

B&C Member Spotlight - John F. Lacey, Conservation's Most Unsung Hero

By PJ DelHomme



In a speech promoting passage of the Lacey Act of 1900, Lacey told Congress that, "I have always been a lover of the birds, and I have always been a hunter as well, for today there is no friend that the birds have like the true sportsman—the man who enjoys legitimate sport."

No lawmaker to walk the halls of Congress has done more for wildlife than John F. Lacey, a member of the Boone and Crockett Club from 1898 until his death in 1913. His name is attached to the most important pieces of conservation legislation of our nation.

Hundreds of books have been written about [Theodore Roosevelt](#). [George Bird Grinnell](#) has a few biographies himself, plus a melting glacier named after him. [Gifford Pinchot's](#) name is attached to an entire national forest in North Carolina. And then there's John F. Lacey, a congressman from Iowa who has a few pieces of legislation with his name on it. To be fair, John F. Lacey should have something akin to the Lincoln Memorial because of his conservation efforts. Yes, that's a bold statement. Allow us to explain.

John F. Lacey grew up in what is now West Virginia and then moved to Iowa with his family in 1855. In his youth he attended no fancy East Coast boarding schools, instead being taught to read and write at home by his mother. He earned money as a paperboy. He joined the Union Army at the outbreak of the Civil War, and by 1865, he had worked his way up the ranks to Major. He studied law in the evenings, got married, and had two daughters who survived past infancy. He became a lawyer for the railroad and traveled across the West's changing landscape. He fell in love with the wildlife and despised the way in which it was being systematically exterminated. Lacey was a sportsman and became a member of the Boone and Crockett Club in 1898. Why does all of this even matter?

Courtesy of Boone & Crockett Club

It matters because, by all accounts, Lacey was an ordinary man who accomplished extraordinary things. This is made all the more obvious as his tenure as a U.S. Congressman from 1889 until 1907. Lacey was an eight-term Republican Congressman from Iowa's 6th congressional district. During that time, he would become known as the "father of conservation legislation."

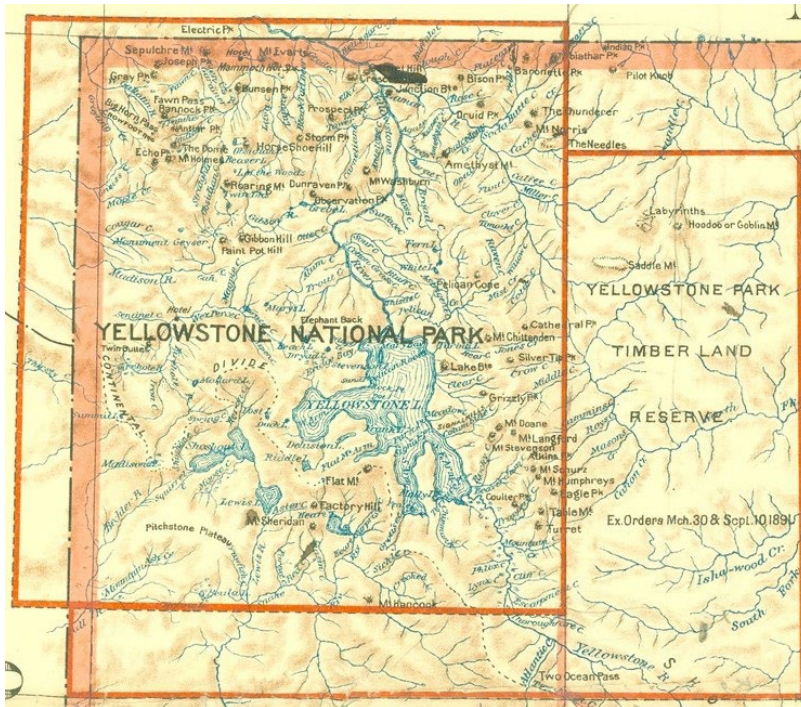


Congressman John F. Lacey, seated at right, in his Washington, D.C. office in the late 1890's with some of his staff members.

Lacey is best known for the Lacey Act of 1900, but his influence and name is on a number of landmark pieces of conservation legislation. Lawmakers both past and present will likely never match the sheer influence that one man had on our nation's resources.

Forest Reserve Act of 1891—Precursor to Our National Forests

Just two years after being elected to the House of Representatives, Lacey was busy drafting and promoting a law that would give the President of the United States authority to create forest reserves, which we now call national forests. This legislation goes by a number of names including the General Revision Act, the Forest Reserve Act of 1891, and the Creative Act. The law was a direct response to the systematic exploitation of timber and minerals on public land by private interests. This law helped lay the groundwork for much of the future conservation legislation that would have Lacey's name attached to it. For instance, only a month after passing the act, President Benjamin Harrison created the Yellowstone Park Timberland Reserve around Yellowstone National Park, which desperately needed some sort of protective buffer. Lacey was just getting warmed up. He would hit his true stride in service as chair of the House Committee on Public Lands from 1895 to 1907.



Map indicating the newly created Yellowstone Park Timber Land Reserve, 1892.

