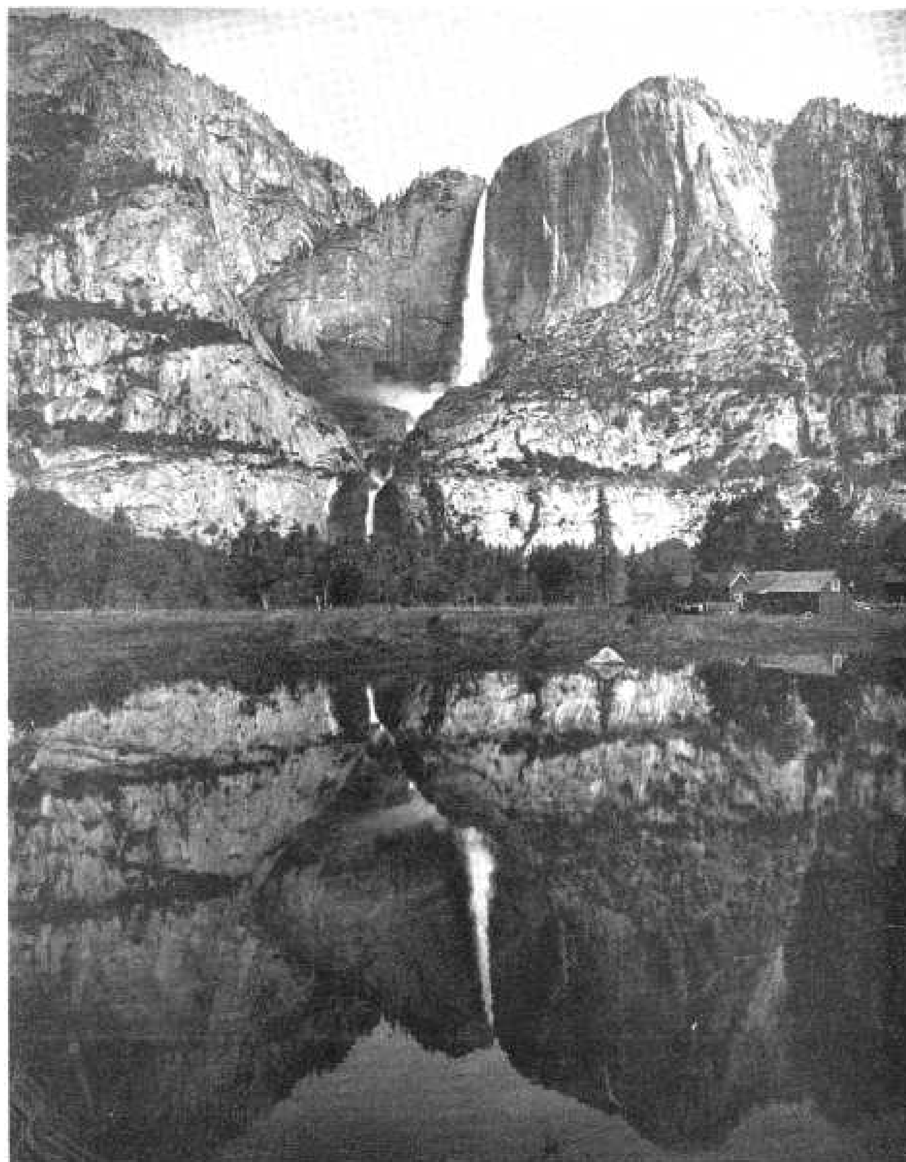
YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES

VOLUME XXXVI · NUMBER 4 APRIL 1957



YOSEMITE FALLS, MIRROR EFFECT

—*Peabody*, c. 1880

Yosemite Nature Notes

THE MONTHLY PUBLICATION OF
THE YOSEMITE NATURALIST DIVISION AND
THE YOSEMITE NATURAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION, INC.

