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Article Summary: A Lincoln couple's photographs and travel diaries are an important source documenting early travel to America's national parks.

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"The early morning scrub" at Lake McDonald, Glacier National Park, 1919. Below, Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming, 1917. NSHS RG0849-06: 99 and RG0849-06: 16

Collecting Parks

BY JILL KOELLING



Right: Little Matterhorn at Odessa Lake, Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado, 1923.
NSHS RG0849-07: 132

Edward and Margaret Gehrke of Lincoln didn't realize their national park photographs and travel diaries, like so many of history's primary sources, were more than personal mementoes. Today their value is obvious. The Gehrkes are featured in filmmaker Ken Burns's forthcoming documentary, *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*, which premieres this fall. Jill Koelling believes modern park travelers are "recreating the experiences of all those who came before us: the early tourists who came by train and then by automobile across roads that didn't deserve the name."



**"The Passing of Lady Lou."
The Gehrkes' first auto-
mobile and their horse
and buggy in front of their
home in Lincoln, 1914.
NSHS RG0849: 1-146**



On July 2, 2001, I headed out from the North Rim of the Grand Canyon with my brother; our goal was to hike the main corridor trail rim-to-rim, reaching the South Rim two days later. Why we went in July is another story.¹ Looking back at the journal I kept during our big hike and at the photograph album I created as a reminder of our great adventure in the inner canyon, I understand my connection to all those hikers, adventurers, and tourists who traveled before me, recording their memories so they wouldn't forget either. Every time I get out the tent, pack my car, and hit the road to visit a national park, I know I'm taking the American vacation by "collecting parks." I am just repeating experiences perfected by the first American tourists to do so.

Americans have been "collecting" parks beginning with the establishment of our first national park, Yellowstone, in 1872. The national parks are part of our national identity. When we visit them, we take photographs, buy postcards and mail them to friends and family, and keep journals describing our experiences so we never forget. We are recreating the experiences of all those who came before us: the early tourists who came by train and then by automobile across roads that didn't deserve the name.

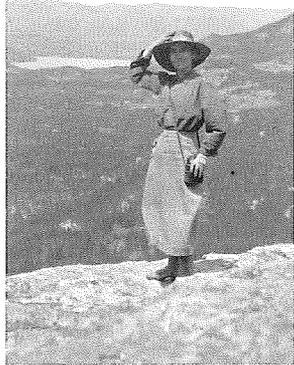
On December 28, 1915, Edward and Margaret Gehrke of Lincoln, Nebraska, saw the Grand Canyon (then a national monument) for the first time.² They were heading home by train after traveling to San Francisco for the Panama-Pacific International

Exposition. In her journal Margaret wrote, "A few things in this beautiful old world are too big to talk about. One can only weep before so supreme a spectacle [sic] of glory and of majesty!"³ Their visit was short, but their newfound desire to see the national parks sparked a lifetime of travel by train and automobile.

Fourteen years passed before Ed and Maggie returned to the Grand Canyon. In the meantime they collected other national parks: Yellowstone in 1917 and again in 1921; Rocky Mountain in 1918, 1921, 1923, and 1924; Glacier in 1919; Crater Lake, Mount Lassen (now Lassen Volcanic National Park), and Mount Rainier in 1921; Gettysburg and Lafayette (now Acadia National Park) in 1922; Platt (now Chickasaw National Recreation Area) in 1923; Sullys Hill (now Sullys Hill National Game Preserve) in 1924; and Mesa Verde in 1925.

Yellowstone was the first national park I ever visited, and I'll never forget the lines of cars stacked against each other and people milling about taking photographs of bison near the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone. When the Gehrkes first visited in 1917, they took a train to Cody, Wyoming, and were then transported into the park to camp near the canyon.⁴

"An attempt to describe the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone is unworthy. At best we can only make comparisons, and comparisons are unfair: It is unlike the Grand Canyon of the Arizona, and it is not Niagara. It is both, and it is not. It is not so immense, but it is more intense. To me it is not



**"Twelve miles steady
climbing over a rugged
mountain trail to 'Camp
Florence,'" Margaret
wrote below this photo.
Rocky Mountain National
Park, 1918. NSHS RG0849-
07: 60**

grandeur but beauty. Unearthly beauty—one can only weep.”⁵

The Gehrkes bought their first automobile in 1914. Edward photographed the new car parked proudly in front of their home next to their horse and buggy, while Margaret noted the dramatic change in a caption, “The Passing of Lady Lou.”⁶ They tested their motoring abilities while driving through western Nebraska in 1916 and encountered “enough new experiences to suit anyone.” After that first harrowing trip, “like little Pollyanna we are Glad: the Buick is battle-scarred; we are motor veterans!!!”⁷

