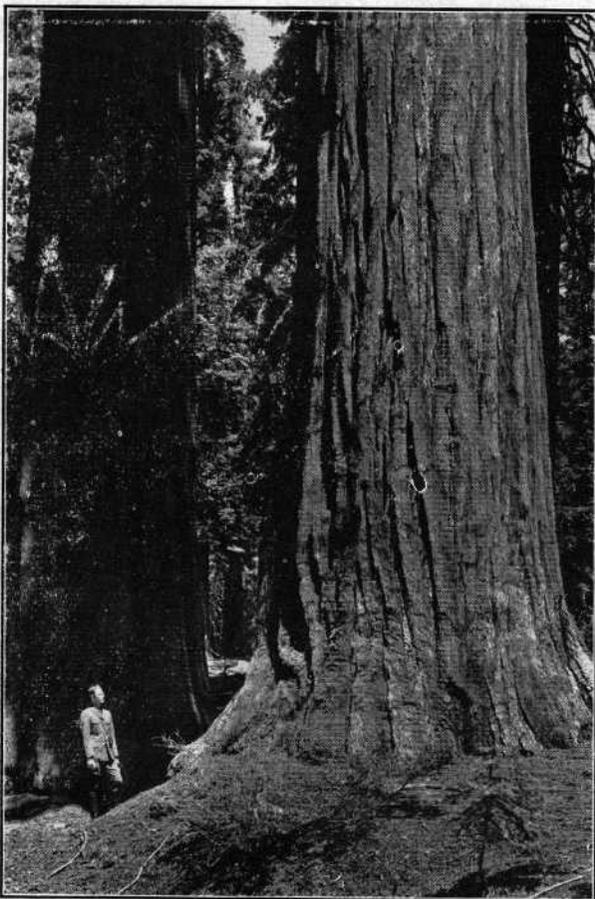


YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES

Vol. XXV

June, 1946

No. 6



Yosemite Nature Notes

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

A. Kittredge, Superintendent

C. F. Brockman, Park Naturalist

M. V. Walker, Associate Park Naturalist

VOL. XXV

JUNE, 1946

NO. 6

YOSEMITE AND THE MOTHER LODE COUNTRY

By C. Frank Brockman, Park Naturalist

No area in California is so rich in historical association as is the region traversed by Highway 49—the Mother Lode Highway. In this region was enacted one of the most dramatic chapters in American history. Rich in gold, in the '50s it beckoned to adventurous individuals throughout the world, resulting in a migration by land and sea that was not only extensive in the numbers involved but fabulous in its cosmopolitan nature. Here high principles were contrasted with greed and avarice, hardship with occasional luxury, humor with pathos and tragedy.

In its heyday the Mother Lode area was dotted with flourishing towns, the names of which were on the lips of people everywhere. Relatively few of these have retained a semblance of their former importance. Some, although deeply etched in the pages of history, now exist in name only.

Several of the highways which

reach Yosemite National Park from the west are richly endowed with the historical heritage of the Mother Lode. The southern portion of this area is closely linked with the early history of the Park, for it was the flood of miners into areas adjacent to this region that prompted aggressive acts by the Indians and eventually touched off the Mariposa Indian War (1850-51). This, in due course, led to the formation of the Mariposa Battalion and the first entrance into and the virtual discovery of Yosemite Valley (March 1851).

Along the All-Year Highway to Yosemite, 37 miles from Merced, one passes through Mariposa. (1) Although a modern mountain community it contains a number of reminders of its former opulence when, in the '50s, it was a metropolis of the southern mines. The heavy masonry walls and iron shutters which typify a few of the buildings along the main street are reminiscent of those

(1) A few miles west of Mariposa the highway passes near the site of Agua Fria, once a rich placer "diggings" which was the first county seat of Mariposa County. Not a vestige of this town remains.



Historic Mariposa County Court House

days. Founded about 1849, it lies within the bounds of the famous Mariposa Estate. This was a grant of about 44,000 acres which, in 1844, was given by Manuel Micheltorena, (then the Mexican governor of California) to Juan Alvarado from whom it was obtained by Col. John C. Fremont in 1847. The existence of gold on the Grant was, of course, unknown at the time—as, indeed, was its exact location.

