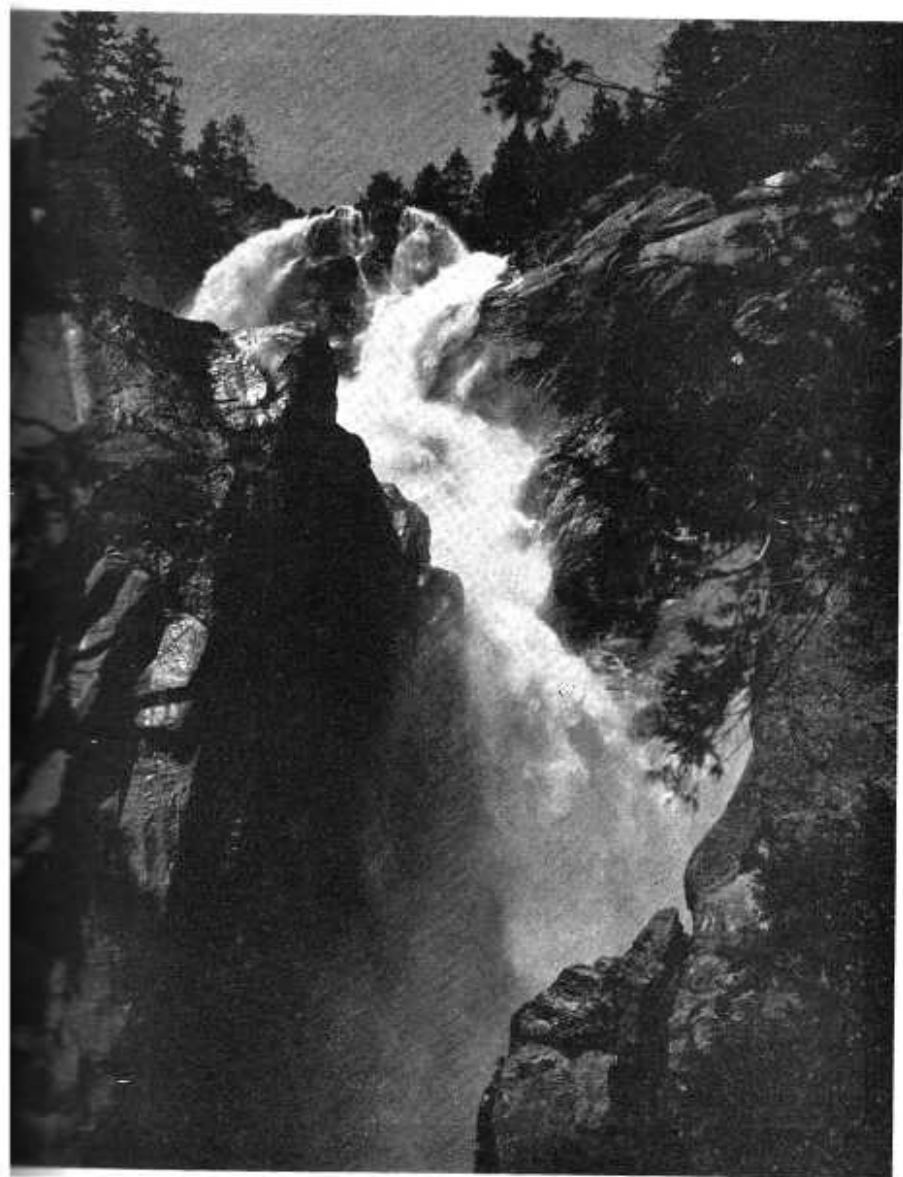


# YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES

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UPPER CASCADE FALLS

—Peabody c. 1830

### PLEASE NOTE

The special issue of **Yosemite Nature Notes** for 1956 will be "Self-guiding Auto Tour of Yosemite National Park." It will be the June issue and will be sent to all subscribers. Additional copies may be obtained from the Association for 50c.

# Yosemite Nature Notes

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

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## HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEM IN YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK

By Odin S. Johnson, District Ranger

On May 23, 1956, the Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company plans to assume the responsibility for maintaining communication service in Yosemite National Park. Since 1909 this company has taken care of the long distance calls; now they will handle all calls, both local and long distance. This changeover is in keeping with the present policy of the Department of the Interior that the National Park Service should allow private enterprise to handle its services wherever practicable. It will also make it possible to replace old, outdated equipment with the most modern types.

