

# GAO Finds Park Reservation Foulup

By Jack Anderson

Tens of thousands of vacationers have been unable to reserve campsites at 21 national parks this summer because the telephone reservation system was handled by an inexperienced firm.

The contract was awarded to Park Reservation System, which was incorporated in Claremont, Calif., on June 7 and began operations on June 23.

By a curious coincidence, the firm's president, L. Donald Middleton, happens to be a close friend of National Parks Director Ronald Walker. Spokesmen for both men deny that their friendship influenced the deal.

It is a fact, nevertheless, that the company was organized for the sole purpose of handling the camping reservations contract. The executives of the new company had no real experience in the field.

Sen. Howard Metzenbaum (D-Ohio), a member of the Senate parks subcommittee, asked the General Accounting Office to investigate the firm's performance. Here are the preliminary findings:

- One day, 25,000 of 29,464 callers got only a busy signal. A spot check by GAO investigators on July 18 disclosed that only one out of every 20 calls got through the reservations switchboard.

- Although the firm had raked in about \$150,000 in reservations from campers by mid-July, it still hadn't posted the \$100,000 performance bond required to protect the government's take.

- The Park Service, after promising "virtually instantaneous" service for campers, has

now called upon them to make their reservations by cards and letters. This slow service will be too late for many vacationers.

- The Park Service has conceded, as a result of the foul-up, that "most parks are still receiving a fairly small number of reservations . . . resulting in many campgrounds no more than 10 to 15 per cent filled."

Nevertheless, the Park Service has extended the contract into August.

Footnote: Clark Powell, executive vice president of the embattled reservations firm, defended its operation as "the greatest thing since sex, if they give us a chance to the end of the year."

Saved by Sam—President Nixon's closest crony, Bebe Rebozo, escaped a possible contempt citation only through the personal action of kindly old Senate Watergate Chairman Sam Ervin (D-N.C.).

As one of the committee's last acts, Ervin subpoenaed Rebozo's financial, telephone and other records. But the secretive Rebozo resisted bitterly, even going to court to fight the subpoena.

The showdown came behind the closed doors of Ervin's spacious Capitol hideaway. Rebozo sat by silently while his Miami attorney, William Frates, assailed the Watergate staff for harassing his client.

The angry lawyer charged that Rebozo had been questioned repeatedly, that his bank had been pawed through, that unfavorable secret testimony had been leaked to the press. Once lawmen rushed to Rebo-

zo's Key Biscayne, Fla., bank to investigate a report that two suspicious men were casing it for a robbery. The two suspects turned out to be Watergate investigators.

At one point, Frates reportedly refused to negotiate if committee investigator Scott Armstrong was in the room. A general hubbub developed after Sen. Howard Baker (R-Tenn.) joined in the attack upon committee counsel Terry Lenzner.

Ervin restored order and twice sent the staff into a smaller hideaway, belonging to Sen. Dan Inouye (D-Hawaii), to work out an agreement. The negotiations dragged on until the staffers and Frates, their nerves raw, fell into bitter dispute. As two witnesses recall it, Frates called Armstrong a "rat fink." But minority counsel Fred Thompson and Lenzner finally reached an accord with Frates, who agreed to provide substantial material from Rebozo's files.

Meeting again with the senators, Frates agreed to sign a letter formalizing the accord. But first, he had to meet with the Watergate prosecutors, he said, promising he would be back.

That was the last they saw of him. Instead of returning to Capitol Hill, he flew to Miami. A committee staffer was dispatched to Miami, but Frates refused to give up the promised material, complaining that still more damaging material had been leaked to the press.

Despite the runaround, Ervin let the contempt question die at a final meeting. The old constitutionalist explained to us that

it was true "we were promised" the Rebozo material and "we didn't get it." But he said the committee was going out of business, and "the Justice Department would have had to enforce the subpoena."

Concluded Ervin: "I have never favored contempt proceedings."

Footnote: My associate Les Whitten reached Frates in Miami. He attacked our column, refused to listen to the questions and hung up on Whitten. Frates' friends said he was honestly disturbed by the news leaks and acted in what he considered the best interests of his client.

Washington Whirl—Rumors have persisted for almost a month that Vice President Gerald Ford had secretly asked former Attorney General Elliot Richardson to become Vice President if President Nixon is forced out of office. Both men deny it. But Richardson is making the grand tour of Moscow and other points, in the manner of men with an eye on high office . . . The U.S. Information Agency must know something we don't. It's working busily on a film explaining to foreign lands how an American president comes to be removed from office. A rough-cut version of the movie shows President Nixon in his historic talks with world leaders and then portrays him caught in the impeachment process. At USIA, a spokesman said the final version won't be completed until after the President's fate is decided one way or the other.

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