John C. Preston, Superintendent
G. D. Gallison, Assoc. Park Naturalist
D. H. Hubbard, Park Naturalist
W. C. Bullard, Asst. Park Naturalist
R. W. Carpenter, Park Naturalist (Trainee)

VOL. XXXVI | APRIL 1957 | NO. 4

THE DISCOVERERS OF YOSEMITE

By Neil R. Bassett, Ranger-Naturalist

To those interested in Yosemite lore the early story of the valley is well known. They know how the prehistoric Indian tribes were decimated by war and disease, how they dispersed, and generations later were gathered together by Chief Tenaya to be brought to the valley of the Ahwahnee. They were present, then, when Captain Joseph Reddleford Walker, in October 1833, lead an expedition across the Sierra en route to the Pacific. His route was probably along the ridge separating the Merced and Tuolumne River valleys, and members of his party may have looked down into Yosemite Valley. Interest in the valley at that time must have been negligible, however.

Another record of discovery, and the one which is regarded as the effective discovery, is that of the coming of Major James D. Savage's Mariposa Battalion in March 1851. Entering the valley near Inspiration Point, they were in pursuit of Indians which had but a short time before raided and plundered his property on the Merced and that of other settlers in the Southern Mines area. In the absence of material to the contrary, Savage and his men appear to have been the first non-Indians to set foot on the valley floor.

James D. Savage

Less well known is the appearance of the diary of William Penn Abrams about ten years ago. There is every reason to believe in its authenticity and it reveals that in October 1849, two years before Savage's explorations, Abrams and his friend U. N. Reamer accidentally saw the valley from the south rim, probably from near Inspiration Point above the present Wawona Tunnel. He says in part (transcribed as originally written):

"Oct. 18th. Returned to S.F. after visit

to Savage property on Merced River. Prospects none too good for a mill. Savage is a blasphemous fellow who has five squaws for wives for which he takes his authority from the Scriptures. While at Savage's, Reamer and I saw grizzly tracks and went out to hunt him down getting lost in the mountains and not returning until the following evening, found our way to camp over an Indian trail that lead past a valley enclosed by stupendous cliffs rising perhaps 3000 feet from their base and which gave us cause for wonder. Not far off a waterfall dropped from a cliff below three jagged peaks into the valley while farther beyond a rounded mountain stood, the valley side of which looked as though it had been sliced with a knife as one would slice a loaf of bread and which Reamer and I called the Rock of Ages."

There seems to be no doubt that Abrams described Bridalveil Fall, Cathedral Rocks and Half Dome. The actual discovery date is obscure since no entries were made from October 7 to 17. Evidently he did not descend to the valley floor.

Born in Sanborton, New Hampshire in 1820, William Penn Abrams began his diary in 1839 at the age of 19, but only five volumes have survived the years. Most of the pages are in ink, although some are in pencil traced over with ink, indicating that perhaps ink may not always have been available. The page with the Yosemite Valley description was not traced over but is in the same handwriting as the inked pages and penciled notations throughout.

Abrams retained the family occupation by becoming a millwright. He was employed in that capacity for about 10 years, beginning in 1839, in Gainsville, Alabama, with time

William P. Abrams

out for a trip to Cuba and another back to New Hampshire to be married. When news of Marshall's discovery of gold reached him in Alabama, he and Reamer traveled to California via the Isthmus of Panama and by boat to San Francisco arriving August 14, 1849. The trip lasted 3 months and 3 days, and entailed the Isthmus on foot and by canoe. From San Francisco they went to Stockton and thence to the Stanislaus River gold operations. Being in an unprofitable region for millwrights their stay was brief and they returned to Stockton to work at carpentering until sent up the Merced River to investigate mill sites. On this trip the two friends made their discovery of Yosemite Valley.

It is not impossible that others saw the valley before him and after Walker's trip through the area, nor is it difficult to imagine that some of the thousands of miners and traders from the Southern Mines observed these "stupendous cliffs." If so, it is unfortunate that they did not record their travels. It is hoped that more study can be made of the Abrams data and reported further in the *Nature Notes.*

AN INDIAN THANKSGIVING

By Estella Falla

For days we noted the annual influx of Paiutes coming to Yosemite. This was in September of 1911, as I recall. They were coming "over the mountain" — that is, from the Nevada side of the Sierra, around Mono Lake, then over the steep climb of the Tioga Pass to Lake Tenaya, then down a steep, short, secret trail which came out at Mirror Lake, the east gate of the Yosemite. These Indians came in groups of two or more families, all walking, except that now and then a small child was given a lift on the back of a burro or pony already laden with sacks of pine nuts. It was an annual ceremony. The few ponies and burros and many of the Indian women carried the pine nuts to be traded for acorns which were profuse in Yosemite.