The new system will be operated by an automatic switching equipment replacing the faithful Yosemite telephone operators. These oft-unappreciated ladies have played an integral part in this community since 1882, rivaling the ranger force in around-the-clock duty and faithful handling of emergencies under all conditions. They most certainly will be missed when their cheerful "Number Please" is replaced by the beep tone.

The cost of the installation of all new equipment by the Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company and

Western Electric will amount to about one million dollars and annual maintenance is expected to cost about \$50,000. Three permanent maintenance men will live in Yosemite.

Communications in Yosemite started simple becoming more complex as year added to year. The history of their development runs the gamut from Indian smoke signals to the expectations of dialing around the world.

The first communication system to Yosemite Valley was a telegraph constructed along the Big Oak Flat from Sonora to Yosemite Valley in 1870. (See "The First Telegraph Wire laid to Yosemite Valley," V33:53-55, *Yosemite Nature Notes*, June 1954.) Later, in 1882, a new line was strung by Western Union and came into the Park via Berenda Grant's Sulphur Spring, and Wawona. It was used by the Army from 1890 until 1908.

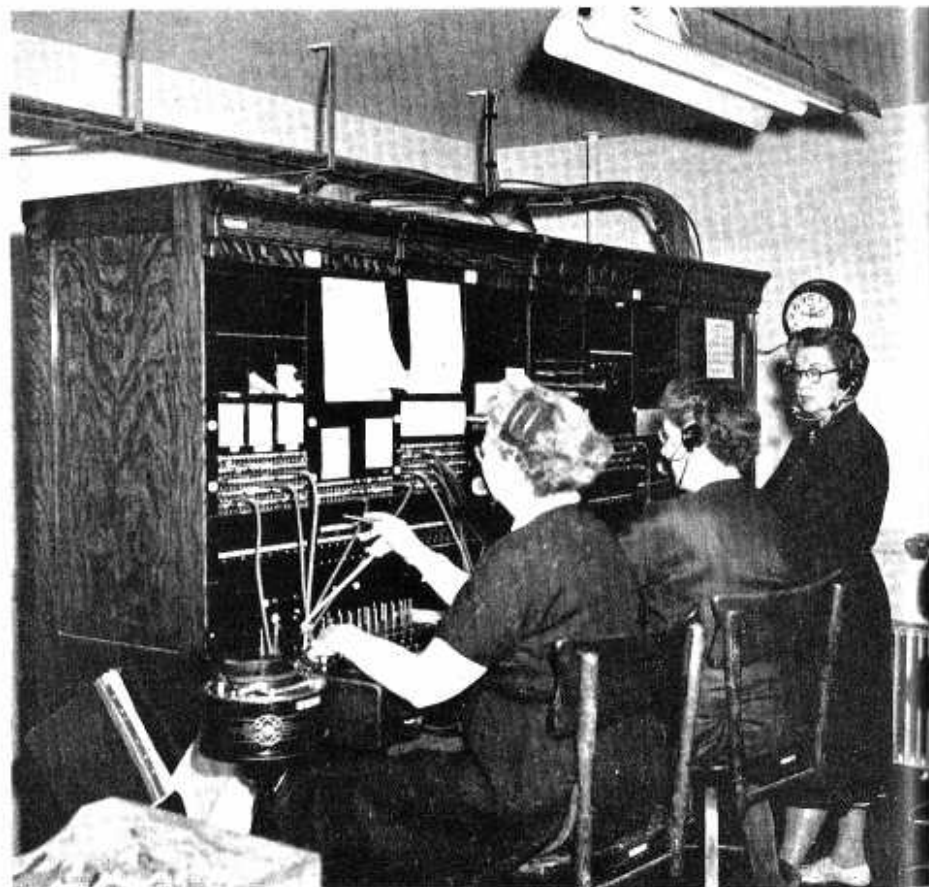
The following information was gleaned from annual reports to the Secretary of the Interior by the Acting Superintendents. These were the different commanding officers of troops stationed here from 1890 until 1915, during days of Army management of the park.