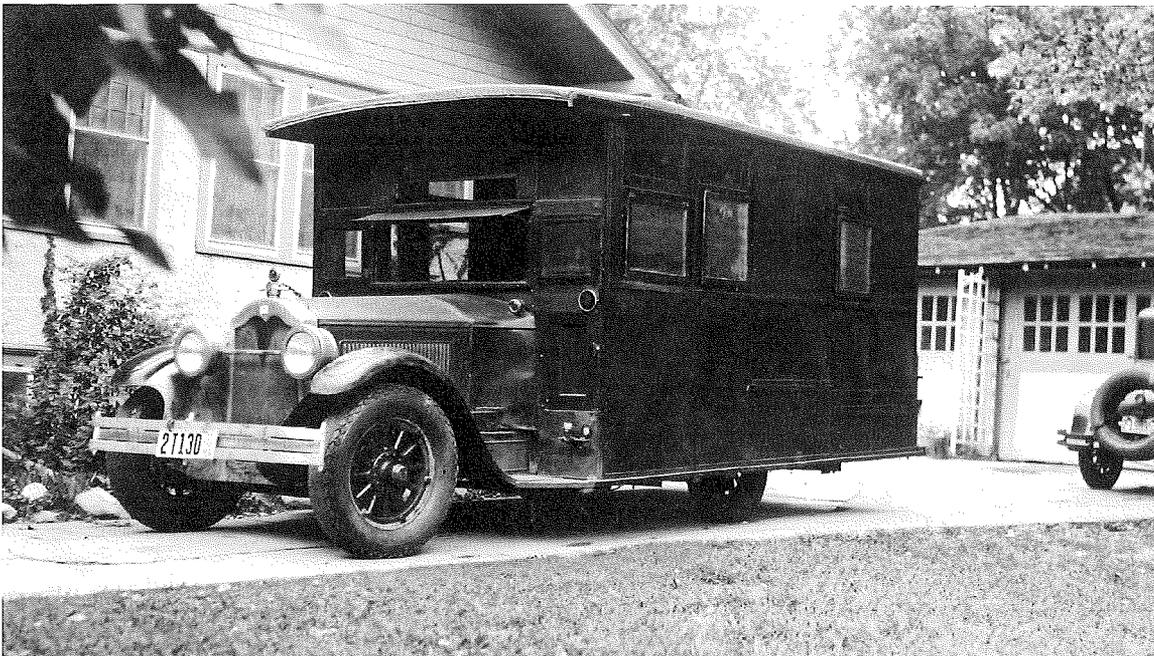
In 1918 Edward and Margaret abandoned train travel and took to the open road for a trip to Rocky Mountain National Park. Each new park fueled their desire to see more, do more, and feel more. “The blazing summer sun of Nebraska and hot corn fields are back of us! Ahead the snow-covered peaks and cool pines, and the long trail into the Unknown.”⁸ In 1921 Edward and Margaret spent nearly three months on the road and visited five different national parks, the most they ever visited in a single trip. Margaret wrote:

“It is given only the god-chosen few to get up and put on dew-dripping cloths and eat breakfast, while the yellow sun comes over the hills to flood with gold a brown camp-knoll, and then to be away over sun-burnt hills, early, with the glad-some promise of a new day everywhere! Autumn is coming with its russet and brown, with its hazy hills, with its arms full of plenty, with its

frost—crimson—glorious, radiant, scarlet autumn! And we are away to meet it in the heart of the hills with arms wide-flung!”⁹

