

Yosemite Nature Notes



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Yosemite Nature Notes

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AN OVERLOOKED FACET OF YOSEMITE HISTORY

By Emil F. Ernst, Park Forester

Practically overlooked in historical studies and writings of Yosemite National Park have been the land surveys of this great area. One of these surveys covered portions of the park where the white man had not previously penetrated. This survey, the A. W. Von Schmidt survey of 1855, crossed the tracks of the only two known previous parties, the Walker expedition of 1833 and the Mariposa Battalion trek to Tenaya Lake in pursuit of Chief Tenaya and his band of troublesome Indians.

It then appears that the A. W. Von Schmidt survey party of 1855 was the third organized party to traverse lands in the present park. A contract to survey the Mount Diablo Base Line eastward over the Sierra Nevada Mountains from a point previously established by a Colonel Norris north and east of Oakdale was awarded to A. W. Von Schmidt on May 30, 1855. According to his certified field notes he completed the first portion of his contract, the Mount Diablo Base line portion, on July 7, 1855, at a point south and east of Mono Lake.

Although the contract, as far as known, called for a survey of the Mount Diablo Base Line, the survey as carried out on the park lands of today did not touch the Base Line at any point. The field notes carry the notation "Offset of Mount Diablo

Base Line." The line carried on eastward through the park is approximately 5 miles south of this important survey line.

Von Schmidt actually carried out the survey, a remarkable one for elapsed time in such rough country, for corners fully meeting the descriptions as recorded in the field notes have been found in the field within the past twenty years. Six of these corners were involved in the Carl Inn addition to the park and at least three of these have been seen by the park forester. A peculiar feature of Von Schmidt's survey is the uncommon regularity of trees at the precise point for a corner or quarter corner location. Another of Von Schmidt's corners, which have been found conforming to the field notes, is the southeast corner of the Aspen Valley private lands, at least three more of the corners have been found in the Porcupine Flat area, almost the geographical center of the park. S. A. Hanson, in his field notes for surveys made in 1883 south and east of Tenaya Lake, reports finding and destroying, in accordance with instructions, corners established by Von Schmidt 18 years previously.

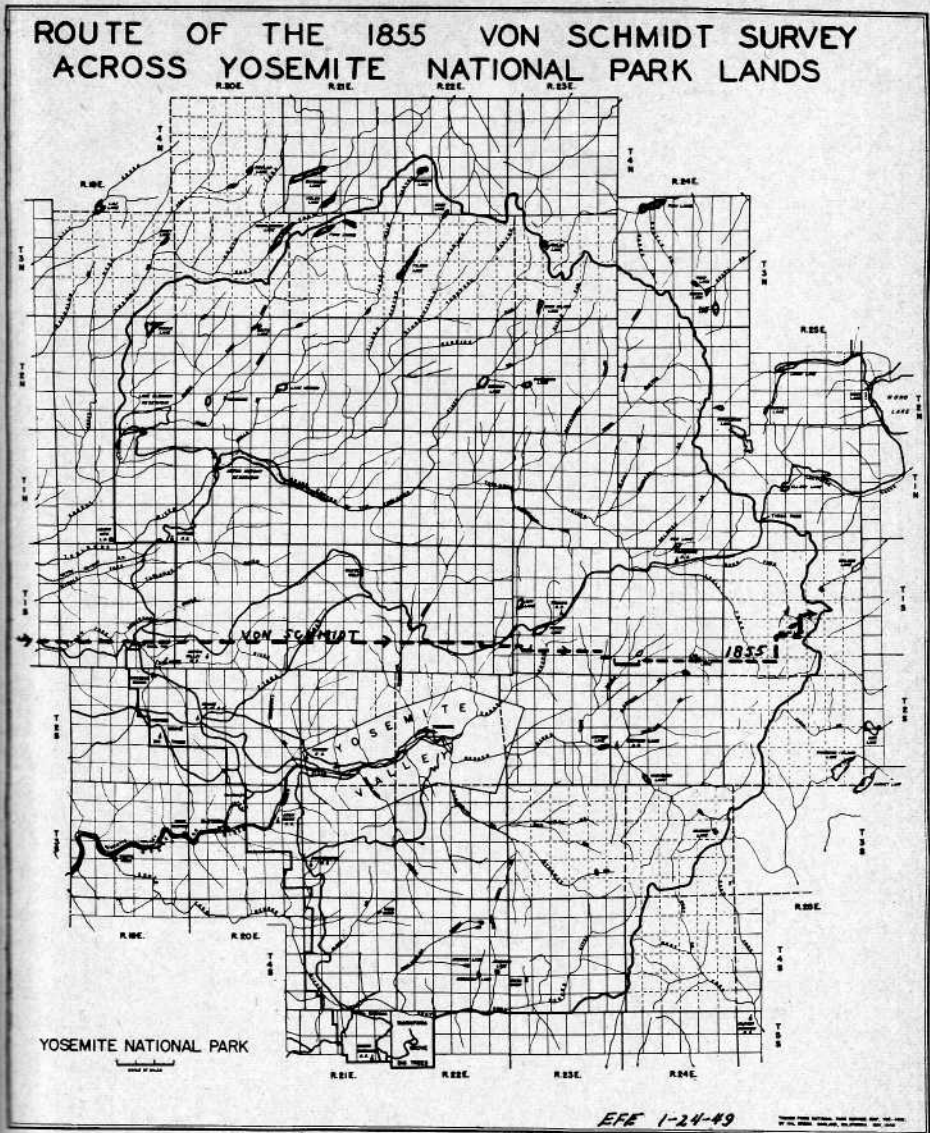
Von Schmidt's party proceeded eastward through the present park on a line passing through points approximately one-half mile north of Carl Inn, one-half mile south of Aspen