As early as 1905, pleas were made to the Secretary for funds to construct telephone lines from headquarters to outpost stations, the urgency for such telephone service being emphasized by the fact that it was more than four days' travel to these posts, and often by the time instructions could be received from headquarters by courier the need for action had passed.

In 1906, a plea was again made, stating that \$2000 would be an amount sufficient to build lines to the outposts.

In the 1907 report to the Secretary we read, "Through the Signal Corps of the War Department, material and

help was obtained for the Administration to construct a telephone line between Headquarters and Wawona." In this same year permission was also given to the Yosemite Transportation Company, the Yosemite Terminal Hotel, and Mr. Cook of the Sentinel Hotel, to construct a temporary telephone line from El Portal (which had just become the terminal point of the Yosemite Valley Railroad) to Yosemite Valley for the purpose of learning the number of passengers and stages, and which to provide. An interesting side note is that to this day during summer the Merced ticket agent phones the Yosemite Park and Curry Co.



This switchboard has handled all of Yosemite's telephone calls since 1925. From the Chief Operator Ruth Mohn, Callie Olsen and Dona Danielson.

office in the valley and gives them this same information. In winter when the bus arrives at Yosemite Lodge, the agent phones the Ahwahnee Hotel to tell them how many guests to expect. The Interior Department profited from this 1907 permit as there was no cost to the government for the construction of the El Portal Yosemite line, even though the government was allowed to install two phones on the line.

In 1908 through the courtesy of the War Department, sufficient material was obtained for constructing a telephone line from Yosemite Valley to Hetch-Hetchy. Crane Flat and Hog Ranch (Mather) outposts were also connected to this line. According to the report this wire was strung a distance of 35 miles in the relatively short period of 15 days. Through the use of this extended service fires near Hetch-Hetchy and Hog Ranch were reached by a large detail 2½ days earlier than otherwise would have been possible. In the same year the Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company, with the permission of the Department of the Interior, constructed a line from El Portal to the Sentinel Hotel. This enabled Yosemite Valley to be in telephonic communications with the outside world. The contract stated that government messages would be sent free.

In 1909 forty-seven more miles of telephone wire were put up - to the Mariposa Grove, the Merced Grove, and to Lake Eleanor. Three other outposts were to be connected by the next spring - Aspen Valley, Soda Springs, and Buck Camp.

In 1910 and 1911 the lines were maintained by the soldiers. At this time an extension was made to Camp Curry (not a military camp) from the Sentinel Hotel.

The contract with the Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company was modified in 1912 to provide an annual fee to the government, and the government in turn would pay for the transmission of its telephone and telegraph messages.

The 1913 report complained of too many telephones on the line and recommended that a central office and switchboard be installed and that heavier telephone wire be used.

In 1914 when the Army was relieved of administering the national parks and civilian employees took over, a 30-line switchboard was installed. This took care of 26 government phones, 11 for the concessionaires, 3 phones at El Portal, and 3 at Wawona, with a total of 87 miles of line.

In 1915, improvements were made to facilitate further the communication service. The switchboard's capacity was enlarged, and heavier wire was strung. In this year there were 153 miles of line and 66 phones in use. Today there are about 600 phones in use in Yosemite National Park and 600 miles of line.

The switchboard installed in 1914 was located in an old building across the road from the present movie pavillion in the Old Village. In 1917 the exchange was moved to the Administration building, then located between the present store building and the movie pavillion.

In 1925 when the new Administration building was built, the exchange was moved into it and extensive work was carried on in improving the telephone system. With the thought of keeping the beauty of the park unmarred by telephone lines, 8000 feet of underground cable was installed. Today with the changeover, the work of putting telephone lines underground goes on.



The last telephone operators to work in Yosemite. Left to right, Front row, Ruth Mohn, Mary Rogers, Callie Olsen, Dona Donielson. Back row, Jane Foushee, Jo Ann Page.

Also in 1925 Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company, to meet the increased long distance telephone traffic, installed an "A" type carrier. This is a device that makes one wire carry several conversations at once. In 1938 to overcome toll line failures due to frequent storms, a radio link was installed between Yosemite and Merced.

In 1934 radio communications was introduced as a permanent part of the park communication service and to supplement the wire lines.

