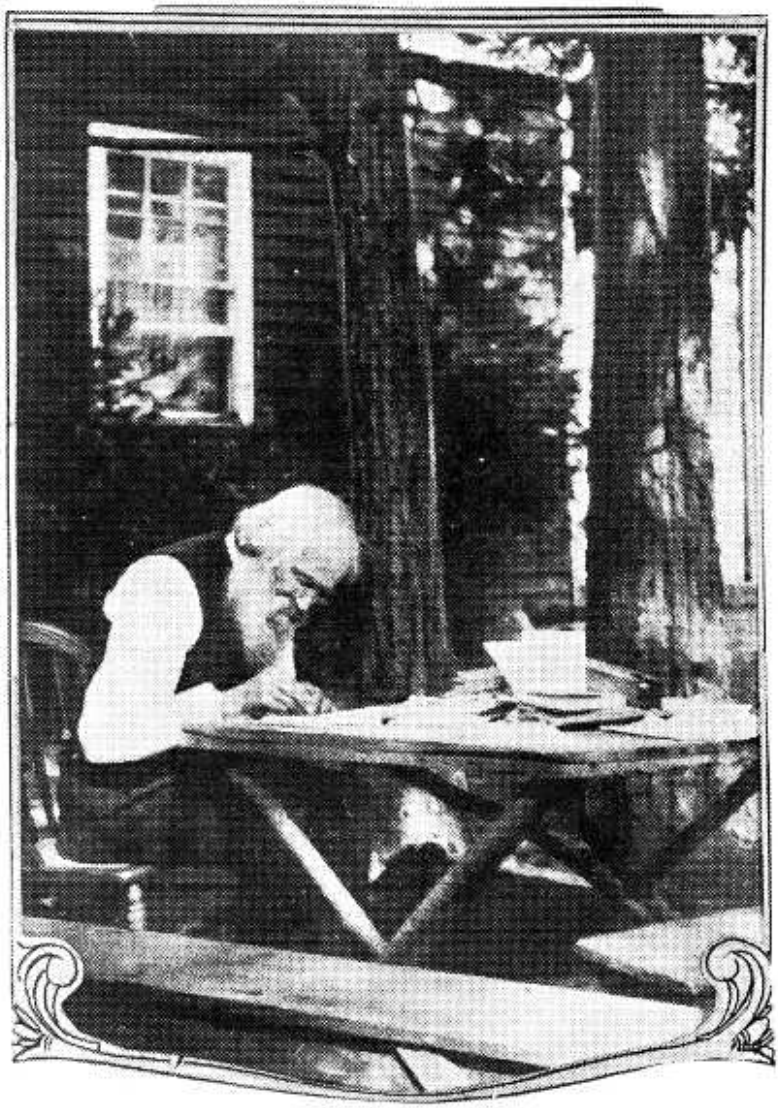
YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES

Vol. XXII · June, 1943 No. 6



Galen Clark - a Yosemite Pioneer

Yosemite Nature Notes

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

F. A. Kittredge, Superintendent C. F. Brockman, Park Naturalist
M. E. Beatty, Associate Park Naturalist

VOL. XXII JUNE, 1943 NO. 6

DEVELOPMENT OF TRANSPORTATION TO YOSEMITE

By C. Frank Brockman, Park Naturalist

Part I — The Era of Trails

The scenic masterpiece of Yosemite stands as an outstanding, dramatic illustration of the erosive powers of water and glacier ice; powers that were made possible by dynamic earth movements which encompassed wide areas throughout this part of the West, and which go back through geological periods to the time when the area now occupied by the Sierra Nevada lay beneath the sea — nearly 200,000,000 years ago! No wonder the awe-inspiring grandeur of this rugged mountain region and the solemnity of the gigantic granite walls of the Valley so profoundly affected many of its first visitors. No wonder their accounts of what they had seen so stirred the interest and imagination of the uninitiated, that others were willing to endure long days of tedious travel through an almost unknown mountain region in order that they, too, might enjoy similar experiences. From such a meager beginning developed the first trails, to be followed by the comparative comfort of stage travel over dusty mountain roads, and finally by the luxury of present-day modern motor highways. This, then, is a brief account of the means by which visitors reached Yosemite from the time when its varied interests were but little known down to the present day.