In previous years, as soon as they arrived in Yosemite, the women came to Salter's General Store to sell their baskets. As bookkeeper for the store and because I had more patience than the men clerks, I did the buying - one basket at a time, each one paid for in silver dollars as purchased. But this year, the baskets were not brought in immediately on arrival. The camp on the Indian Creek grew daily from the usual forty to fifty Indians, and we noted members of other sections coming in over the Wawona, El Portal, and Big Oak Flat Roads until the camp grew to about 300.

Nightly, the usual "hand game" was played — a dozen or more Indians of both sexes sitting cross-legged on the ground on either side of a low-burning bonfire playing a form of our "Up! Jenkins", blankets

spread across their laps to take the place of tables. These games would last until two or three o'clock in the morning. As a player became tired, he lay down where he was, his feet toward the fire and took a short nap, then rejoined the game.

After closing hours, about eleven at night, we often went to the camp to watch the gambling. We could throw in a quarter or half dollar if we liked on the blanket on what we guessed might be the winning side. As the gamesters lost, one by one they rushed to the store to sell their baskets.

The Indian camp with its u-ma-chas made of bark in the style of a tepee, its tents and its chuck-ahs, always held a fascination for me. The chuck-ahs especially interested me as I had watched Teleucie Tellez and her sister make one. Then gentle Lucy was an especially good friend and the best basket maker among the Paiutes, with Emma Murphy a close second.

Four strong saplings were firmly planted in the ground in the form of a four-foot square to start the chuck-ahs. These were kept bare for more than 4 feet above the ground, this being then the usual snow level line. Heavy cord was woven around the posts above the snow line in such a way that a thick wall of pine needles, sharp points down, was woven through up a distance of about 4 feet. A suitable base was built in this chuck-ah, the bottom bristling with pine needles pointing downward. In this container were stored the acorns and other nuts to be used as food, safe from the marauding squirrels. The top was finished off with bark to shed the rain. In the case of a small chuck-ah, an inverted washtub served as a roof.

One thing that had always puzzled me at the camp was a barbed wire fence that fenced in nothing. It was near the Indian Creek, about 300 feet long, its four strands of barbed wire held up by tree limbs used as fence posts.

Typical dwelling or u-ma-cha used in the Yosemite area.

One day Old Mary, whose picture appears in many of the Yosemite books written at the time, happily and secretively sought me out when I was alone in the office. The camp was full of Indians and I supposed she was happy over the grand reunion.

She bent over me as I sat and whispered, "Tomorrow, make acorn bread. You come".

"Where, Mary?"

"By river near Nick's camp. Other way. You see. Plenty Indian there. Three O'clock."

Of course, I promised to come. The three or four women clerks in the store thought it would be a fine idea to go along, too, and I had a hard time making them understand that they had not been invited. If they crashed he party, I would not go.

All the way to the river, I kept a lookout to see I was not followed.

Mary was looking for me when I arrived. She came to me and led me to a large, comfortable stone where I was to sit, facing the fire which was burning about 20 feet in front of me. To my left, sitting on the ground in a group, were 300 Indians and their well-behaved, quiet children. To my right ran the Merced River. It startled me. I had been given the seat of honor where I could see everything. And I sat alone where everyone could see me.

I had wanted to bring pencil, pad, and camera to take notes and pictures but knew I must just sit and watch and say nothing. It did not occur to me to ask permission to take pictures.

As the fire burned, three rounded rocks about 6 or 7 inches in diameter were laid on it to heat. I noticed that three river sand piles had been laid in a row, then bordered with small pebbles. It seems to me that the center, where the fire burned, was bordered in a square about two feet in diameter. While to the right and left as I faced them, the piles were bordered in the form of a circle, each about two feet in diameter, and all very symmetrical and artistic in appearance. In the circle to the right of the fire as I faced it, imbedded in the leveled sand which was about four inches deep, was a large Indian basket about 18 inches in diameter at the top and about six inches at the base and about 18 inches in height. It was a very beautiful, very old basket of Paiute make.