In 1946 and 1947 the Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company improved their long distance carrier service again. Since then and up to now there has been a constant effort maintained to enlarge the system to meet the increasing demands for satisfactory telephone service. In spite of the continued improvements the present 155-line switchboard is inadequate to take care of the heavy summer traffic. The new automatic switchboard will have a capacity of 400 lines, which should provide adequate service for the time being.

The next step in improving communications will be the installation

of modern mobile radio equipment in vehicles and at points now not reached by the telephone system.

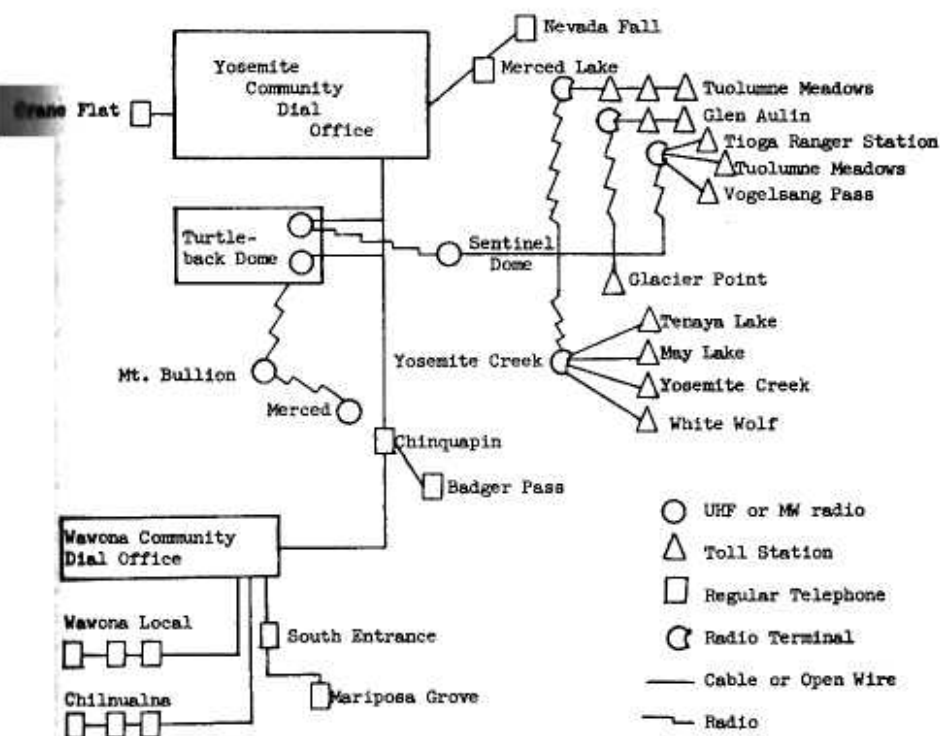
Mention was made earlier of the automatic dial switching equipment which is now being installed. This will be in a new building in the parking area a short distance north of the museum wildflower garden. In this building, known as the Community Dial Office, all local calls including El Portal, Arch Rock, Cascades, Foresta, Crane Flat, Nevada Fall and Merced Lake will be handled automatically. Similarly a community dial office at Wawona will handle local calls there, including Chilnualna Village, South Entrance and Mariposa Grove, Chinquapin and Badger Pass. To reach Tuolumne Meadows and surrounding outpost phones such as White Wolf, Yosemite Creek, May Lake, Tenaya Lake, Glacier Point, and points outside of the park, the system becomes more complex, necessitating a microwave radio system. To call Tuolumne Meadows from Yosemite Valley, for example, the message is carried by cable to Turtleback Dome where the call is radioed to Mt. Bullion, a high point near Mariposa,



The message goes then to the Merced telephone operator who dials the Tuolumne Meadows number. Once again the call goes to Mt. Bullion, which relays it back to Turtle-back Dome. From there it is relayed to Sentinel Dome, where a repeater

station relays to the terminal exchange station at Tuolumne Meadows. From there the call goes by telephone wire to the number called.

