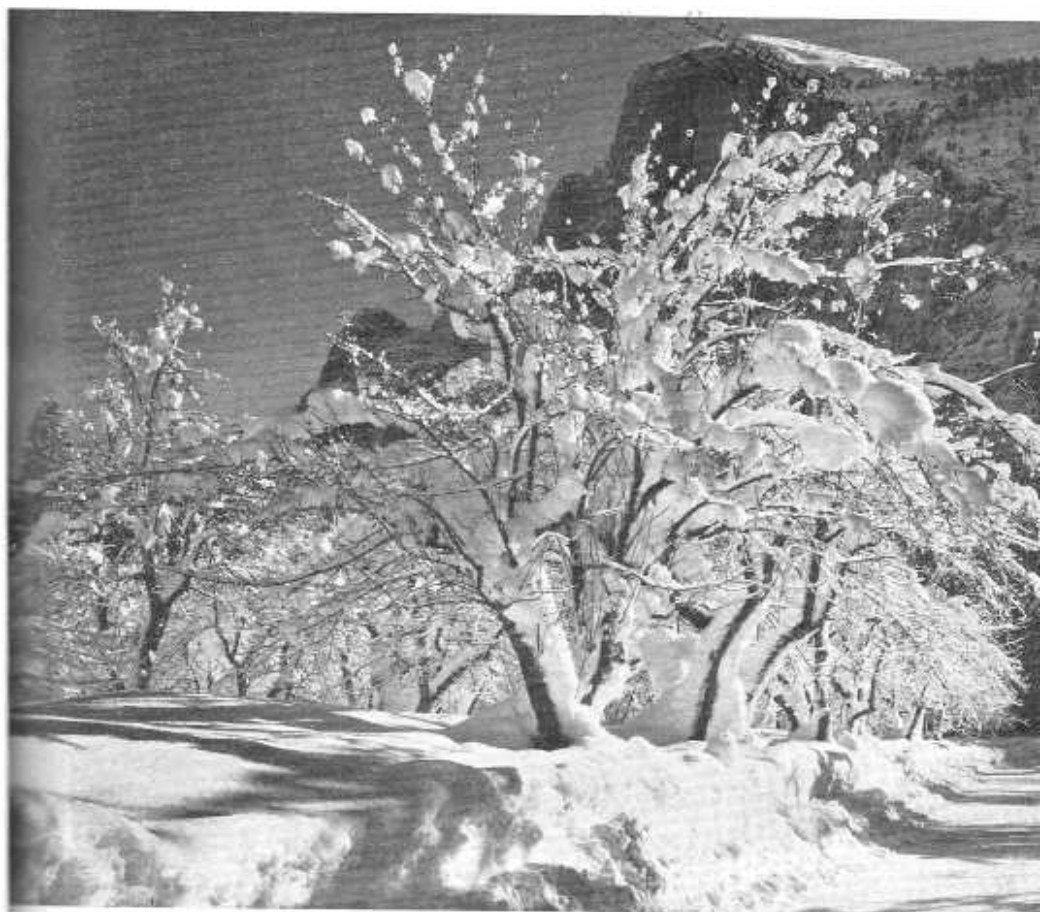


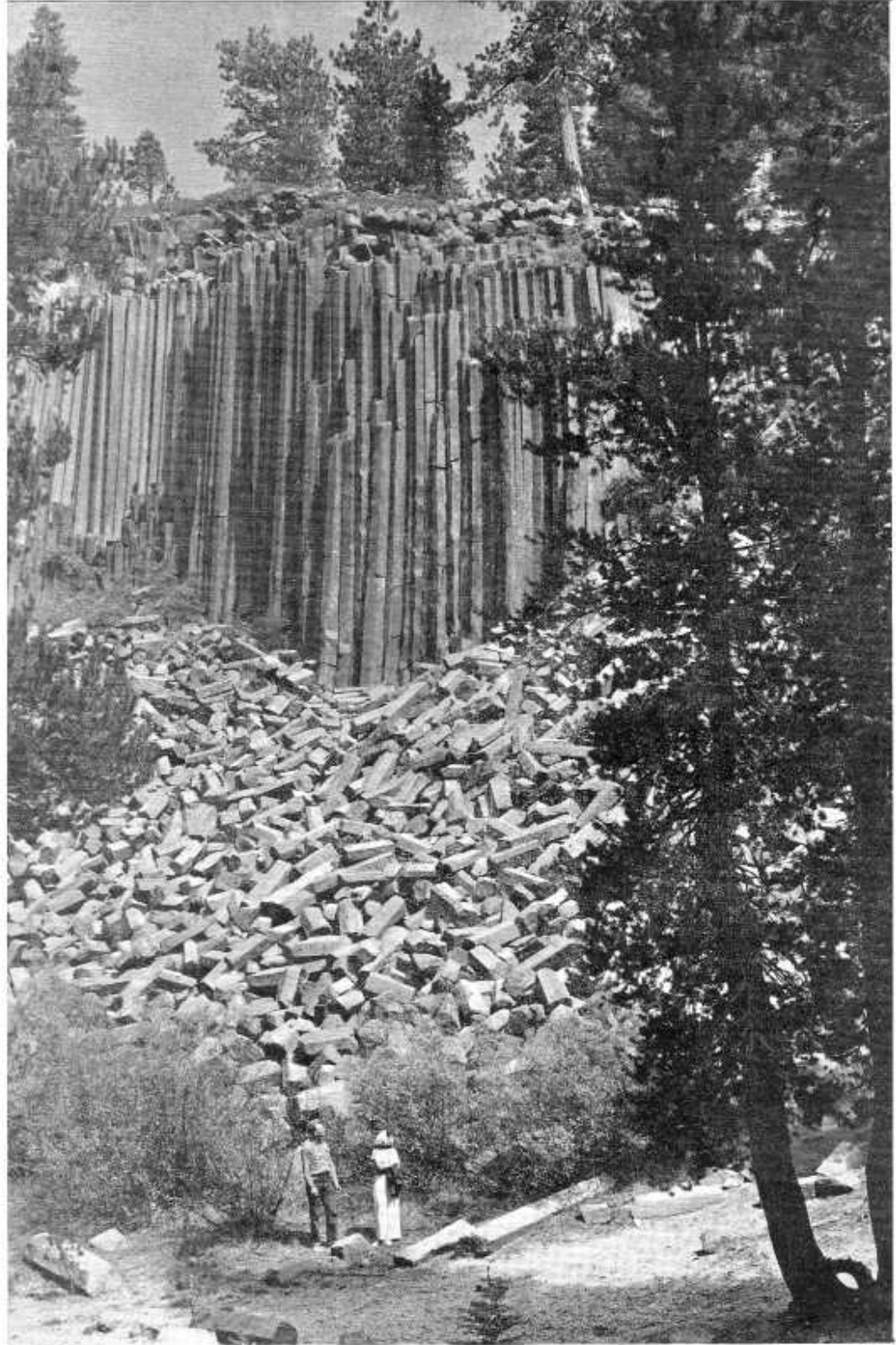
# YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES

VOLUME XXXIII

JANUARY 1934



*Apple orchard in Yosemite Valley, winter  
—Ansel Adams*



Visitors in Devils Postpile National Monument

*Anderson*

# Yosemite Nature Notes

THE MONTHLY PUBLICATION OF

THE YOSEMITE NATURALIST DIVISION AND

THE YOSEMITE NATURAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION, INC.

John C. Preston, Superintendent

D. E. McHenry, Park Naturalist

D. H. Hubbard, Assoc. Park Naturalist

N. B. Herkenham, Asst. Park Naturalist

W. W. Bryant, Junior Park Naturalist

VOL. XXXIII

JANUARY 1954

NO. 1

## HISTORICAL EVENTS AT THE DEVILS POSTPILE

By Richard J. Hartesveldt, Ranger Naturalist

EDITOR'S NOTE: Ever since its establishment in 1911, the area which contains this curious geological phenomenon has been officially named Devil Postpile National Monument. Early maps had given the name of the remarkable formation as "Devils Postpile," while "Devil's" was always the natural way to pronounce it, as well as to write it. The word "Devil" without the possessive "s" or "'s" is the longstanding result of either an error or a decision, for "Devil Postpile" appears on the U. S. Geological Survey's topographic map of Yosemite National Park as early as the edition of 1904 (when the park still included the postpile area)—7 years before the monument was created. Probably this caused the omission of the "s" from the Presidential proclamation that brought the monument into existence, and "Devil" stands as the official spelling to this day. It has been so designated heretofore in *Yosemite Nature Notes*, particularly in the special issue entitled "The Devil Postpile National Monument," Vol. 31, No. 10, October 1952. However, there is now under consideration a proposal to change the official name of the monument back to "Devils" (without the apostrophe, as is customary in place names, such as Clouds Rest), and already the National Board on Geographic Names has approved the spelling for the postpile feature itself. To apply the new spelling officially to the national monument will require a Presidential proclamation. In the meantime, in non-legal usage, it is proper to refer to the area as Devils Postpile National Monument, and that term appears in this article except where the former spelling is specifically called for.