Valley Lodge, a half mile south of the present Tioga Road crossing of Yosemite Creek, a half mile north of the present Tioga Road crossing of Porcupine Creek, a mile south of Tenaya Lake, through Tuolumne Pass and north of Fletcher Lake, just south of Evelyn Lake, and then dropped into the Lyell Fork of the Tuolumne about a mile south of Potter Point. Twice Von Schmidt made wrong guesses on streams, calling one branch of the Merced River and one branch of the Tuolumne River branches of the San Joaquin River. The party apparently had difficulty getting up eastward over Kuna Crest for the offsets become numerous. It also appears that the party passed about a quarter of a mile south of Helen Lake on Kuna Crest and then turned north to skirt the east shore of this same lake. Von Schmidt described it as a fine lake with water as cold as ice. Our copies of the Von Schmidt field notes in the Yosemite area end just west of Parker Pass on the eastern boundary of the park. The Base Line portion of the survey continued on eastward to finally end on July 7, 1855, south and east of Mono Lake.

The Von Schmidt party must have been a very well organized one for it covered at least 120 miles of surveyed line in less than eight weeks from the date of the contract. This line crossed some very rough mountainous country including the summit of the Sierra Nevada with elevations varying thousands of feet in less than a mile many times in relatively short distances. Numerous offsets had to be made to get around impassable cliffs. Had Von Schmidt surveyed the Base Line itself the fast time shown by his party would have been impossible. West of the park long portions of the Base Line are in the canyon of the Tuolumne River and the offset line followed by

Von Schmidt may have been caused by encountering the Tuolumne Canyon west of the park line. The party must have camped at whatever point the approaching night found them. Reference is made to deep snow in the vicinity of Evelyn Lake which is not surprising for apparently the party crossed this point late in June and oftentimes snows are persistent here until well into July.

Recently a photostatic copy of the 1855 Von Schmidt survey contract has been received from The National Archives. The question why Von Schmidt and his party ran across the park lands not on the Base Line itself but on a line averaging a parallel 5 miles south of the Base Line is answered. The first of the survey contract instructions read as follows: "1st, run, measure and mark, all the lines necessary to extend the Mount Diablo Base Line from its present termination at the end of the third mile in Range Eleven East, to a point near the State line and not beyond Range thirty, East." All that Von Schmidt had to do was to establish a point on the Mt. Diablo Base Line somewhere near the California state line and approximately 180 miles east of the initial point on Mt. Diablo. How he arrived at this point was left to his discretion and the difficulties that he would encounter. The fact that very little was known at the time of the full nature of the Sierra Nevada, particularly the summits in the Yosemite region should be taken into consideration. It was very well known, however, that the Yosemite summits were high and rugged because probings of the Sierra Nevada system by the emigrant and gold seeking parties that had been coming into the state since 1846 had found the lower and more practical passes far to the north and to the south. Therefore Von Schmidt naturally followed the line of least



resistance since he was not obligated to remain right on the easterly prolongation of the Base Line from the point to which it had been previously surveyed. On the average, as far as the lands traversed in the park are concerned. Von Schmidt picked as easy a line route as it is possible to do even with more knowledge of the areas than Von Schmidt could have had at the time. Was it luck or just ability on the part of the party chief?