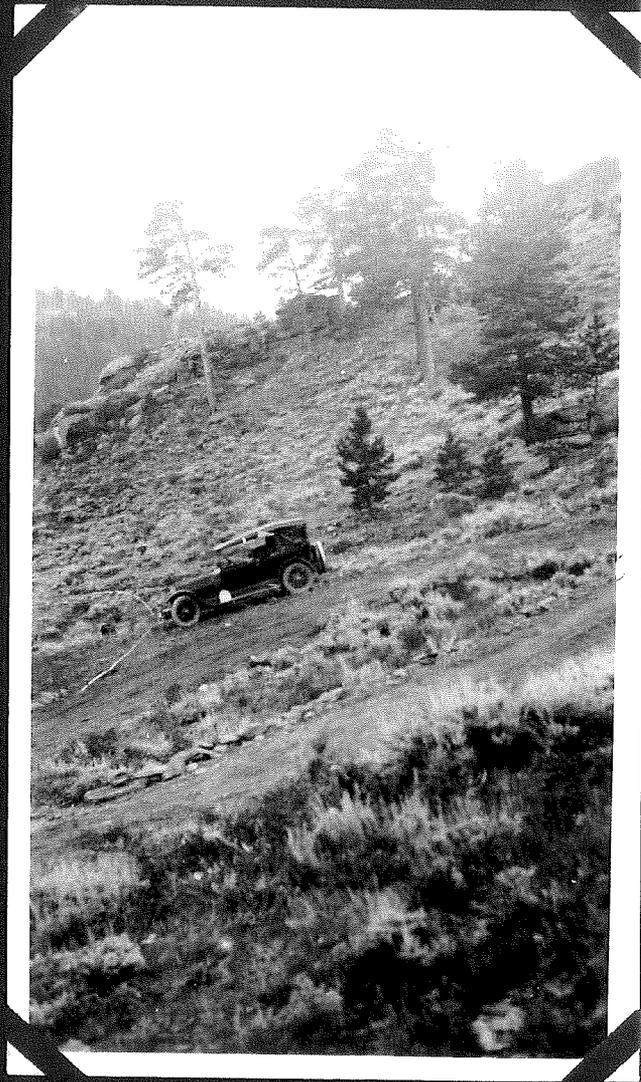
Why do we travel? Why do we pack the car and drive hundreds of miles to see Old Faithful, walk the battlefield at Gettysburg, and watch rock climbers through binoculars at Yosemite? We visit national parks to have experiences, to see things we’ve only heard about, or seen on the Discovery Channel. We want to learn and grow and come back with stories to tell about the bears we saw in Yellowstone or the tunnel of snow we drove through to reach Crater Lake in June. We want something to happen we can feel proud of, that will make the trip worthy of remembrance, like the time I was stopped along the Going-to-the-Sun Highway in Glacier taking a photograph of the view, lost my balance, and was saved from a nasty tumble down who-knows-how-far by my friend Bruce, who reached out and grabbed me.

These desires for experiences and adventures, learning and growth were there from the beginning of Americans’ travels to the parks, and the Gehrkes had plenty to fill the pages of Margaret’s journals. In 1921: “Just over the Colorado line we got a real thrill when our car skidded on a high cliff—turned middle in the road with a sheer drop of 200 ft. The color of the soil had not revealed a recent rain. We put on chains and made the descent safely. . . . Perhaps these incidents serve to enlarge our vision and isn’t that the end of all travel?”¹⁰ In 1923: “The big question: Oklahoma



Edward Gehrke was Lincoln’s “Bungalow King,” so it’s not surprising that a house builder would want a house on wheels, as shown at the Gehrke home in Lincoln, 1931. NSHS RG0849-3: 79

Leaving
"Rose-Weir"
over the
Wegside for
Island
Lake.



The Fall River Road over Hiltner Pass.



Margaret in camp, Sacramento Valley, California, 1921. NSHS RG0849-9: 68

Left page: Crossing the Continental Divide, Rocky Mountain National Park, 1921. NSHS RG0849-9: 9-10

roads? We knew this morning that a good beginning was a bad end. We had 50 miles of good roads before lunch. At Tishomingo the terrors of the roads began. For 36 miles we fought mud holes all the way to Sulphur. But when we arrived and set up Camp No. 24 in Platt National Park, I was too happy to care. One must expect to pay to see all the national parks in the U.S.A. . . . This evening I shut my eyes to roads and rejoice in our 10th national park."

One of Margaret's best stories came while the couple drove across the Colorado mountains to visit Mesa Verde National Park: "Well, I have leaned to the safe side of the road so long today that my body is perhaps permanently crooked. For miles we have been winding thru the foothills, crawling pasty grades, slipping down hills, creeping around curves, the scenery must have been beautiful—glimpses told me of the lovely panorama of wooded hills and trails of smoky clouds along the peaks—but I have kept my eyes glued to the road. Not until the middle of the afternoon have we come to dry road. The weed chains begin to rattle on dry ground, but 'Red Peter' is mud-splashed."

