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THE GRIZZLY GIANT

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THUMBNAIL SKETCHES OF YOSEMITE ARTISTS

By Elizabeth H. Godfrey, NPS Staff

WILLIAM KEITH

William Keith was born in Old Meldrum, Aberdeenshire, Scotland, on November 21, 1838. Five months before his birth his father had passed away, leaving his mother with three small daughters. Mrs. Keith took up millinery as soon as her health permitted, and the children were placed with relatives. Thus, until he was 8 years old, Keith was under the care and influence of his maternal grandparents who were staunch Scotch Presbyterians.

In 1850, Mrs. Keith took her children to New York where her brother lived. Here Keith secured a fair education, worked in a law office, and was later apprenticed to a wood engraver.

As an employee of Harper Brothers in 1858, Keith was sent to California for two months. After a subsequent sojourn in Scotland and England, Keith returned to California by steerage to accept a position on a magazine in San Francisco, only to find that its publication had been discontinued. Keith then opened up a wood engraving shop of his own.

Keith's marriage to Miss Elizabeth Emerson, a fourth cousin of Ralph Waldo Emerson, in June 1864, marked the beginning of his career as an artist. Mrs. Keith was not only an artist, but a teacher of painting, and soon recognized that Keith had unusual talent. At that time Bierstadt and Hill were receiving handsome sums for their mountain landscapes and Keith aspired to rival them, since he felt a tremendous urge to become an artist and paint the spectacular scenery of the West.

An order from the Oregon Navigation Railroad Company for ten paintings—five oils and five watercolors, of prominent scenic features along the line, such as Mt. Rainier, Mt. Baker, Mt. Hood and the Columbia River Highway, gave Keith an opportunity to prove his worth as an artist. Keith's wife had utmost faith in him, and his success with this order convinced her beyond all doubt of his promising future.

In 1869, with the money received from this commission, Keith and his wife were able to go to Dusseldorf,

Germany, so that Keith might study art. Their two small children, Charlie and Tennie, remained with relatives in Boston.

At this time Keith made the statement, "What I want to do is to study nature. The best way to do that is to be near her, and I have a vague idea about living in such close communion with her that she may adopt me and show me things hidden to every eye, but that which loves her sincerely."

In August 1870, Keith returned to New York, and during his sojourn in the East, opened a studio in Boston where he sold many paintings and received much praise from art critics and patrons.

Keith and John Muir

When Keith and his wife Elizabeth called on Ralph Waldo Emerson while in Boston in 1872, Emerson advised Keith to look up John Muir in Yosemite. Emerson had previously visited the Valley and had stopped at Hutchings' place. Emerson told Keith that he and Muir had much in common; viz., both were born in Scotland in the same year (1838) and both were nature lovers.

Upon his return to California, Keith received a letter of introduc-

John Muir in Yosemite

tion to Muir from Mrs. Ezra Carr of Oakland. Keith spent his first night in Yosemite camping with Muir on the shores of Mirror Lake, then, although it was late in October, Muir conducted Keith into the vast mountain splendors of the Yosemite High Sierra studded with lakes and glaciers. Thus Keith received a wealth of inspiration for his paintings and began a lifelong friendship with the great naturalist. In succeeding years, Keith accompanied Muir on numerous sketching trips into the High Sierra of Yosemite, and his paintings were greatly influenced and inspired by Muir's ideals.

In depicting mountain splendor Keith realized his ambitions of equaling Hill and Bierstadt. Later, under the advice and influence of Keith's friend and minister, Rev. Joseph Worcester, pastor of the Swedenborgian Church of San Francisco, Keith chose to paint pastoral scenes of the lower foothill country of California, rather than mountain heights—specializing in California Oaks. Although Muir felt that such landscapes could in no way compare with Keith's paintings of mountain scenery, this latter type of painting has stood the test of time far better than the former.

Keith did not share Muir's indifference to food, and often suffered because of the scanty provisions Muir would take along on their high country trips. Keith especially missed the sugar for his coffee which they invariably forgot. Mrs. Mills, daughter of James M. Hutchings, and now a Yosemite resident, remembers Keith's early visits. She stated that when Keith went to visit the Muirs he always took along lots of good things to eat.

Keith and George Inness

When the famous artist George Inness visited San Francisco in 1891, he made Keith's acquaintance, and the two artists were drawn together by many mutual interests. Both were members of the Swedenborgian Church, had been born in Scotland, and had started out as wood engravers. Their impressionistic style of painting was also somewhat similar. Inness was anxious to paint Yosemite scenery, but when Keith accompanied him there, Inness after making a number of sketches gave up in despair with the remark, "It cannot be done." In this respect Keith surpassed him, because he had interpreted the Yosemite scenery in his paintings with comparative ease and success.