The history of the Mariposa Estate is a story in itself. It is characterized by the series of legal tangles which Fremont was forced to resort to in obtaining title to his property. The old Mariposa court house, built in

1854 and the most interesting building in Mariposa, was the scene of those famous trials.

Fremont himself established his headquarters at Bear Valley, 12 miles north of Mariposa on the Mother Lode Highway. Today one can scarcely realize that this place was one of the most important centers in the region and for a time the home of a famous American who barely missed becoming President of the United States. Enroute from Mariposa to Bear Valley one passes through Mount Bullion, another "ghost town" near which one finds the location of the Mt. Ophir mint, marked by a metal plaque. Here, because a more convenient medium of exchange than gold dust was needed, the famous \$50.00 octagonal gold slugs were minted on official approval of Congress, in the early '50s. To the west, 13 miles from Mt. Bullion, one comes to Hornitos which for a time was one of the wildest towns in the Mother Lode area. The Hornitos area is rich in tales concerning the famous bandit Joaquin Murietta. Later it became an important point on the Millerton road which joined Stockton with Los Angeles. Here one finds the ruins of the old Ghiradelli store—foundation of the chocolate king's fortune.

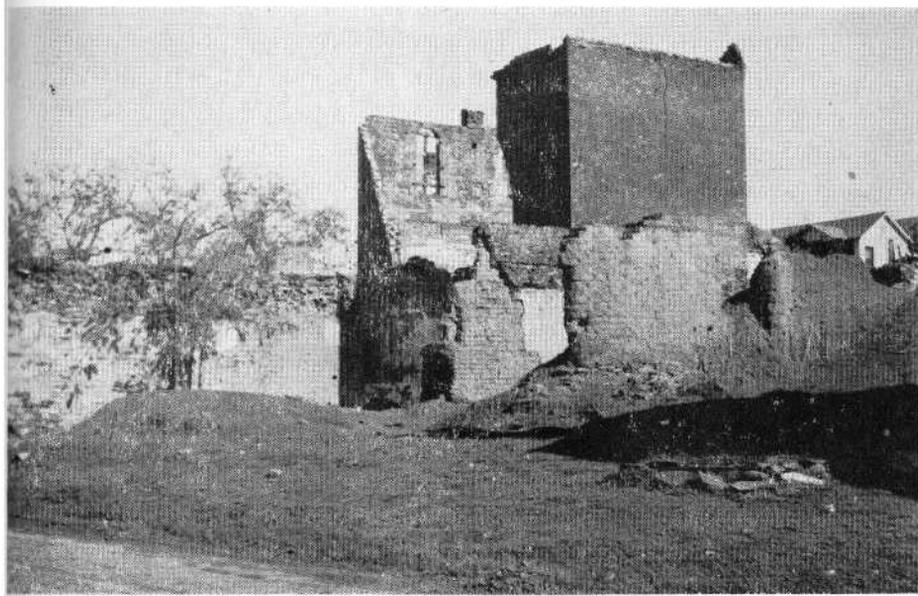
Beyond Bear Valley the highway descends laboriously into the deep canyon of the Merced, crossing that river at Bagby, and eventually comes to Coulterville. This town was once the center of an extensive and

prosperous mining area. It bears the name of George Coulter whose store (established in 1850) served as the nucleus of the community. As was typical of these early towns, Coulterville was visited by a series of disastrous fires which all but eliminated most of the early structures. However, the remnants of a few remain to give one an insight into its historic past. This town was one of the principal points along the famous Coulterville Road (now largely obsolete), first road to be constructed to the floor of Yosemite Valley (1874).

Beyond Coulterville one crosses into Tuolumne County and makes a junction with the Big Oak Flat Road, along the lower reaches of which

one finds such locations as Chinese Camp, an important place in the 50's. Chinese Camp, as the name implies, was once characterized by the presence of a great colony of Chinese miners.

