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75th Anniversary of the United States Geological Survey, March 3, 1954

THIS year the U.S. Geological Survey celebrates its 75th anniversary.

During the first six decades of the 19th century the surveys conducted by the National Government were chiefly exploratory in character and were confined almost wholly to the western country. Following the end of the Civil War, four surveying expeditions were sent out to explore and map the geology and resources of the then little-known country between the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Coast. Usually referred to as the King, Wheeler, Hayden, and Powell surveys, the first two were sponsored and financed by the War Department, the others by the Department of the Interior.

In March, 1879, on the advice of the National Academy of Sciences, the 45th Congress enacted legislation providing for the establishment of the Geological Survey. This new branch of the Government was created expressly to merge the functions of the earlier expeditions into a single organization.

The functions of the new Bureau were defined in the organic act as "... the classification of the public lands and the examination of the Geological Structure, mineral resources, and products of the national domain ..." and it was further provided "that the Director and members of the Geological Survey shall have no personal or private interests in the lands or mineral wealth of the region under survey, and shall execute no surveys or examinations for private parties or corporations. ..." At the time of its inception the Geological Survey operated only in the western states which then as now included the bulk of public lands. A few years later the authorization was extended by Congress to cover the United States, its territories, and island possessions.

Under this charter, broadly interpreted by Clarence King, the first director, and more vigorously by John Wesley Powell, his successor, the major types of activity were blocked out, which the Survey has followed throughout its history. During Powell's term of office (1881-1894) he successfully established the Survey as a scientific and technical bureau with emphasis on research.

The Geological Survey has been referred to as the "mother of bureaus." It organized, nurtured, and directed activities in the field of natural resources in a very broad sense. In the course of expanding national development many of these activities, when they reached maturity, were relinquished to form independent bureaus, such as the Forest Service (1905), the Reclamation Service (1907, now the Bureau of Reclamation), the Bureau of Mines (1910), and the Grazing Service (1934, now part of the Bureau of Land Management).

Today the Survey's functions consist of geologic investigations, topographic mapping, water investigations, public-land classification, and mineral-leasing supervision on leased public and Indian lands. Its work is seldom of a spectacular nature and does not usually produce startling headlines in the daily press. Down through the years it has consistently chosen to remain an unbiased fact-finding and investigative professional agency.

As the Geological Survey celebrates its 75th anniversary, it looks ahead to increasing opportunities to contribute to the advancement of science and to the common welfare of the Nation.

W. E. WRATHER

*Director of the
U.S. Geological Survey*

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