Keith's Second Marriage

One of the tragedies of Keith's life was the death of his wife, Elizabeth, in the winter of 1881-82. His daughter Tennie was 14 and his son Charles 17.

In June 1883, being desperately lonely, he married Miss Mary McHenry, daughter of Judge McHenry of San Francisco. In October of that year the Keiths went to Munich, Germany, where Keith studied portrait painting under Carl Marr.

Although Mrs. Keith had passed the bar examination and was ready

to take up the practice of law when she married Keith, she gave up her career and was a devoted wife.

Keith's Paintings Lost in San Francisco Fire

The San Francisco earthquake and fire of April 17, 1906, destroyed Keith's studio and all but 25 of his 2,000 paintings, valued at one-half million dollars. The 25 paintings were rescued by Keith's friend, Rev. Joseph Worcester. Undaunted by the loss, Keith painted more furiously than ever, and in 1907, his income was around $100,000 per year. Previous to the fire it had been about $60,000.

Keith passed away on April 10, 1911. At one time he had told his friend, Rev. Joseph Worcester, that if he was ever called upon to officiate at his funeral he wanted no personal tribute made to him. Rev. Worcester kept his promise to Keith and when officiating at Keith's funeral he quoted Keith's own words to him: "The quality of a man's life is in its spirit or motive, and there is only One who knows that."

In personal appearance Keith commanded attention. In his youth he had an abundance of black hair; in old age it was still heavy and iron gray. His eyes were large, vivacious, and violet blue, his features strong. He was muscular in physique and of medium height. With his money he was generous and he was ever ready to give an aspiring, struggling artist encouragement and help.

Keith's paintings were very popular in his day and are still exhibited in the leading art galleries of California, including the University of California and Stanford University. St. Mary's College has a large exhibition of his paintings. They are also exhibited in the Metropolitan Museum of New York, in the Boston Museum of Art, and in the Corcoran and National Galleries of Washington, D. C., and abroad.

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(**Note**—The major portion of the above material was obtained from "Keith—Old Master of California," by Brother Cornelius, published by G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, in 1942. Brother Cornelius for practically 10 years, actually relived Keith's life. To read this book is to know Keith.)

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GRIZZLY GIANT RESPONDS TO PROTECTION

By Ralph H. Anderson, Park Photographer

The gnarled old Grizzly Giant has lived an eventful life! For 35 centuries or more, forest fires have swept through the Mariposa Grove of Big Trees at fairly regular intervals, gnawing at the base of this grand old tree. Blazing sugar pines have toppled against its magnificent red trunk, and left gaping wounds in its sapwood. Torrential rains, hurricanes and heavy winter snows have only strengthened the tree's determination to live.

Studies of cross sections of fallen Giant Sequoias show that about three times every century, fires covered the area. Apparently, it required about 30 years for the underbrush to become thick enough to support a sizable lightning-caused fire which inevitably followed. Then there would follow a period when the trees could at least start healing their wounds, while the brush and young tree growth gradually came in again.

But despite fires, windstorm and heavy snows, the Grizzly lived on. In 1710, according to tree ring studies, there was a widespread fire in the Mariposa Grove, and another comparatively big fire occurred in 1860—three years after Galen Clark explored the grove and made it known to the world.

Throughout the eighties and nineties, small groups of thrilled visitors went through the grove and paused under the Grizzly Giant, one of the focal points in the grove. Stagecoaches with six-horse teams rumbled close to the big trunk, 30 feet across at the base, little realizing that they were trampling the soil that supported the broad root structure now known to extend as far as 300 feet from the tree, with thousands of feeder roots close to the surface of the ground.

In 1903 President Theodore Roosevelt came for a three-day respite from the affairs of State. The President chose to camp out under the great old tree with John Muir, Charles Leidig and Archie Leonard. The latter two were rangers in the park at that time.