Eastward along the Big Oak Flat road one climbs the famous Priest Grade over which, in the '80s, labored horsedrawn stages enroute to Yosemite Valley for this was a popular route to the Valley at that time. The writings of Hutchings and his contemporaries are studded with interesting references to this period. At the summit of the grade once stood the famous hotel operated by W. C. Priest. Beyond lie the towns of Big Oak Flat and Groveland, both relics of the early days when this



Ruins of Ghiradelli store—Hornitos



Hangman's Tree on Big Oak Flat Road

region was characterized by rich placer "diggings." The former owes its name to the fact that it was once characterized by an oak of tremendous size. However, the activity of miners working the gravels for gold reduced the level of the area, eventually undermining the tree. Its prostrate form was later burned in one of several disastrous fires that swept this community. Groveland was originally known as Garrotte. Beyond, at a point once known as "Second Garrote," one finds an old oaken snag distinguished as the "Hangman's Tree." If one believes numerous legends it figured on many occasions in carrying out pioneer justice. Nearby is a small house identi-

fied as the "Bret Harte cabin." Actually it was built by Chaffee and Chamberlain, two inseparable cronies, who settled here in 1852. Unfortunately the oft repeated tale that Bret Harte often visited here, knew these men intimately and built them into his famous story, "Tennessee's Pardner" as the principal characters, is subject to scrutiny.

Although not as directly linked with the history of Yosemite National Park as some of the towns farther south on Highway 49, Sonora had an early association with the rugged northern section of this region. It is a busy, prosperous community but the modern trend has not entirely obscured evidences of its interesting past. Picturesque narrow streets thread their way about the hills and there are many buildings that carry a flavor of the town's early days. Four miles distant lies Columbia, the most interesting and best preserved of the old mining camps. It was due to this fact that it was designated as a State Park in 1945. At one time it boasted a population of 15,000 people and gold to the fabulous amount of \$88,000,000 was reclaimed from the rich gravels in the immediate area.

The Sonora-Columbia region is of further note as the center of the Bret Harte - Mark Twain country. In this vicinity one finds the locale of many stories by these two famous American writers.

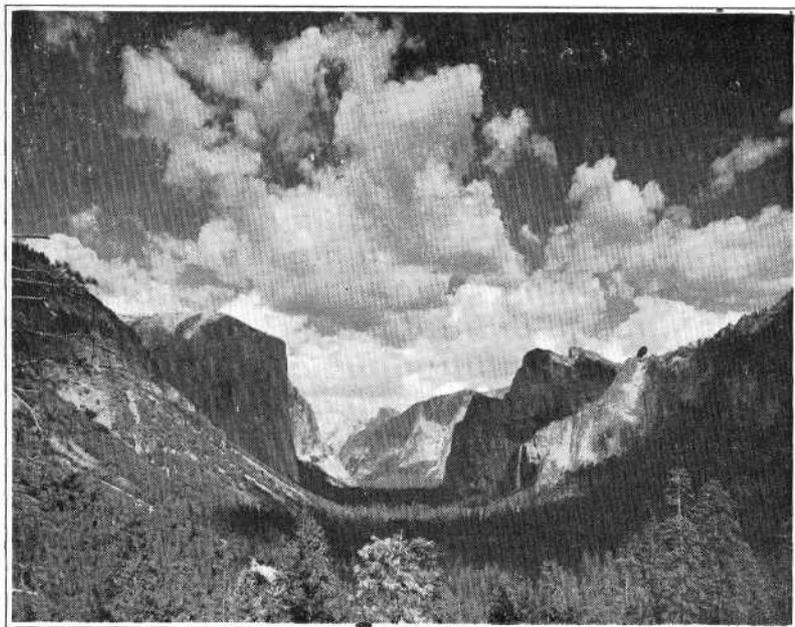
Traveling to or from Yosemite

National Park on any one of several highways the visitor will do well to consider the historical interests, to a large extent often ignored, that lie along the way. Even a casual in-

spection of the following books will aid one in recreating in his own mind the epic "days of '49" as they applied to and affected the Yosemite region.

