by the press and politicians of the late 19th and early 20th centuries for his monopoly of the oil refinery business, and his

brutal treatment of industry competitors. This Rockefeller was also called many things, most of which seethed with contempt. Senior's reputation has been greatly redeemed in the nearly eighty years since his death, but 'conservationist,' defined today as "a person who advocates or acts for the protection and preservation of the environment and wildlife," is still not one of the labels glowingly ascribed to him.

Yet, when it came to the protection of nature in America, Laurance Rockefeller had been crediting his grandfather's personal influence on him long before his eponymous visitor center in the Tetons opened to the public. When, for example, Laurance received the Congressional Gold Medal in 1991 for his contributions to conservation, he acknowledged that both Junior and Senior had inspired him.¹ On another occasion Laurance noted that he had inherited "the land-saving gene," by which he was undoubtedly referring not only to his father's enduring effect on him, but also his grandfather's.² Rockefeller family philanthropy advanced too many social, educational and cultural causes to be listed here. However, their dedication to nature conservation is peculiarly hereditary, continuing unbroken from Senior to Junior to Laurance, and subsequent generations.

Art appreciation, by contrast, was less dynastic. Junior was passionate about art while Senior, decidedly, was not. "Never himself having been greatly interested in beauty except in nature . . . it was not strange that at first he thought I was acting impetuously and extravagantly . . ." Junior recalled, after a disagreement with his father over his acquisition of a Chinese porcelain collection.³ Junior, according to his biographer Raymond B. Fosdick, "had his father's appreciation of nature, but went far beyond his father in his feeling for beauty."⁴ The value Senior placed on the natural world was one that he lived, though it was largely hidden from the scorning public. Even before he retired in about 1900 it was his conservation ethic more than his

work ethic that was in plain sight of his children and visiting grandchildren. How was Senior's love of nature so visceral that this monumental titan of oil and industry bestirred his son and grandson to become America's greatest conservation philanthropists?

Material in the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) provides some answers to this question. During the time that I spent at the RAC in November 2012 and February 2013, I found examples of John D. Rockefeller Sr.'s personal love of nature, along with behaviors and statements that would make him America's seminal conservation practitioner in industry.

Based on my archival readings, I identified five areas in which Rockefeller's love of nature was manifested:

- 1) What Rockefeller wrote about himself
- 2) What family members wrote to him
- 3) The time he spent landscaping and gardening on his four estates, and communicating—if not identifying—with his groundskeepers
- 4) His family's vacation destinations
- 5) His concern for the destruction of the Palisades. (examples of these five areas to follow)

Rockefeller contemporaries and historians have frequently commented on how inexpressive Standard Oil's founder was. Yet, his slim memoir *Random Reminiscences of Men and Events* published in 1909 seems quite self-revelatory. The second chapter, "Some Old Friends," does not seem random in Senior's placement of it near the beginning of '*Reminiscences*,' because in it he repeatedly mentions his affection for big trees. Here his esteem for business associates competes with the arboreal type. Photos of trees Senior planted and the sylvan lanes he built were mixed with photographs of the industrial titans he knew.⁵ If one were to roughly calculate what Senior loved most, based only on '*Reminiscences*' photos, eight

pictures of trees would beat out the two of his famously loved golf links—both of which, by the way, draw the eye to the forest in the background. “Planning for good views,” Senior explained, “must have been an early passion with me.”⁶

Senior waxes uncharacteristically poetic in recalling picturesque landscapes from his boyhood on. Of his estate in Pocantico Hills, New York Senior wrote: “In an old house where the fine views invite the soul and where we can live simply and quietly, I have spent many delightful hours studying the beautiful views, the trees, the fine landscape effects of that very interesting section of the Hudson River, and this happened in the days when I seemed to need every minute for the absorbing demands of business.”⁷ Though he was the richest man in the world, he lived like a Thoreau, and feared that this kind of dreamy idleness did not make him a very diligent businessman. Senior went to Standard Oil's headquarters in New York City only when necessary, and conducted much of his business by telegraph from home so that he was “left free to attend to many things which interested me . . . the making of paths, the planting of trees, and the setting out of little forests of seedlings.”⁸