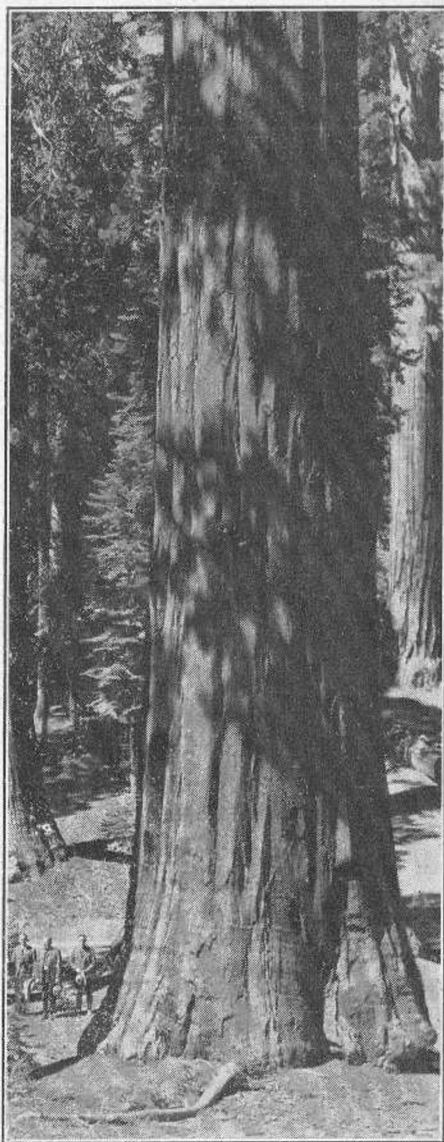
The following year, the State High-

way Commissioner reported that the Grizzly leaned 18 feet from the center axis, and was doomed unless immediate steps were taken to prevent its fall. Various suggestions were advanced for saving the tree by means of cables, etc.

Years rolled on, but suggestions for cable support must have recurred from time to time. In 1923, Superintendent W. B. Lewis answered these suggestions, stating that the weight of 3700 tons was too great to support, and that little could be done to prop such a tonnage. In 1935 a careful study was made by engineers and the lean of the Grizzly Giant was accurately determined to be approximately 18 feet.

Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of Big Trees were re-ceded back to the Federal Government in 1906 to become incorporated into the larger adjoining Yosemite National Park. As soon as the troops arrived to administer the Mariposa Grove, there were naturally improvements to be made over that of the former State administration. In addition, something had to be done to protect the great old tree—to prevent the further carving of initials on its base.

In 1911 many of the tree's roots were exposed from the trampling of horses and visitors, and dirt was hauled in to cover the exposed roots. The next year, a high wire fence was erected with evenly spaced iron posts set deep into the roots of the Giant. (It is recalled by oldtimers that some controversy arose when a visitor saw the workmen digging a hole through a large piece of wood, reported to have been fir.) Carving of initials was undoubtedly discouraged, and the tree seemed to suffer no apparent ill effects from the harsh root treatment.



A Giant Sequoia - Mariposa Grove

In 1925 the road was moved farther north so that the edge of the road would be about 30 feet from the base of the tree. Large roots of the Grizzly had been cut through to make the road possible, but in consideration for the tree, a great deal of extra earth filling was placed around the base.

Some time after the National Park Service replaced the Army administrators the unsightly wire fence was removed, and in its place more holes were dug deep and at regular intervals, and heavy Sequoia-wood posts were set. Signs on the posts read "Do Not Enter This Circle." Later on, a chain was suspended from post to post making a more obvious barricade.

By 1930 it was apparent that the chain suspended from sequoia posts was not completely protecting the tree from occasional initial carvers. The posts were removed and an extensive planting program was inaugurated. Large quantities of azaleas, ceanothus and manzanita were planted and watered. Between the newly planted shrubs were driven iron stakes in an over-all pattern, and long enough to reach many of the Grizzly's roots. Barbed wire was strung loosely over the entire area.

The following summer, most of the planting died from lack of water, but during the fall and the following season, many more shrubs were planted and a good watering system was installed. In 1932, the road was moved away from the base of the tree entirely, to a location several hundred feet to the south. The old road was filled in and obliterated.

For five years no further steps were taken to protect the Grizzly Giant. In 1938 the paths were relocated under the CCC program, and many more shrubs were planted in deep holes among the tree's roots. Log railings were installed to keep visitors from approaching the tree too closely. The barbed wire, long such an eye sore, was removed and the underbrush was restored as much as possible.

Vegetation around the base of the Grizzly Giant is now well established. Young trees are growing rapidly, and the mat of ceanothus and manzanita is becoming more dense each year. Watering of the shrubbery is probably responsible for the greatly improved top of the old tree. The foliage of the Grizzly Giant is much more dense and luxuriant than it was when Watkins tied up his string of pack mules in 1858 or '59, and made the first known photograph of a Giant Sequoia tree.

Comparing the photographs of that day and this, the only difference seems to be in the improved condition of its top. The relatively poor condition of the foliage noted in early photos may have been the result of repeated fires.

After all, it has been less than a hundred years that white men have paid homage to the Grizzly Giant— less than a century out of more than thirty centuries of rugged living. How can we measure the value of our protective system?

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http://www.yosemite.ca.us/library

Dan Anderson