The only known signs of man, red or white, existing in the central part of the park at that time were the two branches of the Mono trail which came together in Tuolumne Meadows. The Von Schmidt party crossed the northern branch near Porcupine Flat and the southern branch in Long Meadow.

The Von Schmidt party was made up as follows: A. W. Von Schmidt, party chief; William N. Plater, chair-

man; R. S. Redmond, chainman; S. J. Lynch, axeman; and Clement Cox, compassman. It can be surmised that at least one other person was in the party, a packer or packer-cook. From the time the party left the gold camps in the vicinity of Big Oak Flat until the Mono Lake area was reached no source of sup-

plies other than these existed. Undoubtedly the game encountered supplied the meat needed by men doing such arduous and dangerous work. It would be interesting to bring to light, if such exist, any personal notes or diaries of Von Schmidt or the other men of the party that traversed the park in 1855.

A NOTE ON THE SQUIRRELS OF YOSEMITE

By Fraser Poole, Field School, 1948

Among the mammals most commonly observed in Yosemite National Park are the squirrels. With this in mind the following brief account of the various species found within the park boundaries may be of interest to our readers. Excepting the marmots and chipmunks the squirrels of Yosemite fall into three groups: the ground squirrels¹, the tree squirrels² and the flying squirrel³.

Most ubiquitous of all, and the one squirrel which almost every visitor to the park sees at some time during his stay, is the California ground squirrel, also known as the Sierra ground squirrel⁴. Not content with foraging for native foods, which include various kinds of seeds, fruits, acorns and roots, it has also learned to depend on the many campers who frequent the park and loses no time in helping itself to whatever particles of food may be left unguarded. The author once lost an entire loaf of bread, pilfered slice by slice by a California ground squirrel. Elsewhere in the state this rodent does no inconsiderable damage to crops, orchards and irrigation canals. In the park, damage seems to be mainly limited to their petty thefts

of campers' food supplies. The California ground squirrel is easily distinguished from any but the gray squirrel by his large size and from the latter by the white patches on the back of the head and shoulders and the white flecked fur.

Most brilliantly colored of the ground squirrels, although smaller and less frequently seen, is the golden-mantled ground squirrel⁵. Half as large as the California ground squirrel, this species is characterized by a yellow or coppery head and neck and by the presence of two light stripes along its sides each bordered on either side by a dark stripe. Chipmunks in contrast⁶ have four stripes instead of two and have striped faces.

The golden-mantled ground squirrel is neither so abundant nor so widely distributed as the California ground squirrel, being restricted to the Canadian and Hudsonian life zones. The author recently was amazed to see a single individual of this species on the bare granite top of Half Dome. Vegetation in this area is scarce and we may surmise that his food supply was eked out by contributions from the lunches of the many hikers who make the trip to the top. Later in the same day an-

1. genus *Citellus*

2. genera *Sciurus* and *Tamiasciurus*

3. genus *Glaucomys*

6. "Chipmunks of the Yosemite Region" by Brittan in **Yosemite Nature Notes**, Vol. XVII, No. 7, July, 1948.

4. *Citellus beecheyi sierrae* in Yosemite.

5. *Citellus lateralis chrysoideus*

other individual was seen running rapidly up the steep granite face of Half Dome near the cable line. The golden-mantled ground squirrel is common at Glacier Point where numerous individuals may be seen consorting with the chipmunks.

Less distinctive in coloration but fully as interesting is the Belding ground squirrel⁷ which is resident chiefly in the grassy valleys of the higher mountains as in the Tuolumne Meadows area. Here it may be seen foraging in the meadow or, when disturbed, running toward the mouth of its burrow where it stands erect with front paws pressed against its sides. It is this attitude which has earned it the common name of picket pin.

Yosemite has two species of tree squirrels. Most commonly seen is the Western gray squirrel⁸. This species is strictly arboreal and frequents areas where the California black oak⁹ and the canyon live oak¹⁰ furnish both shelter and food. Although common on the floor of the Valley it is larger than any other squirrel in the park and even the casual observer will note the ab-



7. *Citellus beldingi*

8. *Sciurus g. griseus*

9. *Quercus kelloggii*

10. *Quercus chrysolepis*

11. Sierra Nevada Chickaree, *Tamiasciurus douglasi* *albolimbatus*, is the Yosemite form.

sence of white flecks in the fur and the lack of white shoulder patches which characterize the California ground squirrel.

