IDEAS

The treasure of democracy that Madeleine L'Engle discovered in America's national parks

Our protected wild spaces awakened something profound in the author of 'A Wrinkle in Time.' They did the same for me.

By **Abigail Santamaria** Updated May 5, 2025, 3:00 a.m.

Before leaving their home in Goshen, Conn., Madeleine L'Engle's daughter, Josephine, 11, practiced pitching the tent as an extension of the family station wagon. CROSSWICKS, LTD.

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"On all our other trips we have been going from someplace to someplace.... On this trip we must realize that we *are* someplace. We are seeing America."

So wrote author Madeleine L'Engle in May 1959, as she embarked on a 10-week cross-country family camping adventure, much of it in national parks — touchstones of American values. Along the way, L'Engle conceived fantastical worlds and key democracy-centric themes for what would become one of our best-loved and best-selling novels — the Newbery Award-winning classic "A Wrinkle in Time."

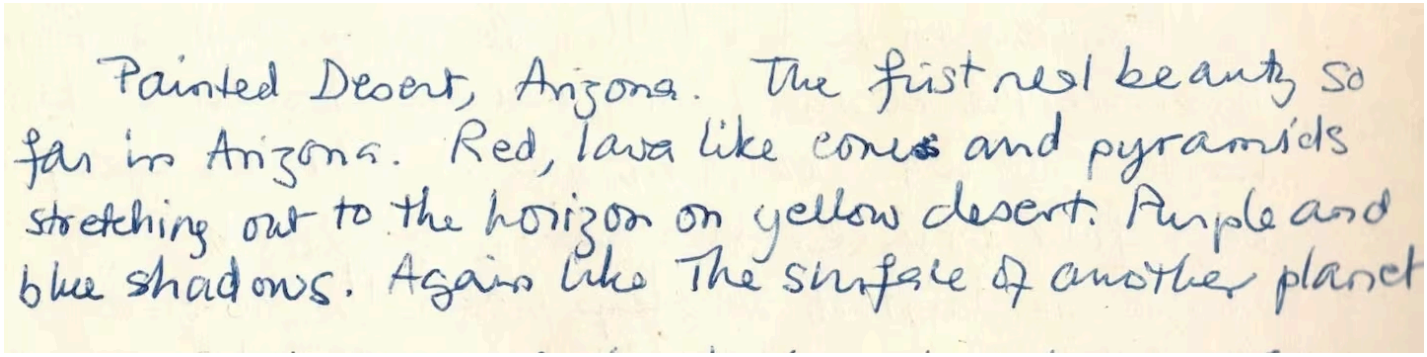
L'Engle's unaffected love of country might strike some as a relic of simpler times. In fact, it is not.

The white middle-class 1950s family road trip was more than a vacation — it was an act of Cold War patriotism, a consumer choice, and an investment in national identity at a time when suburbanites were building bomb shelters in their backyards. "In an era of anti-communism, the ability of American families to afford … a summer vacation demonstrated the superiority of the free enterprise system," writes Susan Sessions Rugh in her 2008 book, "Are We There Yet? The Golden Age of American Family Vacations." L'Engle's station wagon, packed with brand new camping equipment purchased from Abercrombie & Fitch, carried her through the Blue Ridge Mountains and Shenandoah National Park via the winding Skyline Drive, "beautifully kept up" by government employees, she noted.

"It's a big country, and our history was made all over it," the Ford Motor Company affirmed in an advertisement for its station wagon, "America's schoolhouse on wheels," *the* vehicle for navigating a 41,000-mile network of new roadways being constructed under President Eisenhower's National Interstate and Defense Highways Act of 1956. America's largest public works project facilitated "speedy, safe transcontinental travel" for leisure as well as national security amidst threats of nuclear annihilation.

"The only thing that makes us push along without taking our time is the camp-site situation," L'Engle lamented outside Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Campgrounds reached 300 percent capacity at peak season and operated on a first come, first served basis. Late-day arrivals risked being shut out. As car ownership soared and roads facilitated access to remote grandeur, the National Park Service (NPS) hired more rangers, built more visitor centers, and cleared more campsites. Still, it could barely keep up with demand. The number of visitors to the national parks during the first three months of 1959 was up more than 24 percent over the same period the previous year.

The southwestern landscape around the Painted Desert National Monument reminded L'Engle of space age artist Chesley Bonestell's 'pictures of alien worlds.' EKATERINA POKROVSKY/ADOBE


Painted Desert, Arizona. The first real beauty so far in Arizona. Red, lava like cones and pyramids stretching out to the horizon on yellow desert. Purple and blue shadows. Again like The surface of another planet

A journal entry from June 3, 1959, in which L'Engle remarks that Painted Desert is 'the first real beauty so far in Arizona. Red, lava like cones and pyramids stretching out to the horizon on yellow desert.' CROSSWICKS, LTD.

It was amidst a southwest string of parks that landscape and democratic principles coalesced in L'Engle's imagination: Mesa Verde, the Painted Desert (its Petrified Forest National Monument would be designated a national park by Congress in 1962), the Grand Canyon, and Zion.