Lacey Act of 1894—Protecting Yellowstone

Lacey was a lover of wildlife and wild places, and Yellowstone National Park was one of his favorites. He also knew how important the park was in teaching the public at large about these wild places and the need to protect them. “The Yellowstone Park is a great educator along the line of protection of wild life,” he wrote in an article published in the Boston Evening Transcript. “The thousands of tourists who visit the wonderland view the confiding and tame creatures there with as much pleasure as they look upon the periodic display of the Old Faithful geyser.”

When [Yellowstone](#) was established as a national park in 1872 by President Grant, it was in name only. The new legislation creating the park had no laws to protect the landscape or the animals in it. Lacey changed that by sponsoring legislation that gave the government the authority to arrest and prosecute poachers hellbent on destroying the area’s wildlife as well as stealing and defacing the park’s unique resources. In 1894, President Cleveland signed the first Lacey Act into law.

This legislation would become the first law establishing definitive national park management rules, and it was also the first federal wildlife protection law. In addition, it increased the size of the park by 3,344 square miles. The act not only provided legal definitions for what a national park should be—definitions that had not previously existed—but also became the benchmark doctrine for laws and policies when the National Park Service was established in 1916. It was, and still is, considered landmark legislation.

Understandably, Lacey was proud of his achievement. “The code of laws for the protection of Yellowstone National Park, I had the pleasure of drawing, although the park had been in existence many years practically under no law as to details of

management," he wrote in a letter to W. B. Merchon. While this would be the first piece of legislation attached directly to Lacey's name, it would not be the law for which he would become most famous. That would come six years later.



Neither the ongoing presence of the U.S. Army nor the passage of the Park Protection Act of 1894 put an immediate stop to the illegal take of wildlife within Yellowstone. Here military officers at Fort Yellowstone pose with seven severed bison heads confiscated from poachers.

Lacey Act of 1900—Elimination of Market Hunting

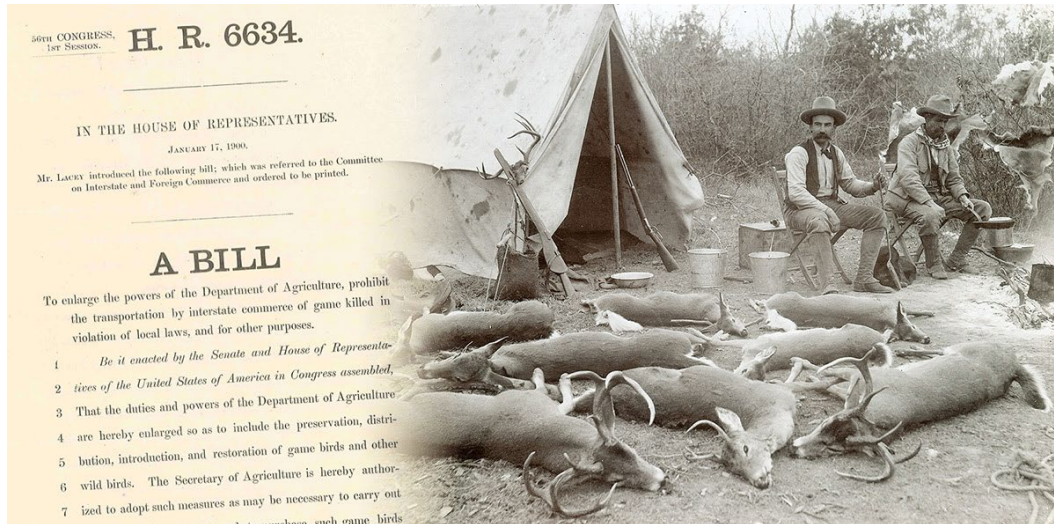
For the record, Congressman Lacey was not big on fashion, especially when being fashionable meant wiping out entire species of birds. He was a man on a mission to bring conservation to the masses. In doing so, he declared war on ladies' fashion, namely their fancy hats of the day. Those hats were festooned with the feathers of exotic birds, which were being slaughtered by the railcar to fuel this fashion craze.

"To know our birds of song is to love all birds. Fortunate indeed were the birds who sang to John F. Lacey, during his boyhood and his young manhood." — [William T. Hornaday](#)

Individual states knew that some of their bird populations were being slaughtered and created laws to curb the slaughter. The states could not prevent the birds from being shipped and sold to other states where the sale of the feathers was legal. And this is where federal legislation was needed to prevent the sale and transport of wildlife taken illegally elsewhere.

In 1900, Lacey delivered a speech to the League of American Sportsmen lamenting the loss of the nation's forest, birds, elk, and bison. "But you invited me especially to explain the nature and scope of a bill introduced by me in the House of Representatives," Lacey explained, "to give national assistance to the preservation of what remains of our birds and beasts." The bill Lacey referenced would allow the Department of Agriculture to prohibit the transportation across state lines of game killed in violation of local laws. In other words, his bill would prohibit trade in wildlife,

fish, and plants that have been illegally taken, possessed, transported or sold. The law would essentially outlaw the disastrous practice of market hunting.