Initial Journeys of Exploration and Discovery

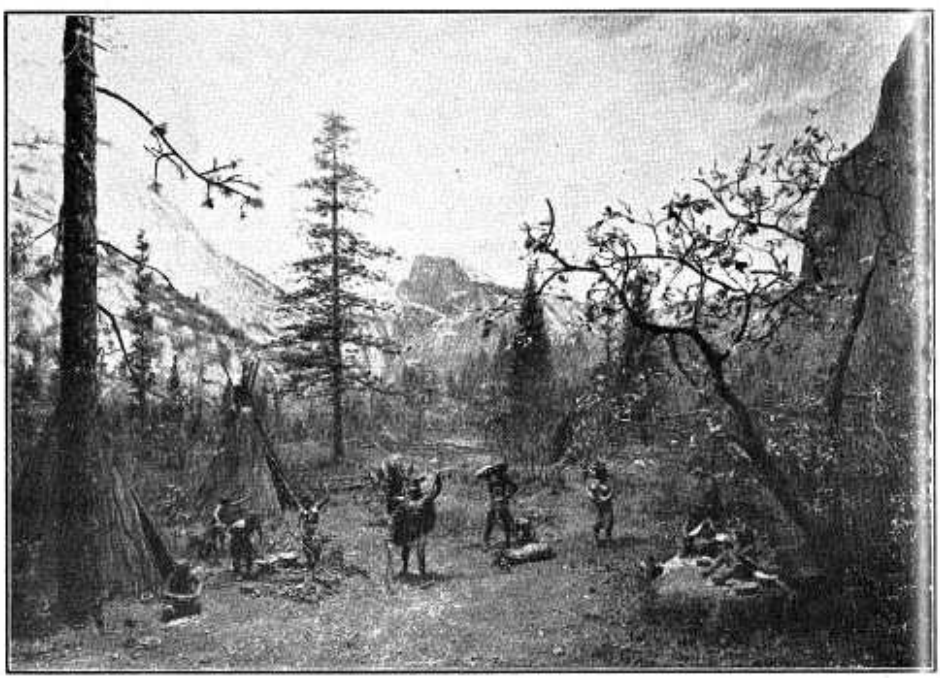
Tourist travel to Yosemite is considered as beginning in 1855, when James M. Hutchings, Thomas Ayers, Wesley Millard, and Alexander Stair, together with two Indian guides, "spent five days in luxurious scenic banqueting" in the Valley. Hutchings was, at the time, contemplating the publication of the California Monthly Magazine and had engaged Ayers, a well-known San Francisco artist, for the purpose of preparing sketches of what they hoped to see.

True, these first "tourists" were not the first to enter the region now encompassed by the boundaries of Yosemite National Park, but they were the first to be attracted to the area for reasons based solely upon interest in its scenic grandeur.

As early as 1833, Joseph R. Walker

and a party of trappers from Salt Lake, seeking a route to the Pacific and a broader field for their enterprise, crossed the crest of the Sierra Nevada, and followed the old Mono Indian Trail along the highland between the Yosemite and Hetch Hetchy valleys. Thus they passed through the center of what is now Yosemite National Park. Evidence points to the fact that members of this group were the first to see Yosemite Valley, observing it from a point on the north rim.

However, the Mariposa Battalion, which entered the Valley in 1851, is generally credited with the discovery. Yet these men were primarily interested in a speedy consummation of their mission—the capturing of Chief Tenaya and his band of Indians. With the exception of L. H. Bunnell, who was profoundly affected by the majesty of the Valley and was responsible for its name, they were little concerned with the aesthetic values of the area and paid them little attention. Likewise, additional military forays into the region later in 1851 and 1852, and visits by prospectors in 1852 and 1853, were prompted by utilitarian motives. Because of this, little mention was made of its wonders by those who first had the privilege of seeing them. Yet the expedition led by Lieutenant Moore in the summer of 1852, against Chief Tenaya and the Yosemites, is of particular importance. In a vain attempt to capture Tenaya,