Histories—those written accounts of human adventures, accomplishments, fortunes, and misfortunes—generally have been well recorded in the State of California. One exception is that of the Devils Postpile area, where the principal remaining knowledge is preserved in the memories of men who worked in or visited the valley of the Middle Fork of the San Joaquin River many years ago, and who recall some of the history that has been passed down to them by word of mouth. The written record is all but absent for the early years. The story has been confused, too, by a great variance in the narratives of this area as told by different people.

The actual date of discovery of the postpile by white man is un-

known, though it is presumed to be about 1849 or a little later during the California gold rush. The first information about the Middle Fork valley is closely associated with the mining boom at Mammoth Lakes on the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada, a short distance from the postpile. Shepherders, who had used the nearby meadows for grazing, are thought to have given the Devils Postpile its name. Satan's title was often assigned to scenic freaks by these hard-working, God-fearing men. The earliest name applied to this one is believed to have been Devil's Woodpile. Another designation given to a similar area of horizontal basalt columns exposed by erosion was Devil's Post-office.

In the spring of 1877, James Parker discovered several well-defined veins of silver-bearing quartz in the vicinity of Mammoth Lakes. People commenced to flock into the region to seek mineral wealth, and on June 20 of that year the Mammoth Lake Mining District was organized by Parker, N. B. Lowe, N. D. Smith, and B. S. Martin. Lowe was elected chairman and Parker secretary. Later the property was purchased by a General Dodge, who had other investments in Bodie, and a 20-stamp mill was constructed. Within a year, 3 communities, boasting 150 houses, had become established in the district. In September 1878 Mammoth City had a population of 200 people (and 6 saloons), Pine City 100, and Monumental 150. Two of the nearby lakes furnished waterpower for the stamp mill and a sawmill. The forest and plentiful water supply were big assets to these new little towns. By December 1878 the Lake District promised to be one of the most profitable areas in the State. While the beautiful mountain scenery was highly spoken of, the accounts failed to take notice of the postpile.

At Agnew Meadow, north of the Devils Postpile, was another venture, the mines of which may have been in the vicinity of Lake Ediza and the Minarets. The community had a blockhouse that commanded all directions, and it remained as late as 1912. No early mention was made of this fortified building, but *The San Francisco Sunday Call* in March 1912 commented on the number of bullet holes around the windows which suggested violent aggression with other miners or possibly hostile Indians.

In 1879 a large, red-bearded man named Red Sotcher moved into a meadow just south of the Devils Postpile to herd sheep. In what is

now Reds Meadows, bearing his nickname, he found that he could grow vegetables that were in huge demand by the miners of the Mammoth Lakes area. So great was the desire for these fresh products that Sotcher received fabulous prices for their sale in Mammoth City, a town of 1,500 population by 1880. There are also rumors that he was a cattle- and horsethief and that he operated on both sides of the Sierra, stealing horses on the west side and selling them on the east, and stealing cattle on the east side and selling them on the west. Although it is known that most people were afraid of Sotcher for some reason, the reports of cattle stealing are not confirmed by newspaper accounts of that day.

It is surprising that the Devils Postpile was scarcely referred to at this time because the old Mammoth Trail from Fresno Flats passed very close to it. Also known as the French Trail, after the engineer who built it, it bore the greatest number of people and much freight into the famed Lake District. James Hutchings, California publisher and pioneer hotel owner in Yosemite Valley, is reputed to have made a trip to the postpile (date unknown, but possibly in the 1870's) to make its first photograph. No record of this trip or the photograph is found in any of his published books.