Perhaps to illustrate a key difference between himself and other great industrialists, he recounts a charming story in *Reminiscences* about a visit from one “man in business” he knew. On a beautiful spring day Rockefeller invited the man to come to Pocantico to see the woodland paths he had created. The man demurred, saying he had too much work to do. “‘That may be,’ I urged, ‘but it will give you no such pleasure as you'll get when you see those paths—the big trees on each side and . . .’” Rockefeller wrote that the man interrupted him. “‘Go on, John, with your talk about trees and paths. I tell you I've got an ore ship coming in and our mills are waiting for her.’” Rockefeller said the man “rubbed his hands in satisfaction,” and declared, “‘I'd not miss seeing her come in for all the wood paths in Christendom.’”⁹ Significantly, it was Rockefeller's

grandson Laurance who wrote the Foreword to the last edition of *Random Reminiscences* reprinted in 1983.

Knowing her husband as she did, nature observation is a recurring theme in early letters from Laura Spelman Rockefeller. In 1887 Laura wrote Rockefeller that she enjoyed “walks and rides, weather bracing,”¹⁰ she mentioned her “beautiful ride” with Junior in “warm rain;” another time, reported that the “ice splendid for skaters;”¹¹ “snow still falling, much sleighing;”¹² in a letter dated January 6, 1888 sent from Forest Hill, the family’s estate in Cleveland, Laura was “writing at the North window in John's room, looking out, I see the stream dark, and swollen and rush rapidly.”¹³

The Rockefeller estate at Forest Hill eventually covered about as many acres as New York's Central Park, and was where Senior introduced his only son John to the joys of nature. He showed him how to ski, build bridle paths, stone bridges, and trails. The ledger Junior was required to keep as a child records that he earned ten cents when he was thirteen years old for the “superintendence of path at F.H.”¹⁴

Perhaps Laura provided such reports so that such mutual interests would keep them close while Senior was away from home on business—reluctantly away, judging from his letters to his wife. In the 1870s Rockefeller wrote to Laura that “The world is full of sham, flattery and Deception, the home is a haven of rest and freedom.”¹⁵ He seemed comforted by mental images of his family far from the world of artifice. In a letter to thirteen-year old Junior, Senior wrote that he was glad “you and your mother were doing so nicely in the quiet of the woods” at the Forest Hill estate in Cleveland while he was “in the midst of hard battles today.”¹⁶ In 1892 Senior wrote to Laura of “A glorious spring morning thermometer 50—Birds sing in every hand ...”¹⁷

In his letters to his father, at the age of fourteen, Junior reported what mattered: “We have had some skating although nothing as good as when you were with us.”¹⁸ The ice had gone soft so that it had to be flooded again, he reported. This epistolary banter about weather and outdoor recreations continued into Senior's retirement. In 1909 he wrote to one of his granddaughters that they would “pick some wildflower and listen to the birds singing.”¹⁹ By the time his grandson Laurance was born in 1910, Rockefeller had transformed himself from an overarching corporate persona, into “the honest yeoman and horny handled son of toil,” that he yearned to be, even when burdened by the duties and responsibilities of running Standard Oil.²⁰ In retirement, with grandchildren to imprint upon, Senior's days were filled with encounters with nature.

The little the public knew of Senior, however, continued to focus on his love of golf, but for his family, seeing him walk barefoot in the grass, or “losing people on the bicycle trail through the maze of woods” painted a truer portrait of the oilman.²¹ The manicured wildness of Forest Hill provided solace. More than his putting greens it was “The exquisite, exclusive expanse of woods that wove a spell over him.”²² In 2008 one RAC researcher commented on Rockefeller’s involvement in the maintenance of grounds and livestock at Golf House in Lakewood, New Jersey. Despite this estate’s name, “the archives are surprisingly silent on Rockefeller's use of Golf House as golf course.”²³

