

# YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES

VOL. XXVI

AUGUST, 1947

No. 8



Ranger Naturalists at Work

# Yosemite Nature Notes

THE MONTHLY PUBLICATION OF  
THE YOSEMITE NATURALIST DEPARTMENT  
AND THE YOSEMITE NATURAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION

F. A. Kittredge, Superintendent

D. E. McHenry, Park Naturalist

H. C. Parker, Assoc. Park Naturalist

H. B. Robinson, Asst. Park Naturalist

---

VOL. XXVI

AUGUST, 1947

NO. 8

---

## THE INTERPRETIVE PROGRAM IN YOSEMITE — TODAY AND TOMORROW

By Donald Edward McHenry, Park Naturalist

Public confidence in the value of the interpretive program in Yosemite National Park has grown throughout the years. Many dedicated men have made significant contributions towards bringing this about. However, during World War II, the interpretive personnel was reduced to the bare minimum judged necessary to play a holding part and to serve visiting groups, made up for the most part of members of the armed forces.

We have been eager for the return of peace time travel and its challenge, since funds were received too late to make an effective start in 1946. This, 1947, would be the year when we would return to the "normal" program of interpretation. Now the seven day, naturalist-conducted hikes would be resumed. Many a potential future naturalist was looking forward to the resumption of the Yosemite School of Field Natural History. Once more the youngsters could

plan to participate in the Junior Nature School. Now we could offer a full program of ranger naturalist services to the visiting public—walks, talks, demonstrations.

But the war years and changing circumstances have taken their toll. Associate Park Naturalist Harry C. Parker is the only staff member remaining from the prewar period, hence the necessity for almost complete rebuilding of the naturalist staff. The total numerical strength of the staff is precisely the same as in 1939 but the forty hour week has reduced its effectiveness by about one-third. In addition, the budget is approximately the same as in 1941, the last "normal" year before the war, except that the dollar is not worth so much. But summer travel in Yosemite is 34% above that of 1941!

It is obvious that under such circumstances the hopes and aspirations for a return to "normal" had to undergo serious modification. The in-

terpretive program has had to be reduced to the simplest terms. In the Valley, it now consists of museum service, one conducted nature walk each weekday morning, a campfire program at Camp 14 weekday evenings, a five minute naturalist talk at the Camp Curry evening programs and one evening talk at Yosemite Lodge and the Ahwahnee Hotel each week. The Camp Curry talks are contributed by the staff on their own time. Because of the reduced work week, and in order to offer evening programs there, two men each have been assigned to the outpost stations at Glacier Point, the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias and at Tuolumne Meadows.

Visitor attendance in the park has so greatly increased that its impact upon the interpretive program as well as other park activities demands re-consideration of methods and approach. One of the traditional and unique qualities of the interpretive services in the past has been the high degree of personal guidance which has been given to park visitors. With the greatly increased visitation it has now become a problem to retain some of the original personalized services. We are faced with a problem of "mass production" which will have to assume some of the aspects of "cafeteria" service.

Although we wish to offer as many personally conducted walks as possible, it appears that some of those carried on in former years will gradually be replaced by the services of roving naturalists stationed at points of visitor concentration, enabling

them to serve the greater number of people. Thus, instead of a regularly scheduled tree walk for comparatively few people, a roving naturalist may be stationed where he will informally contact many more persons and there gather together many groups to answer questions on trees or even conduct a number of impromptu tree walks throughout the day. The roving naturalist service initiated at Glacier Point this season is working well, and a small beginning has been made in the Valley. It is eventually hoped that roving naturalists may be stationed along trails leading up the Valley walls, at overlook points and the like. Further development of this technique will proceed if money becomes available.

Another interpretive device which has recently been inaugurated in Yosemite is the twilight recorded concert of classical music during the half hour preceeding the campfire program in Camp 14 amphitheater. The writer, having had some unique experiences whereby he has made lasting associations with good music in beautiful park areas, believes that visitors will be able to relive the emotional and aesthetic experiences they enjoyed in the park whenever and wherever they hear that music played again. This is a type of interpretation which we believe commends further exploration. This type of interpretation must be undertaken with considerable skill both in selection, method of presentation and quality of physical equipment employed.

(Continued in Next Issue)

**A DRAMATIC FOOTNOTE TO YOSEMITE'S HISTORY****By Frank Purcell**

**Editor's Note:** This article was contributed through the kindness of Hon. Julian H. Alco, Member of the State Board of Prison Directors, by his friend, Frank Purcell.

There is written somewhere in the rich and moving history of California, between the years 1923 and 1928, a footnote that only the impenetrable jesting of Fate could have created. It can be only a footnote, for the known facts are few and the principals must remain in the folds of anonymity. The circumstances are strange and intricate, almost unbelievable. But they hold the key to the saving of a man's life, the building of a hospital, and, curiously, the intangible element which along with dirt and concrete and toil went into the construction of the beautiful All-year Highway leading into Yosemite National Park.