Miniature Diorama Typifying Early Yosemite Indian Village

Moore's quest brought him not only to Yosemite Valley, but also to the Tuolumne Meadows area and to the Mono Lake region east of the Sierra Nevada. His report of this journey, together with subsequent newspaper accounts, although dealing primarily with the principal purpose of the expedition, was of great importance in two subsidiary respects; first, the interest of J. M. Hutchings was aroused, which resulted in the first visit to the Valley by "tourists" in 1855; second, public interest in mining opportunities east of the Sierra was kindled, resulting in the development and use of a trail in 1857, from Big Oak Flat through the Tenaya Lake-Tuolumne Meadows region. This approximated the old Mono Indian Trail, and was for many years the principal avenue to what is now an important and favored section of Yosemite National Park. It also served as the forerunner of the present Tioga Road. Bunnell in his "Discovery of Yosemite" states that Lieutenant Moore "brought into prominent notice the existence of the Yosemite, and of minerals in paying quantities upon the Eastern Slope." In addition he adds, "To Lieutenant Moore belongs the credit of being the first to attract attention of the scientific and literary world, and 'The Press' to the wonders of Yosemite Valley."

First "Tourists" to Yosemite Valley

Hutchings was particularly impressed with the report of a "waterfall 1,000 feet high," for as a literary man and publisher he could readily appreciate the possibilities embodied in such a phenomenon, if properly described and illustrated in the pages of his prospective journal. Consequently, notwithstanding the fact that this fabulous waterfall existed in a remote mountain region; that it could be reached only by many days of arduous travel over little-known, meager Indian trails, and that even the prospect of an Indian attack could not be entirely ruled out, Hutchings and his three companions arrived at Mariposa late in June, 1855, in search of someone who could guide them to this scenic bonanza.

Many men who had been members of the famed Mariposa Battalion were residents of this locality at this time, but interest in and knowledge of the route to Yosemite was surprisingly limited. Considerable difficulty was experienced in obtaining a guide, but finally two Yosemite Indians were secured at Hunt's Store on the Fresno River, some distance south of Mariposa. From this point they approached the Valley over an Indian trail to the South Fork of the Merced, and finally, along a route approximating that of the present Wawona Road to the south rim. At times the trail was scarcely visible, but after four days travel Hutchings and his companions arrived near what is now known as Inspiration Point. Here they beheld the Valley for the first time.

Of this moment Hutchings, in his book "In the Heart of the Sierras," says:

"The inapprehensible, the uninterpretable profound, was at last opened up before us . . . Neither the language of tongue or pen, nor the most perfect successes of art can approximately present that picture."

Ayers immediately busied himself with his pencil and sketch pad—an activity which continued unabated during the five days spent in Yosemite Valley. Thus were prepared the first pictures of Yosemite.

In their exploration of Yosemite Valley, Hutchings not only verified the existence of the phenomenal waterfall, but deduced its height to be from 1500 to 1800 feet. Later accurate measurements show that Yosemite Creek drops in three steps over a cliff totaling 2,425 feet in height—the upper fall being 1,430 feet— the lower fall, 320 feet, and the cascades between 675 feet.

Interest in Yosemite Prompted by Hutchings' Visit

On their return to Mariposa, the accounts of what they had seen, together with the sketches made by Ayers, excited considerable interest and at the request of L. A. Holmes then editor of the Mariposa Gazette Hutchings prepared a brief digest of the trip for the paper. The article published July 12, 1855, was widely copied by leading papers of the day and together with later articles by Hutchings and the illustrations by Ayers, quickly awakened the public to an interest in this area.

On the strength of Hutchings' trip several parties were organized in and about Mariposa for the purpose of further investigation. Early in August, 1855, a party of 17 men from Mariposa, and a group of ten men from the nearby mining camp of Sherlock's Creek, visited Yosemite. Still later in the summer of 1855, their interest aroused by Hutchings' spoken and written accounts of the Valley, Rev. W. A. Scott, of San Francisco, together with a party of friends, also journeyed over the vague Indian trail to Yosemite.

First Improved Trail to Yosemite Valley

The trails by which these first visitors reached Yosemite Valley were but tortuous Indian paths hardly conducive to safe and comfortable passage with horses, even by the standards of pioneer times. It was inevitable that someone would recognize in the Valley the compelling interest that would be manifest in

the uninitiated, and the opportunity for financial remuneration if a more satisfactory trail, suitable for horseback travel by the ordinary person, could be offered as an inducement.

