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## Book Review - Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies

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## Off the SHELF

**Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies** by Paul S. Sutter (University of Georgia Press, 2015: ISBN 9780820334011, \$45.95)

Other than being president, what do Franklin D. Roosevelt and Jimmy Carter have in common? Both, in one way or another, played a role in the creation of a state park in Georgia. It could be called Providence.

In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies*, Paul Sutter guides his readers through the environmental and social history of Providence Canyon, also known as Georgia's "Little Grand Canyon." Located in Southwest Georgia's Stewart County, Sutter likens Providence Canyon to Bryce Canyon or Badlands National Parks, but contrary to how those landmarks were formed, Providence Canyon is the result of man-made changes in the environment that caused soil exhaustion and erosion. Sutter himself notes the irony of the impact humanity had in the creation of the Canyon and states environmental historians often play "with the irony that places we thought were natural are often deeply shaped by human culture." It is this irony that Sutter successfully works through in the three sections of his book.

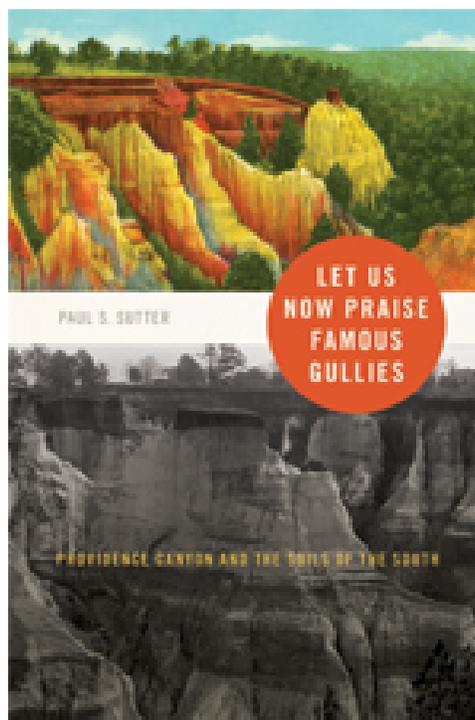
Throughout the first section, Sutter introduces the reader to the beauty of Providence Canyon, but notes how indicative of the South it is to create a park out of poor land use practices and "turn a scar into a point of pride." He begins by discussing the geography and historic land use

of the Plantation South and Stewart County, Georgia, home of Providence Canyon. Sutter points out that Stewart County was one of the largest cotton producing counties in the South and attributes the formation of the gullies to the county's poor agricultural practices. Sutter writes in a factual, but engrossing manner and notes that when conducting his research, he found it difficult to find sources prior to the Civil

War that would date the creation of the gullies. He mentions the effects of the gullies' formation on Providence Methodist Church and hints that residents felt the Canyon's creation was thought to be an "act of God," as natural disasters in the nineteenth century were thought to have been a result of God's displeasure. Sutter then walks the reader through the early nineteenth century geologic and soil surveys conducted in Georgia, including Providence Canyon.

In the second section, Sutter focuses on the decade of the 1930s and the changes in

society that brought attention to Providence Canyon. Sutter discusses a 1933 article in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* that is one of the first sources he found comparing Providence Canyon with the Grand Canyon. He credits the increasing number of tourists who want first-hand knowledge of the romanticized South, a growing interest in Roosevelt's New Deal environmental policies of the 1930s, the availability of affordable mass-produced automobiles, and the modernization of the country's roadways as factors that gave prominence to Providence Canyon. He discusses



the failed efforts to turn the area into a national park and the successful legislation, sponsored by Jimmy Carter's cousin Hugh, which finally succeeded in turning Providence Canyon into a state park in 1971.

Returning to the irony Sutter first observes, the third section tries to provide some understanding of what the gullies mean in terms of the agricultural practices and political economy of the South. Sutter provides further explanation of the various soil types prevalent in that area of Georgia and discusses other expert studies on the soil erosion, sedimentation, and gulying throughout the area. Sutter provides a fascinating description of Southern farming characteristics, different soil types in the area, and various farming practices, including tenant farming after the Civil War. He notes Providence Canyon's ironic presence where "an environmental disaster is protected as a park," but warns readers not to overgeneralize the region.

As part of the Environmental History and the American South series, Sutter's book opens

with photographs from the 1930s, attributed to Arthur Rothstein, depicting the deep gullies that constitute Providence Canyon. Although methodical in placing the black and white pictures in the front of the book as homage to Walker Evans's photospread in James Agee's 1941 book, *Let us Now Praise Famous Men*, which portrayed the lives of sharecroppers in Hale County, Alabama during the Depression, the reader is left wanting to see the beautiful colors for which Providence Canyon is known.

The extensive research integrates the environmental and social history of the rural South and Sutter's style keeps both researcher and layperson engaged. It is interesting to learn of some of Georgia's other areas that were affected by erosion. This book touches on many anthropologic and environmental science issues and although it would be a benefit to any library, it is highly recommended for academic libraries.

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