A photo from 1899 showing the slaughter of big-game species for meat, hides, and heads. The Lacey Act of 1900 aimed to put a halt to the destruction.

Lacey introduced his bill in the spring of 1900. By May 25 it had passed both houses of Congress and was signed into law by President McKinley. It was certainly a win for fish and wildlife conservation, but it wasn't bulletproof. The Lacey Act of 1900 was a solid legislative foundation on which new laws could be built, namely the [Weeks-McLean Law](#) of 1913 and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1913.

The Antiquities Act of 1906—National Parks' Secret Weapon

Despite the rather unassuming name, the Antiquities Act has been a secret of conservation-minded U.S. presidents ever since it was created—thanks in large part to John F. Lacey, of course.

Just as the nation's wildlife resources were being plundered at the turn of the twentieth century, so too were the prehistoric Native American ruins in the Southwest. And just as the railroad brought market hunters with their Sharps rifles to the American West, they brought to the American Southwest treasure hunters looking to loot artifacts from prehistoric Native American sites.

The Antiquities Act aimed to not just protect the artifacts from private interests, but it also sought to protect the lands on which those artifacts were found. There had been previous attempts to pass such a law, which began in earnest with four antiquities bills, according to a [paper](#) published by Richard West Sellars. With Lacey's influence as chair of the House Committee on Public Lands and his powers of legislative persuasion, the congressman would shepherd his version of an antiquities bill through the legislative process. This bill would also be known as yet another Lacey Act.

"This statute became informally known as the 'Lacey Act' (not to be confused with an earlier wildlife act given the same designation) as a tribute to the conservative Iowa Republican who, as the influential chair of the House Committee on Public Lands, had steered the antiquities bill safely through Congress in the spring of 1906," wrote

Sellers. It was "...one of the true cornerstones of American preservation and conservation law." The law, though, had other applications.

In his book *American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation*, author John F. Reiger writes, "Designed originally to protect spectacular archaeological sites, like Colorado's



Mesa Verde and New Mexico's Chaco Canyon, from being damaged by looters seeking valuable artifacts to sell, the law quickly became an opportunity for Roosevelt to save other places that appealed to his aesthetic sensibilities. Applying the 'object of scientific interest' clause of the Antiquities Act in the broadest possible fashion, he proclaimed the Grand Canyon National Monument in Arizona in 1908 and the Mount Olympus National Monument in Washington in 1909. Both would become the cores of great national parks."

Col. Theodore Roosevelt's party descending Bright Angel Trail, Grand Canyon, c. 1911. He signed Lacey's Antiquities Act into law in 1906. In 1908, he designated the Grand Canyon National Monument, which encompassed more than 800,000 acres. It became a national park in 1919.

Immediately after signing the Antiquities Act, President Roosevelt used it 18 times to establish national monuments. Since then, 17 presidents have used the Antiquities Act more than [150 times](#) to establish or expand national monuments. Jimmy Carter used the provisions of the law to set aside 56 million acres in Alaska, which more than doubled the size of the national park system.

The Lacey Act of 1907—The Final Act

Running for a ninth term, Congressman Lacey was unseated by Democrat Daniel W. Hamilton in 1906. And even though he lost his seat, Lacey was still pushing legislation until the bitter end. This particular Lacey Act was approved in a lame duck session after his defeat and signed into law in his final week in Congress. The act dealt with the way in which communally owned trust funds could now be distributed to individual Native American tribal members.

Final Praise

If you've made it this far, you should be wondering why Lacey doesn't have a national monument or holiday named after him. To be fair, there is a state park in Iowa named in his honor. In all honesty, with what little has been written by and about him, it's apparent that he wasn't looking for fame. He was, though, looking out for all of us, those American citizens who enjoy the bounty of our nation's wildlife and wild places.

But don't just take our word for it. We leave you with a letter from President Roosevelt written to Congressman Lacey on July 16, 1906.

My Dear Mr. Lacey,

Certain gentlemen interested in the preservation of the forests of this country, and also interested, though to a less degree, in the preservation of the wild life of the country, and the objects of natural and historic interest which should be kept unharmed for the sake of those who come after us, have written to me expressing their deep sense of obligation to you for all that you have done in Congress to further these matters. They have spoken to me of presenting some memorial to you so that their sense of appreciation may be put in permanent form. I do not know whether this will be done, but I sympathize so cordially with their feelings that I desire to take advantage of this occasion to write you and say how much it means to any man who believes in hard, intelligent, and disinterested public service to see such a career as yours has been in Congress. It has been my privilege to be closely associated with you and to watch the many different ways in which, without any hope or expectation of personal reward, you have rendered efficient public service. I give utterance to the feelings of very many men when I express to you my cordial thanks and extend to you my earnest good wishes.

— President Roosevelt



A photograph of Congressman John F. Lacey in Texas, August 1906.

For further reading, we highly recommend you take a look at a compilation of John F. Lacey's correspondence, speeches, and letters in a rather humble document titled simply [Major John F. Lacey: Memorial Volume](#).