Speaking With People From the Past Within Our Profession

An interview with a former Secretary of the Interior

Harold LeClair Ickes (1874–1952; see photograph) served as the United States Secretary of the Interior during the Great Depression and World War II. Ickes was appointed by Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) shortly after his stunning election as president in 1933, and served through FDR's third term, which ended abruptly with the president's death in 1945. When Ickes submitted his resignation to President Harry Truman in 1946, he had served as Interior Secretary for nearly 13 years, 5 years longer than any Interior Secretary before or since. History remembers few Secretaries of the Interior, though there are notable exceptions especially Stewart Udall (1961–1969) for his progressive vision and Albert Fall (1921–1923) for the scandal of corruption. Ickes, though, deserves attention in a historical light. The public lands of the United States in the 21st century are strongly shaped by Ickes heavy administrative hand applied seven decades earlier. The motivations and methods of Ickes are important in understanding dimensions of these lands today. This fictitious interview was itself strongly shaped by several texts, including Ickes' own words, *The Autobiography of a Curmudgeon* (1946, Reynal and Hitchcock); one of the volumes of his diary (Ickes was certainly loquacious), *The*

Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes: The First Thousand Days (1954, Simon and Schuster); Jeanne Nienaber Clarke's biography, *Roosevelt's Warrior* (1995, John Hopkins University Press); and T. H. Watkins' biography, *Righteous Pilgrim* (1990, Henry Holt Company).

Lasting Effects of an Ambitious Bureaucrat

Question: In 2008, a Time magazine list of the "Top 10 Best Cabinet Members of the 20th Century" put you as #1, ahead of several very notable historical figures such as George Marshall, who eventually won a Nobel Peace Prize, and Robert F. Kennedy, who led the fight for civil rights in the United States in the 1960s. Yet, few Americans would recognize your name. Why do you think, in hindsight, Time would place you at the top of this distinguished list?

Answer: I might tell you that I am surprised, but that might not be totally honest. I titled my autobiography *The Autobiography of a Curmudgeon*, so I thoroughly understood that my demeanor was gruff and my manner was candid for a political setting. I never backed down from a political fight. In fact, I started a few. I had many enemies. Yet, I had many accomplishments during my tenure.

If I am rated as one of the best cabinet members over the past 100 years, though, I would say it is because of two things. First, as part of the Depression Era's "New Deal" through the Public Works Administration, we were able to employ millions of people and to have those Americans produce tangible products—bridges, dams, and highways—that contributed so much to the infrastructure of the nation. I worked tirelessly to avoid corruption and graft in this effort. That federal government program helped to bring the nation out of the Depression and to prepare it for the boom years following World War II.

Second, you will notice that the top three on *Time's* list were all members of FDR's cabinet. Henry Wallace, the Secretary of Agriculture, is listed as #2 and Henry Morgenthau, Jr., the Secretary of Treasury, was listed as #3. If we truly were some of the best cabinet members of that century, it was also because FDR picked us, backed us, and

Secretary of Interior Harold L. Ickes speaking in Chicago in October 1937 with President Franklin D. Roosevelt seated behind him (Library of Congress digital image #LG-DIG-ppmsca-18941; Harold L. Ickes Collection; reproduced with permission).

let us do our jobs. Make no mistake, there was no love lost between us. I tangled with other bureaucrats, especially Henry Wallace, over many key issues. That was one of FDR's tactics. He let us work, fight amongst ourselves, and do what we truly believed to be what was needed in the best interests of the nation. We certainly were political animals. But, our political resolve was to serve the nation, and less so our political parties. Remember, several of us were Republicans, and we worked in a Democratic administration. In the end, it was the capacity of FDR to lead us that allowed us to excel.

As a lawyer, a Republican, and a political activist in Chicago, what possessed you to campaign for and accept a Cabinet position as Secretary of Interior in Roosevelt's Democratic administration?

Though a Republican, I had been a Progressive, and I had formed an Independent Republican committee to back Democratic candidates instead of established Republicans. I organized the "Western Independent Republican Committee for Roosevelt," and when FDR won, my ambitions led me to believe I could secure an appointment in his administration. Actually, because of prior experiences I started to lobby for a post as Commissioner of Indian Affairs. However, during the transition period FDR realized that the Secretary of Interior needed to be a western Republican and a progressive, someone like his cousin, the late former President Theodore Roosevelt. Several western Senators, including Hiram Johnson of California and Bronson Cutting of New Mexico, reportedly turned down the job. To my complete surprise, and the surprise of many others, he asked me.

One of the lasting legacies of your tenure as Interior Secretary was the passage of the Taylor Grazing Act in 1934. How did that come about?

It was well recognized early in the 20th century that the western ranges were overgrazed. Actually, in 1930 then-Secretary of Interior James Garfield recommended to Congress that the federal government cede the public rangelands back to the states as the simplest solution to the problem. However, several western state governments viewed these rangelands as too unproductive and wouldn't accept the offer, and Congress shelved Garfield's report. In 1933 National Park Service Director Horace Albright recommended stronger federal management of these lands. I decided to act on this recommendation, and in 1933 I had my staff draft a bill to "provide for the orderly use" of these public lands. It was only a few pages in length, nothing like the bills that are written today. It established grazing districts, an agency to oversee their management, and stated that all of this could happen over tens of millions of acres of public rangelands at the discretion of the Secretary of the Interior.