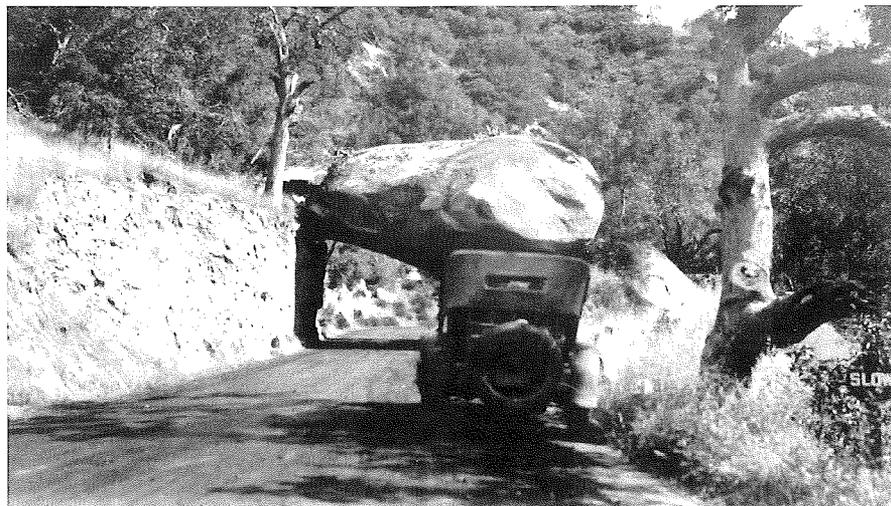
Just as I took photographs in Glacier National Park to remember my visit, so Edward photographed the Gehrkes' park adventures. When they reached Yosemite, Margaret watched as Edward "tried so hard to capture it all with his cameras, while I wondered a bit if I could ever get it all down in my diary!"¹¹ Later on that same trip she wrote, "We took a long hike along the rim of the canyon to view its gorgeous array from as many points as possible. Still I like none better than this one out from our Bryce Camp (No. 23). Herr takes

pictures with reckless abandon! It is no use: it can only live in the walls of memory. And how fine a thought that these walls are never filled with pictures! There is always room for more!"¹²

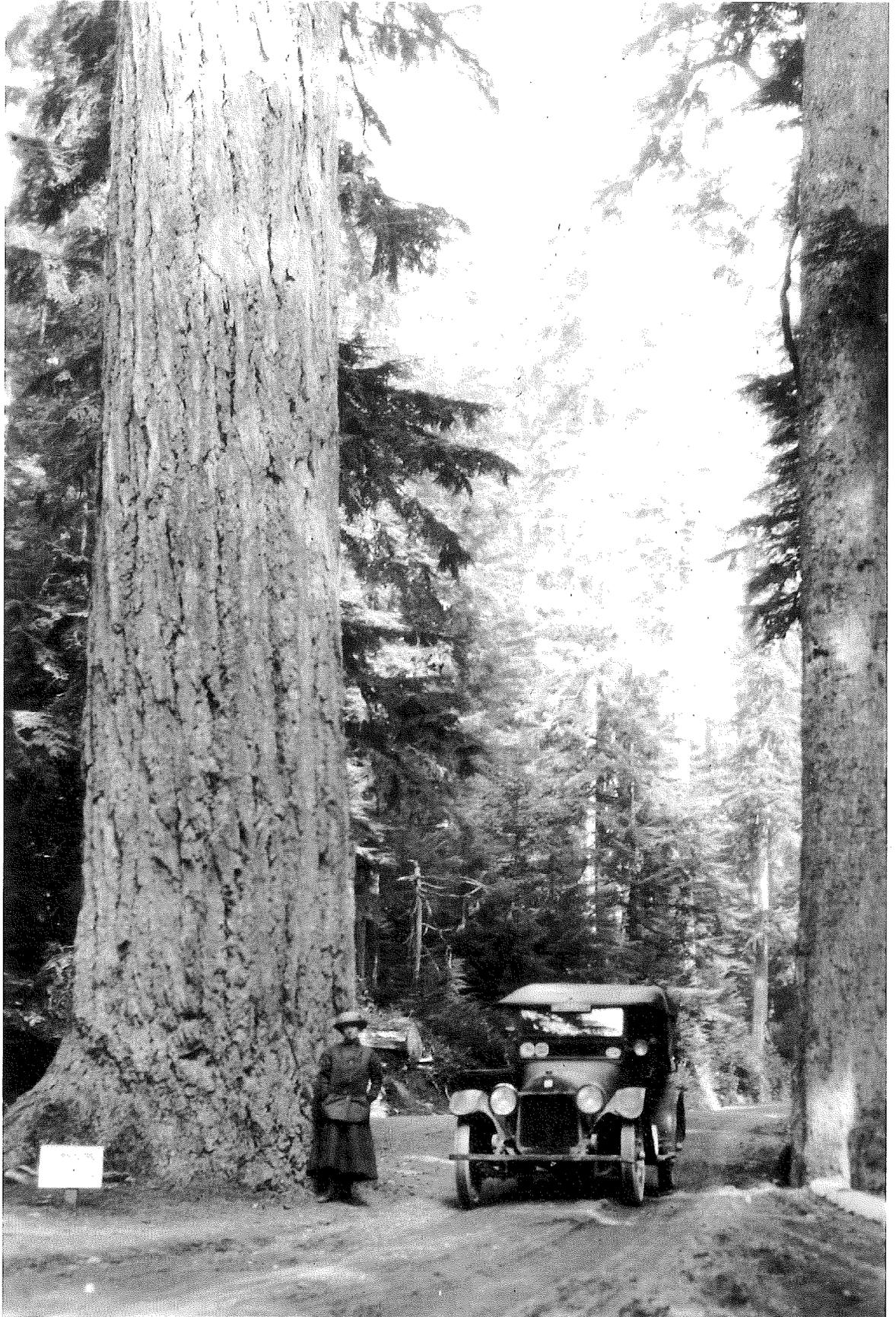
When the Gehrkes finally returned to the Grand Canyon in 1929, Margaret wrote, "Seven miles to the bottom and a hundred and seven to the top. We are stiff and lame but satisfied." This time Edward and Margaret arrived by car, and after finding a neighboring camper to dog-sit Pike, their canine companion on many road trips, they set off for the river. "Looking at its mad, thick waters we felt we had achieved! Then a return to the Indian Gardens, up grade and steep, night coming. Here we slept in this little pocket of green in the heart of the Grand Canyon. What is life but to dream and do?"¹³