Below is a diagram of the new telephone system which will make this seem less complex:



The contrast between the very first telegraph line in 1870 and the modern complicated system being installed in 1956 is indeed great. Through the past winter and spring local Yosemite residents have seen the green telephone trucks with their crews of men busy laying cable, installing new dial phones and various other equipment for the new system. Although we will all welcome the speed and efficiency of the

new dial telephones, we will miss the personal touch of our local operators who could always be depended upon to know where the doctor was, tell us when the latest baby was born, if the river was going to flood, or whether the Joneses were out of the valley on vacation when they did not answer their phone. Too often thanks go unsaid; but to these ladies go our heartfelt thanks for their unselfish devotion to their jobs.

## THE YOSEMITE VALLEY SCHOOL

By Laurence V. Degnan

## CONCLUSION

Another visitor, whom I have special reason to remember, was Miss Sarah Horton, a very lovely lady, who operated a girls' school in Oakland, California. Every other year she would take a group of her girls to Yosemite for the summer, where they generally occupied Hutchings' cabin. She and my mother became great friends, and used to discuss plans for my attending the University of California, many years in the future. One day, during Miss Hall's second term, Miss Horton visited the school, and being a teacher herself, took a great interest in the proceedings. Miss Hall put us through our paces, and my act was the reading of a little poem (the title and author of which I do not remember) dealing with a bird's addiction to cold water. I do not think I will ever forget these two lines, in which the bird speaks:

Cold water, cold water, O that is my lay,  
And I sing in its praise as I twitter away.

I swept through the piece without a hitch; then Miss Horton threw the well known monkey wrench by asking me the meaning of the word "lay". Did I know it? No! Of course not! I was embarrassed, of course, but my feelings were nothing compared to Miss Hall's; she could cheerfully have boiled me in oil. Then my mother learned about my fumble, and I do not suppose I heard the last of it for the next couple of years.

The school term generally closed with a little exhibition, or "entertainment", with recitations, dialogues, tableaux, and the like, attended by the parents and anyone else who might care to view the proceedings.

Miss Hall closed one of her two terms on October 16, 1889 and the other on October 17, 1890, both with appropriate exercises, the second of which I remember vividly. The audience, consisting of 16 or 17 people, were seated on benches strung lengthwise along the walls of the schoolroom. At the close of the program Miss Hall invited the gentlemen of the audience to say a few words. (In those good old well-ordered days, ladies, like children, were to be seen and not heard, and so they were not asked to speak). Mr. William Coffman, of the firm of Coffman & Kenney, who operated the stables, was the first to respond. He was an excellent speaker, and made an impressive talk; all the men who followed him (except Julius Starke) began by apologizing for not being Demosthenes that Mr. Coffman was. Starke, who had taken over Adolph Sinning's woodworking and curio shop after Sinning's death on June 20, 1889, was quite often drunk, and whether it was so on this occasion or not, he made a long, fluent speech of his own, apologizing to nobody. He described his feelings and emotions, repeating often the phrase "in my heart", "in my heart", with his hand over his heart, and bowing.



Miss Hall wrote in the school register, under the list of visitors on October 16, 1889, the words, "Closing exercises said to be a decided success. F. M. H." Similarly, on October 17, 1890, she wrote, "Closing exercises said to a success. F. M. Hall."

Annie Kerrins put on more elaborate shows, which were held in the Guardian's (Galen Clark's) office in the Cosmopolitan Saloon building, or in a large room adjoining the office. Some smaller rooms, perhaps including Clark's living quarters, were used as dressing rooms for the parts. If my memory is correct, Miss Kerrins did not limit the exercises to the closing of school; I think she put on at least one mid-summer performance, I know it was staged when her sister Mamie was visiting her in the valley (Mamie Kerrins did her first visit Annie in the valley in July 1891), and Mamie helped to train the pupils in their various acts. She was quite an elocutionist, and in any entertainment that she was connected with, she generally had prominent billing for an act of her own. On this occasion she elocuted with a vengeance, with a heavy, dramatic recitation.