Selected References

- Buckbee, Edna Bryan—"The Saga of Old Tuolumne." New York, Press of the Pioneers, 1935. 526 p., illus.
- Chamberlain, Newell D.—"The Call of Gold." Mariposa, California, Mariposa Gazette Press, 1936. 183 p., illus.
- Cleland, R. G.—"From Wilderness to Empire (A History of California, 1542-1900)." New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1944. 388 p., illus.
- Farquahar, Francis P.—"The Life of Joaquin Murietta, the Brigand Chief of California." (California Police Gazette, 1859). Notes on Murietta and Bibliographical Notes by Francis P. Farquahar. San Francisco, Grabhorn Press, 1932.
- Gillis, William R.—"Memories of Mark Twain and Steve Gillis." Sonora, California, Banner Press. 128 p., illus. (2nd edition)
- Glasscock, G. B.—"A Golden Highway." Indianapolis, Indiana. Bobbs-Merrill, 1934. 333 p., illustrated.
- Jackson, Joseph Henry—"Anybody's Gold." New York, D. Appleton-Century Co., 1941. 468 p., illus.
- Stellman, Louis J.—"Mother Lode, the Story of Gold Rush Days." San Francisco, California. Harr Wagner Pub. Co., 1934, 304 p., illustrated.



THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE—ITS THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY

By Frank A. Kittredge, Superintendent

The year 1946 marks an important anniversary in the history of conservation in the United States. In 1916, just thirty years ago, the National Park Service was established by Act of Congress, with Stephen T. Mather as the first Director.

Of course, we had a number of national parks before 1916. The first, Yellowstone National Park, was established in 1872. Too, the importance of conserving significant scenic resources was recognized at an even earlier date for the Yosemite Grant (Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias) was set aside from the public domain by a public spirited Congress and the act signed by Abraham Lincoln in June 1864. These two small areas which comprised the Yosemite Grant were administered by the State of California until they were receded to the Federal Government in 1906. At that time they were incorporated into Yosemite National Park which had been established in 1890, and which surrounded the Valley and adjoined the Mariposa Grove.

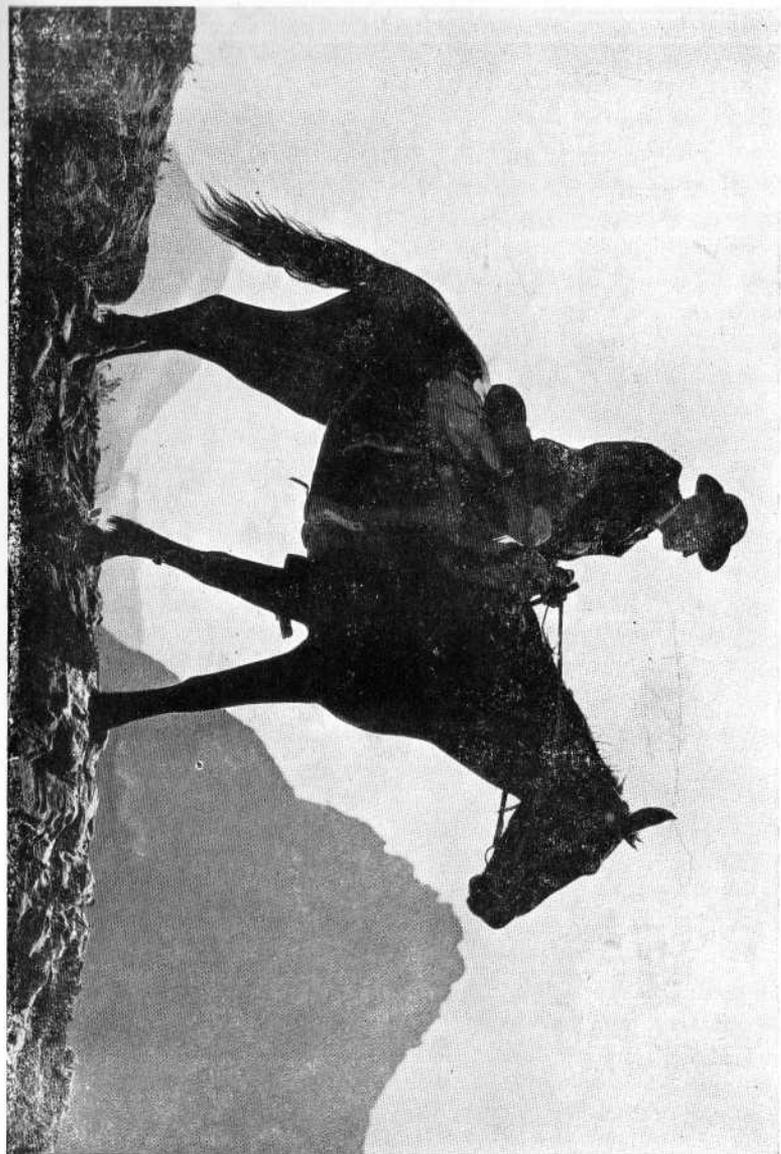
During the 44 years between the establishment of Yellowstone National Park and the establishment of the National Park Service the new national parks had some rather difficult administrative experiences for there was no centralized administration. The situation as it existed at that time is adequately expressed