Edward and Margaret Gehrke visited fifteen national parks between 1915 and 1939. They spent

Sequoia National Park, California, 1929. NSHS RG0849-13: 65



Margaret and a giant Douglas fir tree, Mount Rainier National Park, Washington, 1921.
NSHS RG0849: 09-124



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their vacations mostly in national parks, driving around narrow bends high in the mountains, camping along lakes and streams (Margaret washing her hair in the cold icy water), sitting by campfires and gazing at the stars. The Gehrkes' experiences—and ours—can be found in Margaret's journal entry concluding their 1929 trip to the Grand Canyon, Zion, Bryce, and Mount Lassen:

"How generous is Nature: Wonderful Yellowstone! Sublime Grand Canyon! Lovely Yosemite! Stupendous Niagara! Beautiful Crater! Romantic Glacier! Magnificent Zion! Gorgeous Bryce! To miss such distinction is to lack keenness of perception; to attempt comparison is to belittle the incomparable; to see each in it's own identity, with singleness of eye, is the supreme enjoyment of Nature."¹⁴

NOTES

¹ The story? Let's just say that the timing and availability of backcountry permits are everything. We tried multiple times for months and when finally successful, we grabbed the chance. High temperatures be damned!

² Grand Canyon National Park, Arizona, established as a National Monument on January 11, 1908, became a national park on February 26, 1919. The Gehrkes visited in 1915 and 1929.

³ 1915, *California and the Exposition, Journal of Margaret M. Gehrke*, RG0849.AM:1, Nebraska State Historical Society (hereafter Gehrke Journal), 66.

⁴ 1917, *Yellowstone National Park and Colorado*, Gehrke Journal, 40.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁶ Gehrke Photo Album #1, RG0849.PH:1-146, Nebraska State Historical Society

⁷ 1916, *A Thousand Mile Motor Trip thru Western Nebraska*, Gehrke Journal, 164. An edited version of the journal was published as "A Thousand Mile Motor Trip through Western Nebraska, 1916," *Nebraska History* 78 (Spring 1997): 22-27.

⁸ 1921, *A 7,000 Mile Motor Trip West, Crator [sic] and Rainier*, Gehrke Journal, 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 256-57.

¹² *Ibid.*, 269. Margaret's nickname for Edward was "Herr."

¹³ 1929 *California National Parks, Zion and Bryce, Big Trees*, journal of Margaret M. Gehrke, 245-47.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 270.

Edward, Margaret, and an unidentified person climbing a ladder on a rock wall at Glacier National Park, Montana, 1919. NSHS RG0849: 06-119