The other tree squirrel is the Douglas squirrel or chickaree¹¹ which is



resident in the coniferous forests of the park in the Canadian and Hudsonian zones where it ranges up to timberline. Even more truly tree dwelling than its larger relatives, the Douglas squirrel is recognized by its small size, the distinct white eye ring and its grizzled fur and white underparts. The principal food of this species consists of seeds of the various conifers. Those of the white fir¹², the sugar¹³ and jeffrey pines¹⁴ and the giant sequoias¹⁵ are especially relished. Up and about by daylight this squirrel works rapidly cutting off the cones in the very tops of these trees. After several cones have been felled the squirrel comes to the ground to survey his work. If hungry he may haul a cone to some protected spot and proceed to tear off the scales in order that he may get at the seeds. If already filled, or if he has harvested more than will fill his im-

12. *Abies concolor*

13. *Pinus lambertiana*

14. *Pinus jeffreyi*

15. *Sequoia gigantea*

mediate needs, he proceeds to cache the rest in some secluded spot in the area.

Last in the list of the Yosemite squirrels is the gracefully beautiful Sierra Nevada flying squirrel¹⁶. Though seen much less frequently than any of the other species because of its small size and nocturnal habits, it is not uncommon. Resident in the Transition and Canadian

zones of the park, it is recognized by its soft gray fur which is much lighter on the underside. Between the front and back legs on either side extends a fur covered membrane which gives it the ability to glide long distances through the air. It cannot, of course, actually fly but gliding from a high perch to a lower one it covers much greater distances than it could jump.

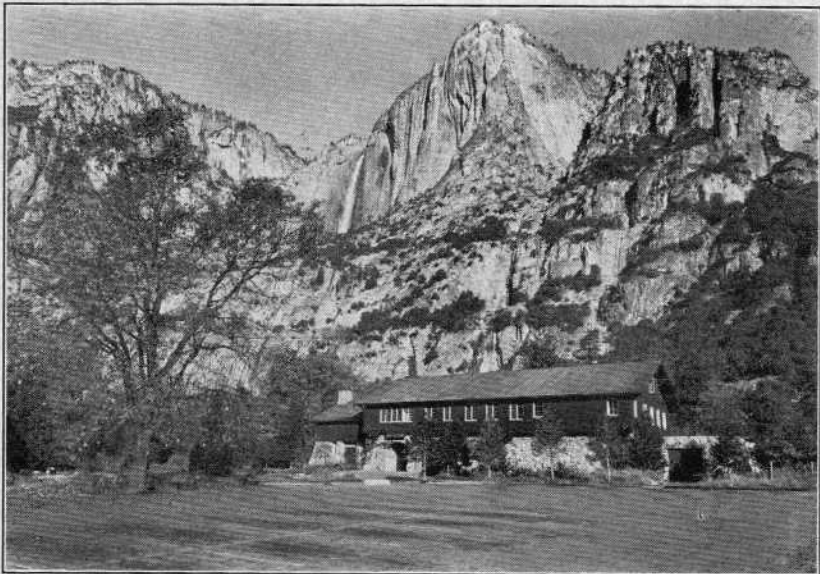
TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO (No. 3)

By Carl P. Russell, Park Superintendent

On an April day in 1924 a message came to Superintendent W. B. Lewis announcing that the American Association of Museums had obtained \$50,000 with which to build a museum in Yosemite Valley. The significance of this news had hardly dawned upon those who were closest to the dreamed-of project when further word was received that the gift would be \$75,500, to be used for construction, equipment, and maintenance over a three-year period.

In a day when park museums

rated nothing in the way of regular government appropriations other than the salaries of a park naturalist and a few ranger-naturalists, this private donation seemed generous, indeed. It came as a result of Ansel Hall's campaign of 1921-1922 to enlist interest in the educational opportunities in Yosemite National Park. A key to the story is to be found in Francis Farquhar's article, "First Ascent of the Middle Palisade," **Sierra Club Bulletin**, Vol. XI, No. 3 (1922), p. 269. Mr. Farquhar



says nothing about park museum aspirations in his interesting account of the pioneer climb, in the company of Ansel Hall, but he tells of how he and Hall after making the ascent on August 26, 1921, dropped down to the lakes at the head of Palisade Creek. There they encountered a party of mountaineers headed by Mr. Chauncey J. Hamlin who was investigating the unfinished parts of the John Muir Trail.

In camp here Mr. Hall took opportunity to expound upon the importance of helping Americans to understand and appreciate their national parks. He also told of his plans for a park museum in the popular Yosemite Valley. His words fell upon discerning ears; Mr. Hamlin was a museum man.