The following account of the exercises at the close of Annie Kerrins' first term in Yosemite is quoted from the *Mariposa Gazette* of October 24, 1886:

The Yosemite School taught by Miss Annie Kerrins closed Oct. 16th. An entertainment was held on Friday evening at the Guardian's office. The programme consisted of songs, recitations, drills, dialogues, and concluded with a laughable farce. "The Tambores Drill", by Tissie and Guy Barnard, Oniska, Charley and Blanche Kenney and Annie McCarty and Allan Keys was heartily applauded. "The Wand Drill", was also a prominent feature. The following participated: Oniska and Daisy Degnan, Mamie, John and Willie McCarty, Charlie, Alice and May. The recitation "How Kate Shelly

crossed the bridge", by Oniska Kenney, "Bill Mason's bride", by Tissie Barnard, and "How Jimmy tended the baby", by Charley Kenney were exceedingly well rendered. Blanche, Alice and Kay Kenney, Lawrence and Daisy Degnan, Emmet and Hattie McCarthy recited very nicely. Walter Kenney, Allan Keys and Guy Barnard. The closing tableau "The Gates Ajar" showed to great advantage Yosemite's pretty school girls.

(Signed) I. X. L.

The *Mariposa Gazette* of October 23, 1886 devotes an entire column to an account of the closing exercises of Mamie Kerrins' first term at the Yosemite school. (She taught the school in 1886, 1887, and 1888; her sister Annie in 1891 and 1892). This was before my time at the school, but most of the performers were schoolmates of mine later. On this occasion also, Mamie Kerrins delivered a recitation, and she seems to have been followed by a guest artist, mentioned by the *Gazette* as follows:

Miss Kerrins' able recitation was followed by one from Miss Cora Currie, of Chinese Camp, by request, and the beautiful manner in which "Over the Hills to the Poor House" was given, held the audience in deepest silence, a hearty burst of applause greeting its finish.



Mrs. W. E. Gallison, teacher, 1893-94

In the later years of my attendance the closing exercises became less elaborate, and sometimes were dispensed with.

And so, from year to year, life progressed at this little schoolhouse back among the rocks. Its shortcomings were recognized however, and at a meeting of the Yosemite Commission in San Francisco on July 13, 1896, Commissioner Boggs made a motion that a committee be appointed to petition the State Legislature for an appropriation of \$2,000 for the construction of a stone schoolhouse in the valley. This was made the special order for the next meeting of the Board, but at that meeting, August 10, 1896, it was laid over until the next meeting, to be held September 14, 1896. In the meantime, on August 24, 1896, the principal hotel in the valley, the Stoneman House, burned to the ground, and the schoolhouse picture changed completely. Indeed, it would seem that the rivalry between the valley's two hotels, the Stoneman House and the Sentinel Hotel, had indirectly provided for a new schoolhouse.

Ever since 1888, when the Stoneman House began operations, and Black's and Leidig's hotels were torn down, the field was left to the Stoneman House and Barnard's, later known as the Sentinel Hotel, and the competition between the two was keen. J. J. Cook, the proprietor of the Stoneman, would protest to the Commissioners against the Sentinel's soliciting of business, to the detriment of the Stoneman. Likewise, A. B. Glasscock, proprietor of the Sentinel, would complain against similar soliciting by Cook, to the detriment of the Sentinel. Apparently as a result of this wrangling, the

Commission, at their meeting in the valley on June 4, 1896, adopted this motion by Governor James Budd:

It is the order of the Commissioners that no stage company shall maintain an office at either hotel in the Valley, nor shall any agent of any stage company reside at either hotel, and any stage company now having an office at either hotel shall immediately remove said office to some other place.

The next step, evidently in compliance with this order, was the construction that same summer, of a stage and telegraph office at the side of the road near the site of the present Le Conte Memorial Lodge, a location that was probably chosen because it was nearly half way between the two hotels, and a man by the name of Colton was placed in charge. The new office, however, did not operate very long, as the destruction of the Stoneman House on August 24, 1896, left it high and dry, in the middle of nowhere as far as hotels were concerned, and it was abandoned as a stage office.

At the next annual meeting of the Commissioners, held in the valley on June 3, 1897, the Guardian's annual report called attention to the need for a new schoolhouse, and pointed out that the abandoned stage office would be suitable for the purpose. The action on the Guardian's suggestion is thus recorded on page 131 of the minutes of the Commissioners for their meeting of June 3, 1897:

The question of a new building for schoolhouse having been thoroughly discussed, a motion of Commissioner Ostrander, seconded, the Guardian was instructed to prepare the building constructed last year for stage office and situated on the road between the Sentinel Hotel and the Stoneman House, the same to be occupied as a public school house.