The sand in the circle to the left had also been leveled to about four inches, and on this sand was piled several inches of acorn meal.

The ceremony began.

An Indian woman carried a basket water jug to the river and filled it, returning to the cooking basket into which the man in attendance poured the water. Another Indian woman had already brought a water jug full of water to the Indian man squatting by the circle of meal, and he gently poured the water over the meal to leach it. The Indian man at the fire kept it at the low flame.

When the meal was properly leached of its bitter taste, the Indian who had been by the cooking basket, took a fair-sized basket and filled it with the damp meal, then poured it into the cooking basket, stirring it with a stick. The Indian at the fire then took two short, stout tree limbs about 1½" in diameter, each with an upward growing branch cut off to make a hook. With these wooden tongs, he lifted a hot stone from the fire, placed it in the cooking basket, and I could see steam begin to rise.

The man at the meal circle continued to leach, an Indian woman keeping him supplied with river water.

Acorns were stored in the chuck-ah's.

Then, the man at the fire used his tongs to lift the cooled stone from the cooking basket and replaced it with a hot one. By the time the third stone was dropped in, the mixture in the basket was boiling. I could see it bubbling from my seat. I was so excited, it was hard for me to keep a calm exterior. I wanted to run down close to see the boiling at close range. I was also too excited to time the cooking, but soon three Indian women, each carrying what we called a Klamath Squaw cap, a very flexible basket about seven or eight inches in diameter and almost four inches tall, came to the cooking basket. When the mixture was done, the Indian man at the cooking basket picked up a small basket which he used as a measure and poured the mixture into each squaw cap. Each Indian woman squeezed two edges of her cap together and hurried to a rock ledge in a bend of the river out of the current, and turned the contents of her cap over the flat rock to be cooled by the gently flowing water which washed over it. The glutinous loaves held their shape and were

about eight inches long and three inches in diameter. As the loaves were laid on the rock, the squaw caps were rinsed in the river, and the women hurried back to the cooking basket for other loaves. When the cooking basket was empty, the process was repeated over and over. River water was again put in the basket, then meal, then a hot rock. At this distant time I do not recall how many hot rocks were required to cook each batch of bread. But I do recall my disappointment at the one discordant note. As the bread cooled on the stone, the loaves were neatly laid in new galvanized wash tubs. Even in 1911, there were no huge baskets in which to pack them.

It was almost sundown when the rite was over. No one had spoken a word. I wondered about the meaning of the circles and the squares. I asked no questions. The Indians had probably lost the answers I wanted.

When the cooking was over and the tubs filled, Mary brought a loaf to me, wrapped in a newspaper. Each tub of bread was carried by two Indian women, and since we were in the rear, we were the last to go. Mary was happy.

"You like?"

"Very much."

We said little as we left the river together to reach the road leading to the village. When we came to the road, we turned left a short distance before we came to the Indian Creek. When we came to the creek, Mary turned right as she said "Good-bye!" I had hoped to be asked to the feast which would follow, for looking up the Creek I could see to what use the puzzling barbed wire fence was put. I believe there was a dressed wild pigeon on every barb. Wild pigeons came to Yosemite by the thousands each year. The Indians must have snared them, for certainly no one had heard a shot. At the store we all tasted the unsalted, glutinous bread, not bad.

That night at eight the big powwow was held. It started with the principal men of the tribes, about 20 men, sitting in a circle around the low burning bonfire. A larger circle of the rest of the men sat outside the inner circle and then the Indian women stood or sat at the back. The tourists stood at the front.

It began with a speech by the Chief of the Yosemites. As he spoke, I thought that any speech student could have taken lessons from his eloquence. Quietly, the modulations of his voice, his rhetoric pauses, his few eloquent gestures, conveyed his meaning to us, although we did not understand his language, and we even got the drift of his humor. For an hour he held white and Indian alike during his speech.