L'Engle had previously published five novels, realism set in locations where she had lived: the genteel blocks of prewar buildings on Manhattan's Upper East Side,

Switzerland's snow-crusted Alps, Florida's Atlantic coast. But here she encountered "high mountainous cliffs with flat tops and eroded sides. And strange fairy tale rock formations appearing out of nowhere." There were "red, lava like cones and pyramids stretching out to the horizon on yellow desert. Purple and blue shadows ... like the surface of another plant."

In "Wrinkle," L'Engle's protagonist, Meg, travels through time to defeat an evil force and rescue her father from the planet Camozotz — a place of such strict conformity that children at play must bounce their balls in precise unison. But her first stop is Uriel, a peaceful planet covered in "tiny, multicolored flowers" like the ones blanketing the Smoky Mountains in spring; elsewhere on Uriel, Meg travels across "a great plateau of granite-like rock shaped into enormous monoliths.... They were like nothing Meg had ever seen before."

A view of Cliff Palace at Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado. DON MAMMOSER/ADOBE

In Colorado's Mesa Verde National Park, located just north of the New Mexico border, L'Engle and her family descended cliffs via "precipitous steps cut in the rocks, and ladders" to tour a "honeycomb" of 12th-century Ancestral Pueblo cliff dwellings built into alcoves in the canyon walls. All of it was — and continues to be — maintained by NPS employees. That evening they attended a ranger-led campfire lecture on "how ruins and civilizations are dated." Such fireside programming became a national parks staple in the 1920s, an opportunity for rangers to educate visitors about "important natural and historical values of the area." Afterward, Navajo park workers performed a traditional dance. At the campfire talk at the Grand Canyon, Hopi natives performed a "spectacular" dance, and the ranger "stepped very firmly on the toes of all who think Indians and everybody else in the world should be converted to Christianity."

Never had L'Engle encountered cultures so different from her own, even abroad. She was a blue-eyed WASP, her mother a member of the Society of Colonial Dames, an Episcopalian raised by Episcopalians and educated at elite girls' schools that demanded conformity to white, Western norms of the "cultured class." She liked the ranger's argument that "to compare our civilization and religion with the Indian was stupid." Why assume our way of life is better? There were other ways, and those ways did not have to be alike to be equal.

In a climactic scene on Camazotz, the evil "IT" attempts to infiltrate and control Meg's mind. To break its hold, she wields the Declaration of Independence: "'We hold these truths to be self-evident!' she shouted, 'that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.'"

"'But that's exactly what we have on Camazotz. Complete equality. Everybody exactly alike.' For a moment her brain reeled with confusion. Then came a moment of blazing truth. 'No!' she cried triumphantly. 'Like and equal are not the same thing at all!'"

Last year, the NPS served a record 331.8 million visitors — 269 million more than in 1959. My family was among them. L'Engle's map and journal in hand, we retraced that pivotal portion of her trip. We climbed the same precipitous steps and ladders at Mesa Verde, where a young ranger taught us about the 27 pueblos and tribes associated with that land and helped my children (ages 7 and 9) identify native plants with magical names like rubber rabbit brush. The kids were participating in the NPS Junior Ranger program, begun in the 1960s to help children learn about the parks and to "cultivat[e] future generations of park stewards."

The author with her sons, Jasper, 9, (right) and Gideon, 7, at Petrified Forest National Park. MONICA HOUSEN

When my kids completed their identification tasks, the ranger instructed them to raise their right hands and "repeat after me":

"As a junior ranger I promise to protect Mesa Verde and all national parks. I will stay on the trails, be nice to plants and animals, and pick up trash. I also promise to respect other people and cultures who might be different from me." The ranger high-fived my kids and said "Awesome job! You are our newest junior rangers."

My own history with national pride is a study in pendulum swings. The Cold War ended when I was about the age my children are now; Reaganism and the "moral majority" heightened ideological and economic division; the '90s passed in a haze of youthful apathy followed by the too-brief burst of unity after 9/11. Then came the whiplash of Obama-Trump.

But in that moment, and many others along our trip, I felt something I hadn't in a long time — a welling of pride and hope in America, both for what it gives us and for what it

invites our children to give back. America remains an ongoing project. Democracy, like national parks, cannot thrive without generous and imaginative investment.

President Woodrow Wilson's Organic Act of 1916 created the National Park Service within the Interior Department and directed it to "conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."

Last month, a few days before Earth Day, Interior Secretary Doug Burgum issued an order entrusting the health and legacy of our national parks to DOGE representative and former oil executive Tyler Hassen. The order gives Hassen control of Department of the Interior policy, management, and budget, and instructs him to "create significant efficiencies" toward supporting DOGE's Workforce Optimization Initiative, created by the same Executive Order that led to the firing of approximately 1,000 National Park Service employees.

On Earth Day, the Interior Department responded to Trump's "National Energy Emergency" — which experts say does not exist — by announcing it will expedite the mining of federal land for natural energy resources including crude oil, coal, and uranium.

The national parks, in all their historical and natural grandeur, are bipartisan treasures, held in trust as living reminders that America's greatest strength lies in its capacity to contain multitudes. Stewarding this land is a commitment to the most democratic idea of all.