The stage office-school in 1907, Miss Kitty Dexter, teacher. Front row from left: Alice Degnan, Lawrence Sovulewski, Ellen Boysen, Lillian Parks, Evelyn Tucker, Eugene Tucker, Harlow Parks. Back row, Miss Dexter, Mrs. Boysen, Mr. Sweetland, Ruth Degnan.

Pursuant to this action, the building was turned over to the school and we moved into it for the remainder of the 1897 term. Because of illness in her family, our teacher, Miss May White, had to return to her home in Stockton. Cosie Hutchings took over at the new school and finished out the 1897 term. The other teachers at this location were, in succession: Julia McClenathan, Alice Wace, Nettie L. Craighan, and Kitty Dexter.

My own stay at this new schoolhouse was short: early in the 1898 term I dropped out of school and went to work as a roustabout for William Thomas, a prominent lawyer of San Francisco, who from June 15 to August 15, 1898 had a summer camp (with about a dozen tents and many house guests coming and going), on the very spot where Camp Curry was to start operations the following year. I worked for Mr. Thomas until he closed his camp; then I was sent away to boarding school and my school days in Yosemite were ended.

The new schoolhouse was a vast improvement over the old one, and served nicely in its original location until some time during Kitty Dexter's tenure, probably 1909 or 1910, when the building was moved to a spot near the forks of the road about 300 yards southwesterly from the site of the present National Park headquarters. It was succeeded in 1918 by the present school building, near the northeast corner of J. M. Hutchings' little farm. This schoolhouse in turn, is being superseded by a new one, to be completed in February 1956. The old telegraph office-school house has been used as a residence for some years, but is scheduled for demolition and replacement by a newer residence in the near future.

Although the school plant was steadily improving, the short terms always bothered my parents, who sought some means of making up for the time lost during the long winter vacations. Accordingly, teacher or no teacher, we were not permitted to throw our books aside at the close of school, and leave them



On May 28, 1908 the Native Sons of the Golden West held a convention in Yosemite Valley during which two flags were presented to the Yosemite School, which had been moved to its north-valley site. Colonel Benson, military superintendent, holds the American flag. Children from the left, Alice Degnan, Ellen Boysea, unidentified girl, Mildred Sovulewski, Ruth Degnan, Evelyn Tucker, Virginia Best, Grace Sovulewski, Eugene Tucker.

until school resumed in the spring, but we had to continue studying them. At times, one of our kindly neighbors, Mrs. Nell Rivers (who later became Mrs. C. B. Atkinson) held informal winter school sessions in our house; as I became older, my winter chores (chopping wood, shoveling snow, and the like) were increased by the addition of the very unpleasant task of teaching my younger brothers and sisters.



Laurence V. Degnan, author of this article, on the eve of retirement from the position of senior civil engineer, San Francisco Public Utilities Committee. Photo by R. Sterner.

On one or two occasions my parents, at their own expense, hired a teacher to conduct school in the valley during the winter. One such private teacher, who taught us during the winter of 1897-98, was Miss Elizabeth G. Higgins, from Stockton, who had taught in the schools there. She was a friend of Miles Wallace (the Guardian who succeeded Galen Clark) and his wife, and during her stay in Yosemite, lived with them

in their quarters in the old Cosmopolitan Saloon building. The school sessions were held in a vacant room in the house formerly occupied by Adolph Sinning and his successor, Julius Starke, across the road from the Guardian's office. At another time, after I had gone away to school, my folks arranged for Nettie Craighan to live at our house and conduct a winter school there.

As time went on, and the number of permanent residents in the valley grew (particularly after the completion of the Yosemite Valley Railroad in 1907), the school terms were lengthened to about seven and one-half or eight months. Then in 1916, the regular full school term was adopted.

Today the school is the latest word in modern, well-equipped plants, constructed by the U. S. Office of Education, with 5 teachers and 104 pupils. The teaching staff, provided by Mariposa County, consists of Mrs. Pauline Shorb, principal and teacher of the sixth grade, who has given me much kindly help in gathering information; Mr. Art Turner, seventh and eighth grades; Mrs. Hazel Overton, fourth and fifth grades; Mrs. Edith Lamkin, second and third grades; and Mrs. Bona May McHenry, first grade and kindergarten.