The archives are quite vocal on the use of all four of his country estates as gardens, farms, natural parks, and tree nurseries. The frequency of Rockefeller’s correspondence with all his superintendents shows the time and minute attention he paid to beautification projects and husbandry on all his estates. He weighed in on agricultural purchases large and small, and on the placement of peach trees, dahlias, mixed gladiolas, sod, manure, rhubarb plants, raspberries, lotus lilies, and hundreds of evergreen and hawthorn trees. “Please advise if the Lotus Lilies that

we have at Cleveland are hardy, and if so, if there are extra bulbs that you can send me at Lakewood,” Senior wrote in one memo;²⁴ and: “Please give me the distance from where the little foot-path turns down into the north valley, leading to the walk that goes to the street toward Euclid Avenue.” When Rockefeller was informed that an elm tree at Forest Hill might have to be cut down to make way for a public sidewalk on its perimeter, he replied: “Do you think so? Please let me know if we can spare the tree.”²⁵

At all four estates combined, more than three hundred groundskeepers, most of Italian descent, were on Rockefeller’s payroll on a seasonal basis. One interviewer’s last glimpse of Rockefeller in 1914 was of him “working, shovel in hand, to show three Italians how to scatter gravel.”²⁶ His bond with William Foerster, the Ormond Beach superintendent for eighteen years, was particularly strong. Foerster seemed to have been battling depression and destitution most of that time. When he wrote to Rockefeller that he had decided to leave the United States and return to his native Germany without his family, Rockefeller was moved by the plight of this authentic horny-handed son of toil. “You have been and are a very faithful and honest man,” he wrote to Foerster. “. . . I am sure you must bear testimony to the fact that I have always been a true friend and brother to you . . . I should much prefer to have you remain, if you desire to do so. I think it would be better for you—far better.”²⁷

While Senior seemed to be most at home at Forest Hill, guests were probably most impressed by the lovingly tended wildness surrounding Kykuit, the family’s mansion in Pocantico Hills. To his daughter-in-law Abby, Rockefeller boasted that visitors had exclaimed that it was “the most beautiful place they have ever seen in the world.”²⁸ Even today, docents giving tours of Kykuit might wisecrack that the grounds “look the way God would have created them if He'd had Rockefeller's money.”²⁹

Traveling from one estate to the next appears to have satisfied Rockefeller's provincial requirement for changes of scenery. Europe's pleasure palaces and museums seemed too rich for his tastes, and American cities held no allure for him or for his devoutly Christian wife Laura. What appealed to them were vacations where nature's spectacles were on display. For their honeymoon, in 1864, they visited Niagara Falls and Mount Washington. After Rockefeller moved Standard Oil's headquarters from Cleveland to New York and Forest Hill was not so easy to reach, the Rockefellers retreated to the Shawungunk Mountains in New York State, or to the Adirondacks. The biggest and perhaps most inspiring vacations that he took his family on were to the American West. In May 1884, when Junior was ten, the Rockefellers booked twelve first class tickets on the Central Pacific Railroad, and traveled from New York to San Francisco.

They stayed at Yellowstone National Park, established in 1872, and very difficult to reach by any means.³⁰ A map of Yellowstone National Park is included in Junior's incomplete journal. In the spring of 1899, the Rockefellers went west again, this time heading for California and Alaska. The itinerary records seeing the "Grand Canyon of the Arkansas River in Colorado," now called the Royal Gorge, and a sunrise at Mirror Lake in Yosemite, a horseback ride to the park's Vernal and Nevada Falls, and lunch at Glacier Point.³¹ The family's Western vacation that year was five weeks long, and may have marked Rockefeller's secretive and permanent withdrawal from the management of Standard Oil. The Rockefellers went to Alaska the next year also. When Laurance conceived the message now on the wall at the Rockefeller Preserve in the Tetons, he must have been thinking of these family vacations to the country's earliest national parks. These remote places of rugged beauty had made a deep impression on his father as a youth, thanks to his grandfather.