The next mention in literature dealing with the Devils Postpile came in the years following the establishment of Yosemite National Park in 1890. The park's original boundary encompassed a large area southeast of its present limits and included the Devils Postpile, Rainbow Fall, and the spectacular Minaret-Banner-Ritter range. The reports of some of Yosemite's early military superintendents called slight attention to the area. Visita-

tion to it at this time was low and remained so until the first road was built over Minaret Summit from Mammoth Lakes in the 1920's. In 1896 Lt. Col. S. B. M. Young, acting superintendent, recommended in his annual report that the sum of \$7,000 be appropriated for improvements to the Mammoth Trail through Reds and Agnew Meadows. It remained for later Army administrators to make actual reference to the postpile in similar recommendations.

During the 1890's one of these officer-superintendents, under pressure from mining groups, suggested that the rather inaccessible southeastern portion of Yosemite National Park be excluded from park status. Different points of view concerning this section were held by the successive Army men who were charged with Yosemite's care. In 1899 Capt. Joseph E. Caine, the acting superintendent, in one of his reports to the Secretary of the Interior, touched on the Devils Postpile, the

Minarets, and Soda Springs in connection with patrols to control cattle trespassers in the abundant meadows of that area. Reds Meadows was one of the park patrol stations. Captain Caine is on record as describing these places as a "country that abounds in natural wonders . . . and should be protected." He also stated that it was important that protection be afforded the headwaters of the San Joaquin.

The influence of mining, water, and grazing interests became stronger and finally a commission was appointed to study the requested changes in the park's boundary. The mineral values of the southeastern section were given careful consideration and the commission concurred that there were desirable deposits there. One engineer's report, in 1904, showed such properties in the Shadow Creek and King Creek areas. Its author was greatly impressed with the remarkable basalt columns of the postpile and so



*Huber, courtesy of U. S. Forest Service*

Hillside in Devils Postpile area, composed of exposed ends of some tilted columns.

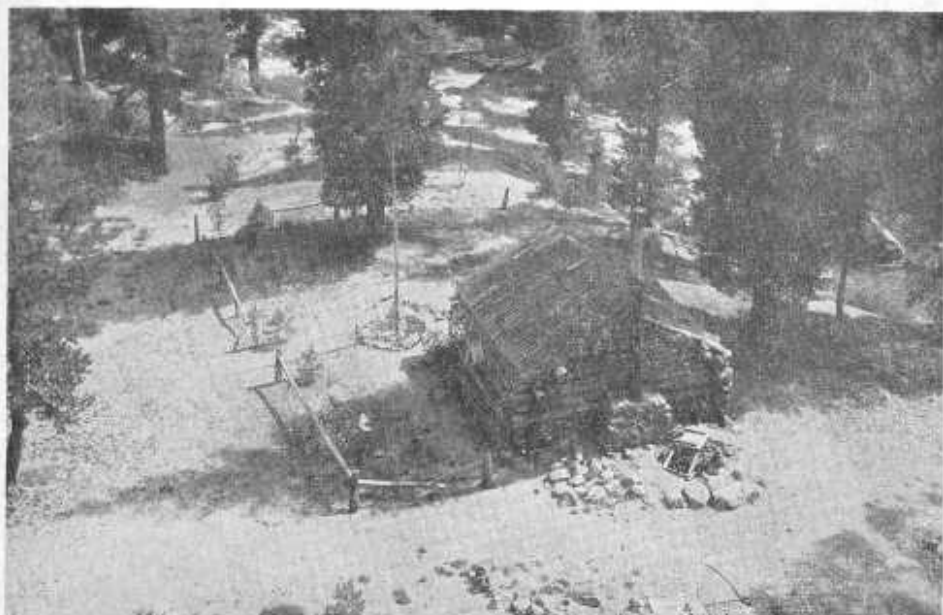


expressed himself in his writing. Despite the favorable comments on the esthetic values of the area, more than 500 square miles of the southeastern and western parts of Yosemite National Park were, in 1905, withdrawn and returned to national forest status so that their resources could be exploited.

Some who traveled through the Devils Postpile area in 1909 tell of visiting a man named Moore (first name unknown) who was living in a cabin at the foot of the postpile. The cabin, which was well furnished and very clean, had been built not long before, presumably by Moore. He was an exceedingly well-dressed man, for one who lived in such an out-of-the-way place, and was seen wearing expensive English tweeds, fine hats, and boots. He had several men working for him on his mining property west of the postpile, possibly near King Creek. Only recently, heavy snows

have caused the aging cabin to collapse. Not far from it, on the west side of the San Joaquin River, are piles of shakes that may have been cut by Moore and were left over from the cabin construction or were intended for repairs to the roof.