Our initial attempts to move this grazing bill through Congress were blocked by western Congressmen, especially

Senator John Kendrick of Wyoming, the Chair of the Public Lands Committee. Western Congressmen generally opposed government controls that might alienate the western livestock industry. However, Congressman Edward Taylor of Colorado understood the range problem and had campaigned for years for this type of legislation. Once FDR provided his support and backing for this legislation, we were able to break this opposition. Congressman Taylor led the bill through Congress, and it was named after Taylor for his legislative efforts. This bill was actually the first legislation that could be considered part of the New Deal.

Besides the creation of grazing districts, the bill created the Grazing Control Service, later reformed as the Bureau of Land Management. I had learned that the US Forest Service managed grazing on their forested public lands for a fee, and we figured we could do the same thing within Interior. One source of early political opposition to the Taylor Grazing Act within the administration was Henry Wallace, the Secretary of Agriculture, coupled with leadership in the Forest Service. They didn't want the Department of Interior controlling grazing on the western non-Forest Service rangelands. I always had the sense that they wanted control of these public lands within USDA.

There was no love lost between you and other prominent political figures such as Gifford Pinchot, who had served in the US Department of Agriculture?

For many years I was a huge admirer of Gifford Pinchot. He was a legendary figure in forest conservation, and he had been a tremendous intellectual force within the federal government in advancing principles of management and conservation of our public lands. His intellect was highly regarded, though maybe no more so than by Pinchot himself. The only time we were at odds, and strongly so for a period of time, was when he publicly resisted our efforts to create a Department of Conservation and to move the forests out of the Department of Agriculture and into this newly reorganized department. He had little regard for the Department of Interior due to serious past issues of nepotism and corruption, and he never let go of those attitudes, despite my intensive efforts to correct these problems. In the end, though, we renewed our friendship. We understood that these were political fights, not personal ones.

You hired Ferry Carpenter in 1934 as the first Director of the Grazing Service and then fired him from that post several years later. What happened?

When I hired Ferry Carpenter in 1934, I thought he was the perfect choice. He looked like a typical cowman, ran the 3rd largest purebred Hereford herd in the United States at the time, was Harvard educated, and was comfortable in the political environment. Yet, from the get-go he was working around me on key important political issues, and I was ready to accept his resignation, if offered, shortly after making this appointment.

In particular, the advisory committees he had set up to operate the grazing districts were primarily ranchers. Very quickly the Grazing Service became regarded as a “captured agency” within government circles, viewed as controlled by local interests. Carpenter even tried to work around me through Congress to have those local advisory committees have legal status to run those districts. In 1935, at a grazing conference in Denver, Carpenter stated “I am in favor of turning the government land over to the states and thence to the citizens as soon as possible.” The western ranchers were a powerful lobby force, and they kept me from firing Carpenter despite his antigovernment philosophy and my concerns about the problems he had created in the Grazing Service.

I finally fired him in 1938. Despite my efforts, we had been unable to gain control over the Grazing Service. Carpenter also proved to be an obstacle to our efforts to radically reorganize the federal government. For years we had been working to realign programs within USDA and Interior, and to reorganize Interior into a Department of Conservation. I needed him out of the way, and I actually asked the Director of the Forest Service to find someone within the Forest Service to replace him. I did not want another stockman.

Obviously, you must have had many more obstacles to the effort to create a Department of Conservation?

Unfortunately, one of my biggest disappointments in my Interior career was the failure to reorganize the management of our federal natural resources. On April 8, 1938, my personal “Black Friday,” our reorganization bill to create a Department of Conservation was defeated by an eight-vote margin in the House after passing the Senate. We lost our

opportunity to reform the federal government. After that vote the White House decided it was not worth the political costs to continue with this plan.

It was FDR himself that refocused me after this defeat. He said the most important task now was to bring about economic recovery. So, we intensely focused on dozens of new public works projects.

You served in Washington, DC, for a long time. That is a difficult environment to survive unscathed. You must be either thick-skinned or incredibly adept at avoiding the withering scrutiny of the press and political foes.

It may have been a bit of a different environment back then. The Hearst newspapers actually didn’t print stories about rumors of my marriage infidelity, probably not a degree of restraint you would see today. However, I certainly didn’t avoid the scrutiny of the press or of foes in my professional life.

The truth is, if you review the documents from my legacy, you should conclude that I could handle the heat, and that I didn’t mind any notoriety. It comes with public service. You have to accept it. I, though, may have embraced it.

Interview conducted, edited, and condensed by Susan R. McGuire, a pen name used by the author of this article. Her “interviews” with members of our profession (alive or not), inanimate objects, biological specimens, and other subjects of passing interest are an irregular contribution to Rangelands. All costs of publishing these interviews are sponsored by a research unit of the Agricultural Research Service, the in-house research agency of the United States Department of Agriculture, whose rangeland scientists are a segment of the Society for Range Management.