To get away from the noise and grime of New York City where the Rockefellers moved to

from Cleveland in the 1880s, Junior found wilderness at Fort Tryon on the rocky summit of Manhattan Island, and along the Palisades, where fourteen miles of colorful traprock cliffs on the New Jersey side of the Hudson River faced the New York side. In 1900, the New York and New Jersey legislatures established the Palisades Interstate Park Commission to protect the cliffs from the rock quarry operations that were defacing them. According to Junior's biographer, "From the beginning the Rockefellers were deeply interested in this conservation project."³² However, by 1909, it was clear that the two states could not fund additional land acquisitions and the cliffs remained at risk from New Jersey quarrymen. The financier, J.P. Morgan, initiated a major subscription campaign to purchase Palisades parcels by donating \$500,000 to the Palisades Commission's endowment, and suggested that Rockefeller be asked to match this contribution. Rockefeller agreed.³³ Putting the interstate park on an even more solid foundation was Mary Harriman's one million dollar contribution, accompanied by her gift to the Commission of ten thousand acres her late husband had owned on the Palisades' tablelands.

As joint participants in the nation's largest interstate effort to save wild land, Senior and Junior appealed to other wealthy New Yorkers for contributions; fourteen people joined the Palisades subscription campaign and raised a total of \$2.5 million. Among the givers were Senior's brother William, and John Archbold, Standard Oil's president, each of whom contributed \$50,000.³⁴ Helen Gould, who donated \$25,000 at Junior's request, called the amount "a tiny one compared with the princely sums so generously offered by your father, Mr. Morgan and Mrs. Hammer."³⁵

Since Rockefeller must have known how important the cliffs' preservation was to his son, the desire to save them from disfigurement was as much for his son's sake as for his own. On their belief in the need for the Palisades' preservation as a public park, the two acted as one.

Together they entered this grand public and private venture into conservation philanthropy, the first of its kind in the country. Although Junior is the correspondent of record on matters associated with the Palisades Commission, it remained a project that vitally engaged Senior as well. In one letter responding to the Palisade Commission's 1915 report, Junior replied that he would be "taking the first opportunity of acquainting Father with the facts therein contained." Of the Rockefellers' numerous multi-generational land-saving efforts across the country, the continual expansion of the Palisades Interstate Park has been the most dynastic undertaking of them all. Continuous and cumulative family association with the Palisades span more than one hundred years since Rockefeller wrote his check for \$500,000. Contributions of Rockefeller time and money far exceed both the Morgan and Harriman family gifts. The sixth generation of Senior's descendants are now involved with ensuring that the cliffs are preserved.

This article can only offer glimpses of the man that John D. Rockefeller was in the sanctuaries of his private estates; repetitious press reports of his golfing distracted the public from the implications of his lifelong passion for nature's protection and beautification.

Although beyond the scope of this review, I want to close with the observation that Senior's dedication to what could be called conservation in the way he ran his business had long been obvious, and was disdained. Indeed, Rockefeller's adherence to a version of the modern credo "reuse, recycle, reduce" would have provided more fodder for his many enemies, and be interpreted as another example of his persistent stinginess. "With unblinking vigilance he conducted throughout his company an eternal war against waste," wrote Mathew Josephson.³⁶ Rockefeller might have taken this remark as a compliment, but Josephson, who coined the term 'robber baron' partly in reference to Standard Oil's founder, did not mean it as one.

In his book *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*, historian Samuel P. Hays described

the rise of the Progressive conservation movement of Theodore Roosevelt's era. Rockefeller is not mentioned, despite the fact that he was as devout a practitioner of the gospel of industrial efficiency as the nation had ever seen, decades before Roosevelt took office and concentrated the management of the nation's natural resources in the federal government. Instead it was James R. Garfield, President Roosevelt's "ultra conservationist" Secretary of the Interior who expressed the popular opinion of Rockefeller when he wrote of meeting the oilman in 1909: "Never have I seen a more sinister, avaricious face—repulsive and deceitful. I disliked to shake his hand, but of course could not cause comment by not doing so . . . I wonder if anyone—outside his family—really cares for him apart from his money."³⁷

By not being acknowledged as one of America's first conservationists—particularly by subsequent conservationists—John D. Rockefeller was not merely overlooked—he was intentionally excluded. At the preserve in Grand Teton National Park, Rockefeller receives a belated and modest tribute from his grandson, who like his son, inherited his land-saving gene. All three put it to marvelous use.