Present-day travelers to the postpile are confronted with several stories concerning the old "hermit's cabin." Of Mr. Moore, the story, though brief, is undoubtedly correct. Of later occupants, the tales are fragmentary and conflicting. One of them credits an Ernest Card of Incline, California, with the building of the cabin. It may be that he was employed by Moore for this purpose. Many old-timers say that an unfriendly hermit lived in the shelter for several years, and in the early 1920's moved farther west because of the increased number of fishermen who came into the valley when the road was built.



*Anderson*

The cabin in 1934, before its collapse, viewed from the Devils Postpile above it. Middle Fork of the San Joaquin River in background.

Another man who occupied the cabin was Joseph Ivanhoe, better known as "Postpile Joe." One account states that he started using it in 1912. It is known that he was residing there in 1928 and that he left in 1934 or 1935. Although he had but one arm, he is reported to have been a good worker and skillful mule packer. It would seem that he was the hermit who dwelt in the old cabin for so long, except for a conflict in personalities. Our knowledge of "Postpile Joe" is that he was friendly and was acclaimed a boisterous liar.

There is still another story concerning a Chinese recluse who lived in the vicinity of the postpile, but probably not in the "hermit's cabin." The date and place of his residence are unknown. In fact, no one can be found who actually saw the man. He may have settled at Reds Meadows because he is supposed to have fallen into one of the "boiling springs and was half drowned, half cooked to death."

Soon after the time of the commission studies in the postpile area, the oddity of this geological formation became more renowned and the first newspaper articles about it were published. Anxious to give an explanation for the die-straight columns, an early writer described it as follows: "Once [the liquid basalt] flowed in a molten torrent from a nearby crater, plunged over a precipice, split into prisms, and hardened in mid-air." It was several years before Dr. Francois Matthes and other investigators gave us a much subdued but more logical version of how the remarkable columns were actually formed.\*

In 1910 Mr. Walter L. Huber, then district engineer for the U. S. Forest

Service at San Francisco, received a filing for permission to blast the Devils Postpile into the San Joaquin River to form a rockfill dam from which water could be conducted past Rainbow Fall to be used in mining operations. Mr. Huber, who was personally opposed to this tragic destruction, discussed the application with his superior, District Forester F. E. Olmsted. At Mr. Olmsted's request, Mr. Huber called on officials of the Sierra Club to examine the situation. William E. Colby, then secretary of the club, took it up with Prof. Joseph N. LeConte of the University of California who was more intimately acquainted with the postpile than any other person of his day. The two men soon thereafter presented to District Forester Olmsted their objection to the granting of this permit. Mr. Huber was also in attendance at this conference. They were advised that Mr. Henry S. Graves, the chief forester of the United States, would be in San Francisco shortly and that they could make their protest to him if they so desired.

The meeting with the chief forester was held and when the evidence was heard, Mr. Graves asked Mr. Olmsted if they desired a national monument to be established for that area. When a strong affirmative reply was given, Mr. Huber was designated to prepare a draft of a proclamation with the required map and to have it in Washington in time for the chief forester to present it to James Wilson, then secretary of Agriculture, who in turn was to submit it with a favorable recommendation to the President. At the same time, John Muir, Joseph LeConte, and E. T. Parsons of the Sierra Club wrote letters to the

\*See "The Geologic Story of the Devils Postpile" by Richard J. Hartesveldt, *Yosemite Nature Notes* 31(10):138-148, October 1952.—Ed.

President of the United States and to the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior, urging that the President save the postpile by making it a national monument. Acting upon these recommendations, and authorized by the Act for the Preservation of American Antiquities, of 1906, President Howard Taft proclaimed the area Devil Postpile National Monument on July 6, 1911.

The new monument was at first in the charge of the U. S. Forest Service whose land surrounded it. It was but little visited until the first mining road was built into the valley in which it lies. Even then the administrative duties were light because the very poor quality of the road was not inviting to many motorists. On August 10, 1933, after a reorganization in the U. S. Department of the Interior, the jurisdiction of Devils Postpile National Monument was given to the National Park Service. Then on March 24, 1934, the superintendent of Yosemite National Park was made responsible for its protection and supervision.