In 1922 the Yosemite Museum Association was organized. This was the forerunner of the present Yosemite Natural History Association. As a first step toward something concrete, Mr. Hall enlisted the help of Herbert Maier, at present Associate Regional Director, National Park Service, Region Four, in the preparation of preliminary plans and a perspective drawing, in color, of the proposed Yosemite Museum. Thereupon a drive was made for funds. Mrs. Lora J. Knight of Santa Barbara made the first substantial donation, a gift of \$5,000, so giving impetus to the building fund program. The Yosemite National Park Co. gave \$1,794.50 to the Association and other lesser contributions were obtained until some \$9,000 was in the stewardship of the Yosemite Museum Association.

Mr. Hamlin in the meantime had not forgotten his campfire visit with a Yosemite ranger under the Middle Palisade. As President of the American Association of Museums he approached Dr. Beardsley Ruml, Presi-

dent of the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial, with a plea for support to be given to the National Park Service museum program. Perhaps because some California people had evidenced their interest by contributing to the Yosemite Museum Association, the Yosemite Museum project was designated by Dr. Ruml and his board as the place of beginning. The favorable action of the board resulted in the gift referred to in the opening paragraph of this article—a gift which launched the Service-wide program which today embraces more than one hundred park museums.

It is interesting to record Mr. Hall's personal statement regarding some of the history sketched above. In a letter of March 3, 1949, he writes:

"From the time of my meeting with Hamlin party on Palisade Creek I corresponded very frequently with the Hamlins. We had a grand plan to spend some six months together in Europe on the waterways of France, Belgium, Holland, and Germany. Mr. Hamlin purchased canoes and other equipment but the plan had to be abandoned because his affairs would not permit him to be away for so long a period. Mr. and Mrs. Hamlin did, however, make a hurried trip through Europe by automobile in the winter of 1922. They left their car in storage in England where it was available to their son, Chan Hamlin, and me when we started our European tour in the autumn of 1923. You will recall that Mr. Hamlin very generously arranged for me to officially represent the American Association of Museums at the time that I spent approximately a year studying museums, outdoor educational subjects, etc., in Europe, North Africa, and a portion of the Near East.

"At the time of my departure from

Yosemite in August, 1923, I took the preliminary plans and colored sketches for the proposed Yosemite Museum with me. I had already written to Mr. Hamlin frequently about the development of the interpretive facilities in Yosemite but I had not told him about building plans until my arrival in Buffalo. When he did see them he immediately expressed keen interest. He was at that time President of the recently revived American Association of Museums. The outcome of this meeting was the adoption of the Yosemite Museum building project as the first substantial 'cause' to be sponsored and given moral support by the Association of Museums. I

was, of course, delighted to leave the preliminary plans and Herb Maier's perspective sketch, in color, with Mr. Hamlin. While we were on the high seas returning to this country in the autumn of 1924, I received a wireless from Mr. Hamlin bearing the good news that the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial had appropriated the remainder of funds needed to complete the Yosemite Museum Building. The story of how Mr. Hamlin successfully presented the project to the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial for support is already familiar to you."

In a future article a brief account of the development of the Yosemite Museum program will be given.

THE SNOW PLANT*

By Dr. Willis Linn Jepson

Of all rarities in the park no other plant excites so much interest, perhaps, as the snow plant. It is a very Mephistopheles amongst plants, and its dazzling red color has exercised a strange and almost weird fascination upon the popular mind. The whole plant—flowers, bracts and stems alike—is of a bloody red hue. It springs up from the leafy mould of the forest floor and (as the police judge would say) is without obvious means of support, since it has no chlorophyll, no green leaves, to manufacture its own food as other plants must do.

While called a parasite **it is not such** and does not draw its sustenance from the living tissues of another plant. It is a **saprophyte**—that is, it lives on dead decaying vegetable matter. Its stems rise from an underground, very much involved, interlaced and compact mass

of coralline roots which gather up its food materials. One, two, three, or four stems rise from this root mass, or sometimes a cluster of a dozen. I have even found as many as sixteen.

The snow plant has nothing to do with the snow any more than many other Sierra plants which come up after the snow or snow banks have disappeared. Probably the snow plant has never been seen rising from the winter snow. After the stems start up through the layer of pine needles or forest mould and after the stem is once above the ground a light snowfall may come and the blood-red stems may thus appear to have risen through this virgin snowfall. In this way, most likely, the name snow plant originated. A near relative is the pine drops, a red-brown plant with a slender stem 1 to 2 feet high which is common beneath the yellow pines.

***Editor's Note:** Written by the famous botanist, now deceased. This article was posted in Yosemite Valley May 9, 1920.



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Dan Anderson