Milton and Houston Mann, who had been in the Sherlock's Creek party of 1855, were the first to take positive action along this line. They undertook the construction of a toll trail from Mariposa to Yosemite Valley almost immediately after their initial visit, completing the project in August of the following year (1856). Existing Indian trails were utilized as much as practical, particularly as far as the point now known as Wawona on the South Fork of the Merced, which they bridged. The toll route started approximately 12 miles from Mariposa, from a point known as White and Hatch's. At the Wawona area, however, it departed from the old Indian route, climbing steadily to the highland between this point and Yosemite Valley by following the Alder Creek drainage to its headwaters, then crossing at an elevation of over 7,000 feet to the drainage of Bridalveil Creek where it traversed a number of lush meadows, gradually making a second ascent over a series of low ridges, to the highest point on the route, before dropping to the south rim of the Valley at Old Inspiration Point. From here a quick descent to the floor of the Valley near the base of Bridalveil Fall was made. This route is essentially the same as the present combination of the Alder Creek-Pohono Trails.

Undoubtedly, the presence of the meadows along this route with their abundant stock-feed was the compelling motive for locating the trail in this manner. The old Indian Trail which followed a lower elevation through the timber did not offer this advantage, which any horseman will recognize as an important factor. Several years later two sheep camps, known as Westfall's and Ostrander's, were set up in the vicinity of these meadows and the crude shelters which were then available served occasionally as a hospice for those who desired a respite from the long ride. An interesting reference to this section of the route will be found in "The Yosemite Book," (Geological Survey of California, 1868), as follows:

> "Here two houses, Westfall's and Ostrander's sometimes occupied during the summer by herders of sheep, often afforded a kind of shelter, poor, but better than none, to persons overtaken by night or too much fatigued to go farther. Usually, however, this is the lunch place, or half-way house . . . . . as will be easily recognized from the number of empty tin cans lying about."

The vagaries of human nature, even at that early time, were productive of problems concerned with good manners in the wilderness.

In 1857, shortly after the trail was opened, Galen Clark—who was a member of one of the parties that visited Yosemite in 1855, and who was to become a prominent figure in Yosemite history—established himself at the meadow where the trail crossed the South Fork, where Wawona is now located. Here he ministered to the overnight require-

ments of many travelers on their way to Yosemite. Still later, Charles Peregoy, for whom Peregoy Meadows is named, established a "public house" midway along the trail between Clark's and the Valley. It was operated by Charles Peregoy and his wife until 1875, when the stage road constructed between Wawona and the Valley diverted travel from the trail.

Wawona - midway point - Mariposa Trail

The total trail distance from Mariposa to Yosemite Valley was slightly less than 50 miles, and those who were first attracted to Yosemite necessarily made the entire distance in the saddle.

Seven hundred dollars was expended by the Mann brothers in their enterprise but, while their efforts were successful in encouraging early travel to this region, their project proved to be somewhat ahead of its time from a practical point of view, and was not an outstanding financial success. Some years after its construction the trail was purchased by Mariposa County for $200, and made available to the public without charge.

First Women Visit Yosemite Valley

In passing it may be of interest to note that the first white woman to visit Yosemite Valley was Madame Gautier of Mariposa, who made the long journey on horseback in the summer of 1856. An account of this trip was recorded in the Mariposa Democrat of August 5, 1856. Shortly afterward, Mrs. John Neil, also of Mariposa, and Mrs. Thompson of Sherlock's Creek visited the valley. Still later Mr. James Denman, who was, in 1856, Superintendent of Schools in San Francisco, conducted a party to the Valley. Included in this group were a number of women school teachers. Undoubtedly, the independent spirit and resourcefulness of these members of the "weaker sex" further stimulated travel to this area. Yet, from an account of the apparel of one lady who made the trip in the early days as noted in "Terisina in America" (1875) by Therese Yelverton, one wonders how they ever managed to get astride a horse much less ride the 50 miles to the Valley. This lady, quoting from the book mentioned, was attired in a costume consisting of:

> ". . . . a very dull pair of knickerbockers, over which was to go a wide, short petticoat or kilt reaching to the knee, and the jacket a basque, to correspond! It was of blue alpaca, elaborately braided and fringed in yellow, with a quantity of yellow buttons distributed profusely in marvel-

ously awkward places. To wear with this, she had red striped stockings and highlows! . . . . She insisted, too, on wearing a green veil tied tightly over her face to preserve her complexion, and another (a blue one it chanced to be) over her chignon, to prevent the dust from spoiling her precious bird's nest; and on top of that she wore her husband's wide-awake; and on top of that, a large wet sponge to save her from sunstroke!"