Like all good stories, the drama written by Nature to puzzle the fictionists of the future is best told in the simple chronology of its development. It begins in 1916, before the world was plunged into its first great war. It begins in a prison, and, like most new ventures, as an experiment. It begins with the innovation of the first prison road camp, an experiment providing for the assignment of trusted inmates to labor camps set up along the unimproved highways of California. Each morning the men would go to work on highway repairs; each night they would return to their camps. But the plan failed through lack of directed supervision and co-ordination of State agencies. The camps were abandoned.

But failure was not permitted to remain failure. In 1923 a new force appeared to bring together the shreds of the experiment and scan them with the eyes of a planner. This was Julian H. Alco, even then a dynamic figure in the affairs of California's prison system and now a member of the State Board of Prison Directors. He saw beyond the unplanned efforts of 1916—the prisoners idle in the state institutions, the roads that needed building, the opportunities awaiting only the fusion of the ends. In one vision, he could see men freed from confinement for gainful, health-restoring work; in another, he could see the beauties of California opened up by highways and made available to all; in still another, he could see families made whole and happy as husbands and fathers worked their way back to citizenship; and at other times, he would see the rich resources of the great empire that is California under constant protection by virtue of the arteries that would criss-cross her to her various depths.

But, at this time, in 1923, he concerned himself with only the start of his great vision, the section of the highway that bored into the loveliness of Yosemite, the national park almost in the center between the North and South of California and deep in the heart of the tumbling Sierra Nevada.

Julian H. Alco took his plan before

the State Legislature that year and by dint of his singular persuasiveness saw it enacted into law under the title of Assembly Bill No. 1366. After it was passed and duly signed with ceremonies in the Governor's office in Sacramento, the bill's title was promptly forgotten and the great project became known as the Alco Plan, representing one of the few times that the sponsor has been given richly deserved recognition for a merit-laden program.

Like all such undertaking, the Alco Plan is founded on a solid basis of

simplicity. It is a practical demonstration of trust in the inherent goodness of men, an implementation of the principle that men will make good if given a chance. Julian H. Alco believed in that principle and set out to prove it to a state. His plan, now law, provided for the establishment of proper camps for housing and feeding "prisoners-at-large," adequate compensation for the men, regular hours of work, the necessary protective supervision without the binding restrictions of imprisonment, and development of individual re-



*Convict Labor Camp at Briceburg*

*Photo courtesy Hon. J. H. Alco.*



*Convicts in Their Mess Hall on the All-year Highway Project*

*Photo courtesy Hon. J. H. Alco.*

sponsibility without which man shrivels.

All without cost to the taxpayers!

That is the way the prologue prepared for the dramatic sequence of events which was to unfold as the first road camp consignment of trusted prisoners went out from the walls of San Quentin Prison to establish the State's first successful road camp at Briceburg on the tumbling Merced River, a swift current that races out of the wooded hills of Yosemite.

There were 250 prisoners assigned to the first camp, 250 men of varying types and backgrounds and records. The work was slow at first for the men had softened over the months and the years behind the white walls of the penitentiary, and the work was hard and the sun was hot. But progress was shown, for willingness took the place of softness and as the days passed the tempo of the toil increased. The stretch that was to be the highway along the banks of the winding stream, through the natural

beauties of a forested state, soon was leveled. Then foundation was laid and ridges rounded off and shoulders made firm. Each day added inches and then feet to the road and the working crews moved ahead.

Out of Merced, linked to the other cities of the state by the principal coastwise artery, Highway No. 99, the road into Yosemite began to stretch. Past Briceburg on the river, it extended into Bloss, and in November, 1925—two years after the Alco Plan came into being—the camp was moved. By this time, new workers were taking the place of old as prisoners reached the end of their incarceration and were released. Still the work went on. Then, two years later, in 1927, the camp was set up at Midpines and the course of the Merced River, racing toward the sea, had a companion in the route of the Yosemite highway.

With dramatic suddenness, the personal element which is the epitome of drama entered the records of road building in California. Already the new project was attracting visitors who wanted to see, tourists who were bound for the mountains and the camp sites. It was a lumber foreman who took the center of the stage. He was stricken with appendicitis. It was as simple as that, but the consequences threatened tragedy.

No doctor could be found! Emergency calls were dispatched to nearby communities. No doctors.

Move the patient? Impossible.

Calls to more distant towns were unavailing. It was in the middle of winter; no doctors could be reached.

The lumberman lay on his cot in the firelight. He was writhing in agony that overwhelms a body at the danger point of dread ailment. There was nothing to be done.

Then out of a nickname was born inspiration. Could the road camp inmate they called "Doc" really be a doctor? If so, could he do anything now?

Yes, he was a doctor. Yes, he was serving time. The lumberman's properties were in the back country and it was necessary for the doctor and two guides to climb over the mountains on snowshoes to reach the sick man. In due course the doctor arrived and his examination of the patient showed a precarious condition. But, no, he could do nothing, nothing except to ease the patient. Operate? Impossible! There were no facilities. The responsibility of holding a man's life in his hands was tremendous. As a prisoner, there could be legal obstacles. No.

