



William Penn Mott, Jr. (1909-1992)

William Penn Mott, Jr. was inducted into the Recreation and Park Hall of Fame in 1997. Mott was perhaps the most influential professional in the parks field of the last half of the twentieth century. His influence was pervasive, extending to all levels of government—local regional, state, and national, and into fostering the establishment of non-profit foundations to support the acquisition and development of parks. Wherever he went, programs just seemed to spring to life.

He was born in 1909 in New York City, but in 1925 moved to Jonesville, Michigan, and it was in this rural setting that his love of nature matured. When Mott graduated from Michigan State in 1931 with a bachelor's degree in landscape architecture, he wanted to learn about a landscape that was different from the Midwest so did his master's degree at the University of California of Berkeley. After his marriage in 1934, he moved permanently to the Bay Area and retained his home in Orinda, California, for the rest of his life, even though he subsequently held positions in Sacramento and Washington D.C.

For his first position in 1933, he was hired by the San Francisco regional office of the National Park Service to supervise landscaping done by CCC and WPA enrollees at several national parks. The constant travel was unacceptable as his children grew, so in 1940 he became a public housing planner, which enabled him to stay home while also operating his own landscaping consulting firm.

His landscaping activities resulted in his appointment as superintendent of parks for the city of Oakland where he remained for 17 years and the city bloomed under Mott's leadership. He personally nurtured the department's planners, gardeners, secretaries, and administrators. He began to develop the open management style that today would be called TQM (Total Quality Management) or MBWA (Management by Walking Around). "The real job of an administrator is not to give orders but to inspire creative thinking in his staff," he said early on. "Everyone is encouraged to think creatively and offer suggestions for improvement."

Mott set the example for creative thinking through the expression of his own irrepressible imagination. No idea was too bold to consider. To educate the public about the importance of protecting the environment, for example, Mott hired Paul Covell, America's first municipal park department naturalist, or nature interpreter. It was an unheard-of idea at the time, but quickly became standard nationwide. He created Children's Fairyland, the first three-dimensional children's theme park in the world and a predecessor to Disneyland. Mott's colleagues at Oakland struggled to keep up with him. They called him the man with "an idea a

minute." By the time he departed Oakland to become general manager of the East Bay Regional Park District in 1962, the Oakland Parks Department enjoyed a national reputation for excellence.

East Bay was a fairly small rather placid system when Mott joined it. His impact was like the sudden appearance of a tornado on the horizon. A board member commented, "Bill Mott turned the whole thing around. Before he came we were just coasting along with no big plans... the beautiful part about it was that you'd turn him down and it didn't dampen him. He'd turn around and work on another idea."

By the time Governor Ronald Reagan asked Mott to become director of California's Department of Parks and Recreation in mid-1967, the East Bay Regional Park District had grown from 10,500 acres to 22,000 acres and from five to twenty parks, serving a rapidly expanding population of 1.5 million in two counties. It was seeing triple the number of visitors that had been counted before Mott's tenure.

During Mott's tenure from 1967 to 1974 an additional 154,000 acres were added to the existing 800,000 acres of the state park system—an extraordinary accomplishment. Other acquisitions that Mott had started were still in progress and were finalized after his departure. A total of 24 new parks, historic parks, reserves, and beaches were begun during Mott's tenure. In addition to new units, thousands of acres were added to existing state parks. The California Journal which had been leery of Mott at the beginning of his reign, by the end declared "Mott has developed a reputation as something of a magician with projects, a master manipulator of elected officials, a hard nosed negotiator for park property and a fighter to preserve the state's natural resources."

In 1974, Bill Mott was 65 years old—but retirement was not in his plans. He became director of park and recreation for the local community of Moraga that had recently voted to establish a district. Why? Because Mott said it offered "a great challenge and opportunity to set up a prototype of a local park jurisdiction that could be copied nationwide. In addition, he provided consulting services to the East Bay Zoological Society in Oakland. His third part-time job during this period was as president and CEO of the California State Parks Foundation. He founded this non-profit in 1969 and mentored it while state parks director, so his association with it stretched from 1969 to 1985. During that period, land and historic artifacts worth over \$50 million were acquired and deeded over to state parks.

Bill Mott had been offered the position of Director of the National Park Service by President Nixon in 1969 but declined. He accepted it when approached by President Reagan and served in the position from 1985-89. Despite being opposed at every turn and serving in an administration described by former NPS director George Hertzog as "having the most obscene environmental record in

history", 17 new NPS sites were added to the system in Mott's tenure. That was an extraordinary accomplishment in that environment. He vigorously and vociferously advocated the reintroduction of the wolf to its ancestral homeland in Yellowstone National Park despite determined opposition from farmers, ranchers and their political representatives. When the Yellowstone fires raged in the summer of 1988 it was Bill Mott who faced the media horde demanding more effort to extinguish them, pointing out that such fires were important to restoration and sustainability mobility of the ecosystem. They forecast steep declines in tourism to the area in the following years. Mott forecast a big increase. Mott was right.

Mott's tenure as National Park Service director ended along with Reagan's second term, but not his involvement with the Park Service itself. When he returned to the Bay Area in 1989, it was as a Special Assistant to the National Park Service. His assignment: To lead the plan to convert the historic Presidio at San Francisco from military to National Park Service use. Throwing himself into this new challenge with characteristic energy, Mott was soon advocating the Presidio as a perfect location for an international research center, an idea he had first suggested many years earlier. He was pursuing that goal and speaking out on worldwide ecological issues when he died of heart failure in 1992 at the age of 82. Bill Mott had great vision. He once said, "A vision is a powerful thing. It is a dream based on a clear perception of the future combined with a commitment to take the necessary steps to make it happen."

Bill vigorously contended that parks offered a unique opportunity to serve as educational vehicles for students of all ages. In all his roles, he emphasized the role of creative interpretation programs, because he understood that you win the support of the public by making them a part of the system and helping them recognize the value of the resources.

Mott broke down racial and gender discrimination by hiring women and members of minority groups previously shut out of parks work and by urging members of those same groups to take on leadership responsibilities. He relished the challenge of getting poor, inner city kids outdoors where they could learn good work habits and become contributing members of society.

Often quiet and soft-spoken off-stage, Mott came forcefully alive before an audience. A gifted speaker, with clear enunciation and a raspy, light-timbered voice, he had the natural rhythms, extemporaneous humor and emotional epiphanies of an evangelist. He would start a typical address by cracking a joke to relax his listeners. Then, he would begin addressing his topic in casual, conversational tones. As he continued his body language grew more intense until, voice raised and fist pounding lectern, he held the group transfixed. As he ended, always on a positive note, the audience usually erupted into loud, spontaneous applause.

This trim, square-shouldered, white-haired man with an infectious smile and crinkly blue eyes created a model for living and working; a clear message exemplified by his own actions, that if you believe in anything, you must pursue it vigorously, passionately. To make things happen, you must give more than you initially think you can. He left the world pushing us to stretch our thinking. He was a torchbearer. And, perhaps, that was his greatest legacy.

Mott was the only individual receive the Pugsley Medal on these occasions: in 1972 for his work as Director of the California Department of Parks and Recreation; in 1982 for his efforts as Executive Director of the California State Parks Foundation; and in 1988 for his contributions as Director of the National Park Service.

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