The circles broke up and the dancing began — the deer hunting dance, the courting dance where young people made known their preferences in husbands and wives, and many other dances. The next day the trek reversed itself, going back "over the mountain" to the deserts of Nevada, over the Wowona, El Portal, and Big Oak Flat Roads to the deserts and plains of California.

Quiet settled down for the fall and winter with Saler's Store at one end, the Sentinel Hotel at the other end of the block-long village on one side of the street, and facing Salter's, Degnan's home, and bakery at one end and the Cedar Cottage, so called because of the cedar tree which grew through one of its rooms, at the other with picture studios, the post office, dance pavilion, Wells Fargo Express, Yosemite Valley Transportation Co., and a meat market filling in the spaces between.

This old village lives only in the memories of the old-timers for progress has swept it away. There are

no more acorn bread rites, no more pow-wows.

But in the year 1911, when we settled down to the everyday routine following the pow-wow, I thought of the immense amount of work this reunion had entailed. All summer I had watched Old Mary and the children race the squirrels in gathering the acorns from the ground. At the campground I had seen Old Lucy (not the basket maker) carried to a blanket spread in the sun on the ground where all day she hulled acorns with her teeth. She was 108 years old, but she had all her front teeth, at least, although they were worn to half their length. Later I had seen the younger women grind dry acorns to a meal at the Indian Rock whose surface was covered with holes made by centures of Indians using long stones as pestles, the huge stone resembling a beehive of mortars where a dozen women could work at a time.

Looking back, I have been very *grateful to my Indian friends who in*vited me to witness the rite of thanksgiving for the harvest, the making of the acorn bread, perhaps the last held in California. The Indians have since been moved about a mile west where those working for the government live in houses supplied with electric lamps, refrigerators and sometimes with washing machines. I know they must miss the music of the Indian Creek, as it gurgles its rushing way to the Merced.

In 1952, I went to Yosemite and looked up Teleucie. When she answered my knock, she did not recognize me.

"This is Estella," I said, "remember? A long time ago."

"Oh, Estella!", she said and put her arms around me, laying her cheek to mine. Then she took my face in her hands, and I could see her sight had failed. Then, disappointedly, "Oh, so old!" Recovering herself, she laughed and added "Me too!" We had both been rather young women when last we had parted.

EDITOR'S NOTE—Estella Falls has supplied this interesting and human story of the Indians of the Yosemite area from her observations during a period when the Miwok Indian culture still existed. She was born in 1875 in Tres Pinos, San Bonito County, California. Her father was British, born on the island of Guernsey. Her mother was born in Mexico City, of a Mexican mother and a Spanish father who was the son of a representative of Spain at the court of Emperor Maximilian. When Maximilian was executed (1867), the women of the family fled from Mexico to San Francisco, where Estella's parents met.

Estella studied to be a teacher starting at San Jose Normal but contracted uberculosis and later obtained her teacher's certificate in Los Angeles County. Because of TB she could not teach and held many jobs through her working years. In 1909 she spent a month camping in Yosemite and the following year returned to work as bookkeeper and Assistant Postmaster in Salter's Store from 1910 to 1914. These she described as the happiest years of her life. She was fascinated with the Indians, stage drivers, woodchoppers and visitors who came into the store.

Because of her winning personality she was extremely popular wherever she went. She won the confidence of the Indians. Being observant and keenly interested in her surroundings she was able to record her experiences.

Today Miss Falls lives in an Eastern Star Home in Los Angeles. Despite her 81 years she is possessed with a keen memory. She has drawn from her diary this interesting page in her life.

PUBLICATIONS FOR SALE AT THE YOSEMITE MUSEUM

All mail orders should be addressed to, and remittances made payable to, YOSEMITE NATURAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION, YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK, CALIFORNIA. Prices include postage, insurance, and on proper items, California State Sales Tax 3%, plus 1% County Tax.