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Robin W. Winks, *Laurance S. Rockefeller: Catalyst for Conservation*, p. 2.
- ² Anthony DePalma, *New York Times*, “They Saved Land Like Rockefellers,” November 15, 2005.
- ³ Junior’s memories of his father, in the Transcribed Notebook, April 1936, Senior Office #1, Box 36, Folder 273.
- ⁴ Raymond F. Fosdick, *John D. Rockefeller, Jr. A Portrait*. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1956, p. 327.
- ⁵ See John D. Rockefeller, *Random Reminiscences of Men and Events*, pp. 30-31.
- ⁶ JDR, p. 39.
- ⁷ JDR, p. 34.
- ⁸ JDR, p. 37.
- ⁹ JDR, p. 34.
- ¹⁰ Laura Rockefeller to JDR, March 19, 1890, Senior Office, 1886-1891, Series 1, Box 36, Folder 271.
- ¹¹ Laura Rockefeller to JDR Senior Office, 1882-83, III2A, Box 36, Folder 271.
- ¹² Laura Rockefeller to JDR, Senior Office, Box 36, Folder 270.
- ¹³ Laura Rockefeller to JDR, Senior Office, Series 1, Box 36, Folder 271.
- ¹⁴ Junior’s Ledger, October 31, 1887, Family, Record Group (RG) 2, Series Z Jr., Subseries 1, Box 1, Folder 12.
- ¹⁵ JDR to LSR, January, 1872, Senior Office, 1867-1872, Box 36, Folder 270.
- ¹⁶ JDR to Junior, Family, RG 2, Series Z Jr., Box 1, Folder 12.
- ¹⁷ JDR to Junior November 19, 1887, Senior Office, Notebook of Transcribed Family Letters, Series 1, Box 36, Folder 273.
- ¹⁸ Junior to JDR, January 15, 1888, Senior Office, 1867-1894, Series 1, Box 36, Folder 269.
- ¹⁹ JDR to Babby Rockefeller, February 24, 1909, Senior Office, Notebook of Transcribed Family Letters, Series 1, Box 36, Folder 273.
- ²⁰ JDR to Junior, (n/d), Senior Office, Notebook of Transcribed family letters, Box 36, Folder 269.
- ²¹ “John’s Home Sweet Home,” TRW logo, Senior Properties Forest Hill—General 1886, 1917-1923, 1983, (clippings) Series 2, Box 50, Folder 397.
- ²² “John’s Home Sweet Home.”
- ²³ Kenneth Rose, “John D. Rockefeller and the Golf House in Lakewood, New Jersey,” RAC, 2008.
- ²⁴ JDR to W.H. Smith, April 26, 1919, Senior Properties, Series 2, Box 50, Folder 397.
- ²⁵ JDR to W.H. Smith, June 21, 1918, Senior Properties, Golf House, Series 2, Box 50, Folder 397.
- ²⁶ Allan Nevins, *John D. Rockefeller: The Heroic Age of American Enterprise*, Vol. II, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1940, p. 690.
- ²⁷ JDR to William Foerster, March 28, 1921, Senior Properties, Golf House, Series 2, Box 50, Folder 400.
- ²⁸ JDR to Abby Rockefeller, July 27, 1915, Senior Office, Family Letters transcribed, Series 1, Box 36, Folder 273.
- ²⁹ Said to Dyana Z. Furmansky at Kykuit, May 2010.
- ³⁰ Junior, “Diary of trip to the Yellowstone Park, 1886,” Rockefeller Family Personal, RG 2, OMR Series 2, Box 42, Folder 386.
- ³¹ Junior, Personal, RG 2, OMR, Series II, Box 42, Folder 387.
- ³² Fosdick, p. 322.
- ³³ Jean Strouse, *Morgan: American Financier*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1952, p. 410.
- ³⁴ See Office of the New York Palisades Park Commission, December 30, 1909, Family, RG Cultural Series, Box 125, Folder 1116.
- ³⁵ Helen Gould to Junior, December 29, 1909, Box 125, Folder 1116.
- ³⁶ Earl Latham, editor, *John D. Rockefeller Robber Baron or Industrial Statesman? Problems in American Civilization Series*. Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger Publishers, LLC, 2007, p. 41.
- ³⁷ Douglas Brinkley, *The Quiet World: Alaska’s Wilderness Kingdom, 1879-1860*. London, U.K.: HarperCollins, 2011, p. 217.