Would the patient survive without an operation? Doubtful.

The patient added his entreaties to those of his camp-mates.

Would the doctor operate?

The prisoner doctor had to make his own decision.

What should he do?

"Do the best you can," the patient begged. "It's my responsibility. Try . . ."

There, buried in the mountain fastness in a commissary shack, in the

dim light of a coaloil lamp, the operation was performed.

Some time later, the patient returned to the prison road camp to see his friend, the prisoner doctor. He handed the inmate a check to express his appreciation.

"You fill it in," the grateful lumberman said.

The doctor demurred.

"But what can I do for you?" the former patient asked. "I've got to do something for you."

"I need some equipment for this camp hospital, such as X-ray machines, modern sterilization, and proper instruments to work with."

The lumberman was only too grateful to meet this need of the Briceburg camp. They had a modern little hospital that was built as the expression of a grateful patient in appreciation for the high, meritorious service and noble effort of the doctor.

The lumberman's appreciation was never forgotten, and he and the prisoner became fast friends throughout the years, even though the doctor remained in confinement.

Not all of the stories that accompany the building and repairing of Highways in California by former prisoners of the State's institutions bear the embellishment of drama, but most ring with the facts of rehabilitation. It was rehabilitation that was in the mind of Julian H. Alco when he pressed for passage of the bill legalizing the road camp system in California and it is that which today is

the trademark upon all roads along which have trod the prison workers.

From the first scenic stretch into Yosemite to the present camps in California's northern mountains and southern hills, the restoration of men to the standards of citizenship is the keynote. It was introduced by Mr. Alco before the State Legislature, was carried into the institutions by him and it was instilled in the state's first camp workers by the early supervisors on the scenic route: W. B. Alberson and R. W. Brown, of the State Department of Highways.

And it has since become the basis for the flourishing cooperation between the State camp system of the Department of Corrections and the Department of Highways which together act as guardians of the project.

The rights of citizenship require honor and prison road camps operate as honor camps. Proof that they succeed is found in the statistics of the records: less than one per cent of the total number of men assigned to the camps have violated the trust that is placed in them.

That the fruit of their success is enjoyed by a state's people is found in the statistics revealing the visitors to Yosemite Park. The Yosemite road—with Merced on Highway 99 as one terminus and the park the other—stands today as California's first monument to man's character and as a testament to the dream Julian H. Alco turned into fact. It is a footnote to the cavalcade of California.



**CHICKAREE HARVESTS GIANT SEQUOIA CONES****By James W. McFarland, Ranger Naturalist**

On the morning of June 30th, a rhythmic "plop, plop" was heard on the ground beneath the Rhode Island Tree just outside the Mariposa Grove Museum. A Sierra Nevada chickaree (***Tamiasciurus douglasii albim-batus***) had cut eight large cones loose from the twigs of this giant sequoia. The next morning, the same squirrel, presumably, cut down 84 cones from the same tree in less than an hour. These were picked up and added to the collection of eight cones of the previous morning. The visitors were interested in the harvest record of our chickaree.

The following morning, we arrived at the Museum with our field glasses and soon saw the chickaree again busily at work harvesting the sequoia cones. In one hour he had cut down 284 cones, making a total of 376 cones in about an hour and a half. At this point he paused, either from exhaustion or to come down and survey his work. However, on arriving at the base of the tree he could find no cones, which meanwhile had been picked up. In bewilderment he looked around and began to circle. After making larger and larger circles and still finding no cones, he sat up on his hind legs and barked his frustration.

The 376 cones remained on display in the Museum for several days. On opening the Museum the morning of July 7th, we caught a chickaree in the act of making off with one of the larger cones of our display. He had

already eaten the greater part of several cones, including the scales. It seems that "our" chickaree had finally found his cones and was caching them away under the furniture in the Museum. He was photographed by one of our visitors as he was let out of the door. Thus it can be seen that all is not always easy even in the life of a squirrel.

---

**CRANE FLAT TRIPLETS****By Eugene A. Drown, Park Ranger**

Triplet cubs have been noted with keen interest by locals on numerous occasions within the past three or four weeks in the vicinity of the garbage dump on the Lookout road near Crane Flat. This is the favored congregating point for the majority of Crane Flat bears of which there are a considerable number.

The mother is a fairly large, sleek, dark brown bear and has shown a very tolerant disposition towards humans thus far. However, she has been observed to drive away at least one male bear a little larger than herself. The cubs are still fairly small, of uniform size and color, being dark brown, similar to their mother. The mother and all three cubs appear to be in excellent condition of health.

Twin cubs were also noted earlier in the season at the same place. The mother of the twins is a large black female. Recently, however, the triplets have taken the "spotlight" although the twins are still here also.



Digitized by  
Yosemite Online Library

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

Dan Anderson