GENERAL

Title	Price
Adams' Guide to Yosemite Valley, Illustrated	$1.65
Auto Tour of Yosemite Valley, Self-Guiding - Beatty and Harwell	.30
Auto Tour of Yosemite National Park - Ditton and McHenry	.60
Climber's Guide to High Sierra (Sierra Club)	3.25
Devils Postpile National Monument - Hartesveldt	.30
Exploring Our National Parks and Monuments - Butcher (paper)	3.75
Exploring Our National Parks and Monuments - Butcher (cloth)	5.40
Going Light - With Backpack or Burro - Sierra Club	2.20
National Parks, The - What They Mean to You and Me - Tilden (cloth)	5.40
National Parks, The - What They Mean to You and Me - Tilden (paper)	1.15
Outdoor Hazards - Real and Fancied - Hood	4.25
Park Ranger - Colby	1.45
Starr's Guide to John Muir Trail and High Sierra Region	2.20
Waterfalls, Famous, of the World - Brockman	.60
Wildlife in Color - Peterson	4.10
Yosemite Story, The - Scott	1.20

ANIMAL LIFE

Title	Price
Animal Tracks, Field Guide to	4.10
Birds of Pacific States - Hoffman	5.35
Birds, Western, Field Guide to - Peterson	4.10
Birds of Yosemite - Stebbins	.85
Fishes of Yosemite National Park	.45
Mammals, Field Guide to - Burt and Crossenheider	4.10
Mammals of Yosemite National Park - Parker	.60
Reptiles and Amphibians of Yosemite National Park - Walker	.40
Survey of Sierra Nevada Bighorn - Jones	.60

TREES AND FLOWERS

Title	Price
Broadleaved Trees of Yosemite National Park - Brockman	.60
Cone-bearing Trees of Yosemite National Park - Cole	.40
Flowers of Coast and Sierra - Clements	4.80
Sequoias, Yosemite, Guide to the - McFarland	.50
Trees of Yosemite - Tresidder and Hoss	2.20
Wildflowers, Common, of Yosemite - Beatty, Harwell, and Cole	.40
Wildflowers, Western, Field Book of - Armstrong	5.35

HISTORY AND INDIANS

Title	Price
Gold, Guns and Ghost Towns - Chalfant	3.80
Indians, Yosemite, Yesterday and Today - Godfrey	.30
Miwok Material Culture - Barrett and Gifford	2.25
Mother Lode Country, Guide to the - Brockman	.60
One Thousand California Place Names - Gudde	1.15
Steve Mather of the National Parks - Shankland	4.30
Wilderness World of John Muir, The - Teale	4.80
Yosemite's Pioneer Cabins - Uhte	.35
Yosemite: The Story of An Idea - Huth	.30

GEOLOGY AND MAPS

Title	Price
An Illustrated Guide to Common Rocks - Allan and Brown	.55
Geologic History of Yosemite Valley (Professional Paper 160) - Matthes	5.65
Geology of Yosemite Valley, Brief Story of - Beatty	.20
High Sierra Camp Areas, Pocket Guide to (Clark)	.55
High Sierra Camp Areas, Trail Guide to (Clark)	1.10
How To Know the Minerals and Rocks - Pearl	.60
Incomparable Valley, The - Matthes (cloth)	4.10
Incomparable Valley, The - Matthes (paper)	2.15
Map of Yosemite National Park, Topographic	.55
Map of Yosemite Valley, Topographic, shaded (geology story printed on back)	.55
Map of Yosemite Valley, Topographic, unshaded (geology story printed on back)	.30
North Country of Yosemite, Pocket Guide to (Clark) (paper)	.55
North Country of Yosemite, Trail Guide to (Clark)	1.10
Rocks and Minerals of California - Allan and Brown	2.95
South Boundary Country, Pocket Guide to (Clark)	.55
South Boundary Country, Trail Guide to (Clark)	1.10

FOR CHILDREN

Title	Price
A Day With Tupi, An Indian Boy of the Sierra (paper)	1.15
A Day With Tupi, An Indian Boy of the Sierra (buckram)	2.55
Animal Friends of the Sierra (paper)	1.15
Animal Frieds of the Sierra (buckram)	2.55

This supersedes all previous price lists.

SUBSCRIBERS ARE ENTITLED TO 10% DISCOUNT FROM ABOVE PRICES

Digitized by
Yosemite Online Library
http://www.yosemite.ca.us/library/
Dan Anderson