Coulterville and Big Oak Flat Trails

With increasing public interest in Yosemite, the enterprising communities of Coulterville and Big Oak Flat, on the north side of the Valley, became aware of their strategic location in relation to this scenic attraction. Accordingly, in 1856, L. H. Bunnell, joined with George W. Coulter and others of that community in the construction of the "Coulterville Free Trail." This route did not benefit materially from any previously existing Indian trail, as did the one pioneered by the Mann brothers, for horses had apparently never been taken into the Valley from the north side, and the foot trails that existed were unsuited to conversion to horse travel. It started from Bull Creek, to which a wagon road had already been constructed. The total distance from Coulterville to the Valley was 48 miles, of which 17 miles could be traversed by road. From Bull Creek it passed through meadow areas at Deer Flat, Hazel Green, and Crane Flat, then to Tamarack Flat—finally crossing Cascades Creek to the point now known as Gentry from which the descent along the north rim was made to the Valley floor.

A third, the Big Oak Flat Trail had its origin at the town of that name, located six miles north of Coulterville. It followed a route north of the Coulterville Trail through Garrote to Hardin's Ranch on the South Fork of the Tuolumne River, thence to its junction with the Coulterville Trail between Crane Flat and Tamarack Flat.

During the early days of trail travel to Yosemite the latter approach was not so generally used as were the Mariposa or Coulterville trails, although the advantages of its more direct route from Stockton (which then served generally as a center of distribution of travel to Yosemite) were pointed out in the early guide books.

Need for a Trail Up the Merced Canyon Recognized

Each of the three routes described had an identical disadvantage in that they passed over high elevations through a portion of the distance which, due to lingering snowdrifts in the spring and the possibility of early fall snowstorms, prevented their use except during a relatively short season. A route directly up the Merced would have made Yosemite Valley accessible for a much longer part of each year due to its lower elevation, but the expense necessary in the construction of a trail through the narrow, crooked canyon with its precipitous sides and tempestuous stream discouraged such a venture for some time.

Yet thought of a lower route persisted in spite of these apparent disadvantages. The Hite's Cove route, which appears to have been in use in 1872, and 1873, was at least a partial answer to this need. No mention of this approach to the Valley is to be found in "The Yosemite Guide Book" (California Geological Survey) of 1871, but the issue for 1874, states that it "was considerably used of late years." Hite's Cove, where was located the rich mine discovered by John Hite in 1861, was on the South Fork of the Merced some distance above its junction with the main Merced River. By 1874, it was accessible by wagon road from Mariposa, 18 miles distant, to which point visitors were transported by stage. After an overnight stop at Hite's Cove the Valley was reached after a 20 mile journey on horseback, up the Merced.

Another route having similar advantages was made available from the north side of the Merced Canyon by 1877. Before this time wagon roads had been completed to the Valley from Coulterville (June 1874), Big Oak Flat (July 1874), and Mariposa (July 1875), and much of the hardship of a long journey in the saddle was unnecessary. Yet some visitors, presumably because of personal preferences or the seasonal condition of the roads, changed stages at Dudley's, an overnight stopping place along the Coulterville Route. From Dudley's they continued their journey to Jenkin's Hill, over-looking the deep canyon of the Merced. Here, horses were mounted for a 30-mile ride to Yosemite Valley, the trail first dropping into the canyon of the Merced River, then ascending along that stream to its destination. This portion of the trip required an overnight stop at Hennessey's located a short distance below the present community of El Portal.

Tenaya Lake named for Chief Tenaya

The report of the Yosemite Valley Commission for 1880 indicates that before the completion of roads into the Valley, 12,000 people reached this point via horseback. The first to penetrate to this area had to pick their way carefully along obscure Indian trails, camping out along the way. Later years brought improved facilities—better trails and comfortable overnight stopping points. Inevitably, the trails gradually gave way to the wagon roads as Yosemite's fame spread, and increased public demand made stage travel to the area a practical venture. And when travel to Yosemite by trail succumbed to travel by road, Yosemite entered a new era.

(Part II - "The Era of Roads" will appear in next month's issue)