The school has indeed made a long march from the log and tree of 1875, or even from the rough little shack of my time, with its mosquitoes and its audience of long, green lizards.

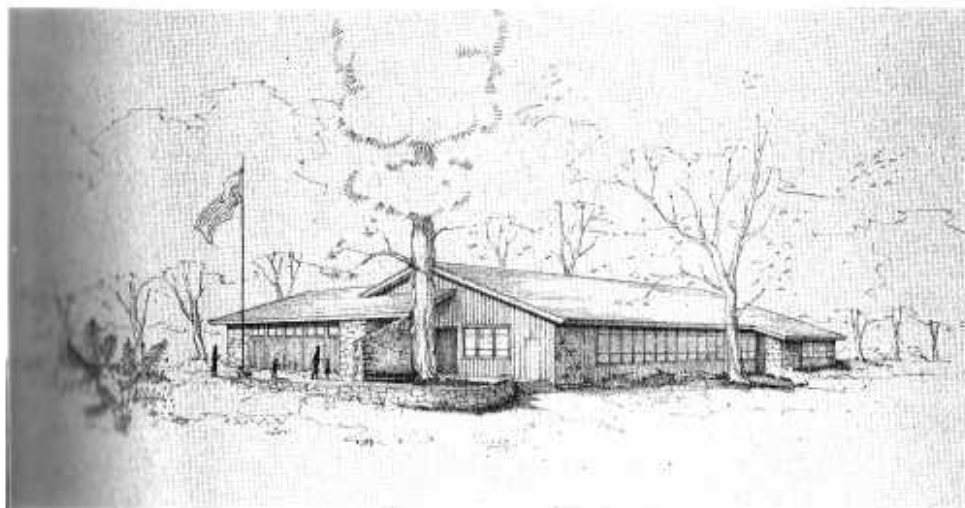
But unchanged through it all is the spirit of the loyal, hard-working teachers who, whether on a log or in a tent, in a shack or in a modern schoolhouse, do their best with what they have, in the vital but sometimes trying and thankless task of molding Americans.

## A STUDY IN CONTRASTS—

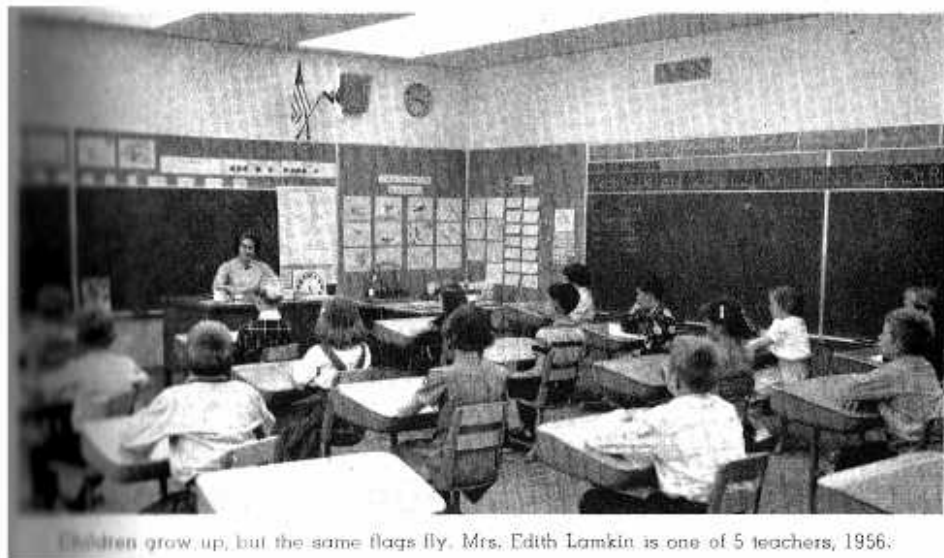


The Yosemite Valley School in 1877, Miss May Anderson, teacher.





The Yosemite Valley School, 1956.



Children grow up, but the same flags fly. Mrs. Edith Lamkin is one of 5 teachers, 1956.



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Dan Anderson