From that year until World War II, a ranger was stationed each summer at Soda Springs Meadow, a quarter of a mile from the postpile. Lack of sufficient funds during the war made administration from Yosemite Valley, 126 driving miles distant, impractical. Through a temporary cooperative arrangement with the U. S. Forest Service, the national monument was again put under its care. During one summer, soon after the war, a park ranger from Yosemite was stationed there, but it was not until 1952 that another agreement was made, returning the management of Devils Postpile National Monument again to Yosemite National Park. In the summer of 1952 an organized interpretive serv-



*Gladier Studio*

Mr. Walter L. Huber, whose farsighted efforts set in motion a train of events leading to the creation of Devils Postpile National Monument in 1911. Then district engineer for the U. S. Forest Service in San Francisco, he also prepared the draft of the proclamation acted upon by President Howard Taft, and made the survey which established the boundaries of the national monument. As befitting a conservationist of his standing, Mr. Huber was appointed last year to the Advisory Board on National Parks, Historic Sites, Buildings, and Monuments.

vice by a ranger naturalist was initiated, consisting of evening campfire activities and trailside contacts at the postpile. The program met with considerable popularity.

Today the boundaries of the monument are the same as they were when it was established, according to Mr. Huber's survey. The postpile is located in the valley of the Middle Fork of the San Joaquin River, about 29 miles east of Yosemite Valley, and just west of the Sierran crest. The monument is  $2\frac{1}{2}$  miles long and half a mile wide, making a total area of  $1\frac{1}{4}$  square miles. The elevation varies between 7,100 feet and 7,800 feet.



## 1953 CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT IN YOSEMITE VALLEY

By Walter J. and Erma Fitzpatrick

The annual Christmas bird count taken in and adjacent to Yosemite Valley between El Portal, elevation 2,000 feet, and Mirror Lake, elevation 4,000 feet, with an additional trip up the Wawona and Glacier Point Roads to above Badger Pass, elevation 7,600 feet, was conducted on December 27, 1953. The weather was marked by severe contrasts. While all the day was clear, there were balmy temperatures and no wind at El Portal, while in the upper areas the day was characterized by very strong winds, with gusts up to 45 miles per hour. Many trees were blown down in the park, and for a time the Glacier Point Road was closed to traffic. Temperatures were seasonally mild, ranging from 28° to 69°. There was very little snow on the ground, this lying mainly at the upper elevations and mostly in shady areas.

Due to good accessibility resulting from the abnormally dry, mild winter in the park, an extra trip to Badger Pass was scheduled. It was hoped that several unusual birds, such as the great gray owl and the arctic three-toed woodpecker, might be found, since both are resident in that area. However, the strong winds effectively ruined birding at that elevation.

The 22 participants, working in 5 parties, recorded 50 species and about 2,973 individuals. While this is not a record for species observed, it does break all records for the total of individuals. This is accounted for by the fact that the day was exceptionally favorable in the El Portal area, and altogether abnormal counts were made on some species, notably lark sparrows and

Thurber's juncos. An interesting observation of only one pine siskin was made by Mr. Norman Herkenham of the museum staff. It is probable that other siskins were present in the area, although huddled, out of sight in the trees against the very strong winds.

The detailed count follows: California heron, 1; American merganser, 1; sharp-shinned hawk, 1; western red-tailed hawk, 9; golden eagle, 2; duck hawk, 2; eastern sparrow hawk, 3; band-tailed pigeon, 332 (est.); California pygmy owl, 2; western belted kingfisher, 1; red-shafted flicker, 10; California woodpecker, 32; willow woodpecker, 2; Nuttall's woodpecker, 1; northern white-headed woodpecker, 4; black phoebe, 9; Say's phoebe, 1; blue-fronted jay, 101; long-tailed jay, 42; short-tailed chickadee, 296 (est.); plain titmouse, 31; California bush-tit, 46; slender-billed nuthatch, 2; red-breasted nuthatch, 8; Sierra creeper, 18; pallid wren-tit, 9; dipper, 31; San Joaquin Bewick's wren, 8; dotted wren, 17; sage thrasher, 2; northern varied thrush, 2; Alaska hermit thrush, 12; Townsend's solitaire, 1; western golden-crowned kinglet, 483 (est.); western ruby-crowned kinglet, 26; English sparrow, 6; Kern red-winged blackbird, 1; Brewer's blackbird, 13; Cassin's purple finch, 100 (est.); common house finch, 100 (est.); northern pine siskin, 1; green-backed goldfinch, 40; Sacramento towhee, 72; Sacramento brown towhee, 200 (est.); western lark sparrow, 300 (est.); slate-colored junco, 1; Thurber's junco, 503 (est.); golden-crowned sparrow, 84; fox sparrow, 2; Modoc song sparrow, 2.

## A SEQUOIA DISTURBED

By Daniel D. Deliman, Ranger Naturalist

April of the year 1935 felt the ground in the Mariposa Grove shake and quiver as the giant Utah Tree strained to keep erect its enormous bulk. Named by the enterprising Washburn Brothers in the early seventies, the Utah had served faithfully for many years in the role of an exhibition tree.

Now it was faced with an increasing brittleness, a partial result of its many centuries of growth. Perhaps, too, the disastrous fire of 1862 or one of the earlier recorded forest fires had helped to weaken the roots extending from the uphill side of the tree. The course of the road had been altered to reduce the danger to the General Grant and the General Sheridan, some hundred yards below the Utah, because the road had formerly wound directly about the bases of both of these trees on its way around the loop. Thus an advantage for the two General trees proved to add to the undoing of the Utah, as the new loop must have come perilously close to the vast root structure of the big tree, if not directly damaging it.

Whether from one of these causes singly or from a combination of all, the great tree fell in 1935. Fortunately for the Mariposa Grove Museum located downhill from it, the Utah fell in the opposite direction. With its massive roots extending high into the air, its fire-scarred base looming immensely above the viewer's head, the noble Utah has since provided a closeup study of the details of a fallen giant sequoia. Some of its foliage remained green for more than 3 years after its fall, for its life was slow to fade.

Even in rest, however, the peace of the mammoth tree was not to be complete. Early in July 1953, about noon, the ranger naturalist on duty at the museum was asked by the fire ranger to make a survey from nearby Wawona Observation Point, just north of the museum about one mile. En route to the point by trail (due to noontime traffic and a one-way road, travel by foot was far speedier than by car), the astonished naturalist found a huge blaze centered about the upper area of the Utah Tree, being fed by the forest detritus and limbs of neighboring pines and firs. Here was a serious threat to one of the finest portions of the Mariposa Grove.

In the short space of an hour, a crew composed of volunteer sightseers, rangers, fire-control guards, and a division of blister-rust-control workers from the adjoining Sierra National Forest was hard at work in curbing the fire. Available garbage cans were pressed into use as water containers. Other workers dug the necessary ring in the soil about the tree to stem the spread of the fire in the thick forest humus. Axmen chopped through the numerous attached branches and limbs to determine the depth of the fire into the dried-out, now less fire-resistant appendages.

The motley crew labored well into dusk before the tree was pronounced out of danger. However, rechecks were made the following day and more work was needed when smoldering was discovered. A total of some 30 men had been employed actively in fighting the potential forest fire.

Cause of the fire? Wiser men of the forest have told the answer in a simply worded sign that now adorns the strewn-about, charred, and burn-scarred area: "This fire was started by a careless smoker. It might have been worse!"

Sadly mankind must erect such an epitaph to a once-majestic titan of the forest. In the tree's life such efforts as destruction by fire would have been met by scornful rebuff. Even in death the regal figure portrayed its heritage proudly.



**Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias, winter,** by Ansel Adams from "Yosemite and the Sierra Nevada," reproduction by permission of Houghton Mifflin Co.



*Re-live*  
**YOUR VISIT TO**  
*Yosemite*  
**EACH MONTH**  
**THROUGH**  
*Yosemite*  
*Nature Notes*

A \$1.50 subscription will bring you the Yosemite story accurately and interestingly told twelve times a year.

Revenue derived from the activities of the Yosemite Natural History Association is devoted entirely to assisting the park naturalist division in the furtherance of research and the interpretation of significant interests in Yosemite National Park.



Address subscriptions to  
Yosemite Natural History Association, Inc.  
Box 545, Yosemite National Park, California





Digitized by  
**Yosemite Online Library**

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

Dan Anderson