in this statement from "Early Administration of the Parks," a paper prepared by the Region One Office of the National Park Service — "It cannot be said that such a thing as a park system existed, if the word 'system' be used in the sense of a disciplined, coordinated unit. Every park was in a very real sense a law unto itself, and the parks were more of a conglomeration . . . than a system."

In the early days various national parks were administered by a number of existing Federal agencies. For instance, Yosemite National Park was administered by the War Department. It soon became apparent that if the national parks, with their specialized problems, were to be most properly and efficiently administered a specialized organization for that purpose would be required.

Stephen T. Mather, a public spirited conservationist, visited his friend Franklin K. Lane, then Secretary of the Interior, and outlined the need for a different plan of administration for the national parks. Secretary Lane requested that Mather serve as first Director of the National Parks under a National Park Service.

Mr. Mather not only appreciated the importance of conserving trees for lumber, water for irrigation, and grass for grazing, but he saw the great need for conserving in the



Stephen T. Mather, first Director of the National Park Service

small areas constituting the national parks the trees for inspiration, the mountain meadows for their scenic beauty. He recognized the great but

intangible values embodied in the preservation of the outstanding significant areas of the nation in an unspoiled condition. He served as

Director until 1929, a year before his death. Today, bronze plaques in every national park proclaim, "There will never come an end to the good that he has done."

Under the National Park Service the system has grown in numbers and importance. There are now 27 national parks, (in addition to other related areas) each unique and dis-

tinctive in some form, each outstandingly different from others in the system. They present, in dramatic, inspirational fashion, significant examples of the geology, biology, archeology, or history of our nation and are being administered so that these significant features may be retained, unspoiled, for the enjoyment of future generations.

MARMOTS IN THE HIGH COUNTRY

By M. V. Walker, Associate Park Naturalist

Many times during the course of each summer season the attendant in the Yosemite Museum listens patiently to something about as follows:—"What were those animals we saw up near Yosemite Creek, Tenaya Lake and in the Tuolumne Meadows? They looked something like badgers but I know they were not badgers. When they ran they kept close to the ground, and they disappeared into the rocks alongside the road. Occasionally one would seem to run into the culverts under the highway. Several were observed lying flat on the rocks along the road, apparently enjoying the sunshine. They were larger than ground squirrels, but not quite as large as a badger, and I know they were not porcupines. I would surely like to know what they were. Do you have any idea what kind of animals they are?"

The museum attendant usually has a pretty good "idea" after the very first question, but long years

of experience has taught him that it is futile to try to identify the beasts too quickly. The animals appear so unusual to the observers that they always insist on relating the entire story and approximately the same set of facts regarding the actions and behavior of the mysterious animals.

The animals observed were of course the large Sierra marmots. They are often called "rockchucks" in the western mountains, and they are closely related to the woodchuck of the east. Another common name is "ground hog." Because they live in the higher elevations where the winters are long, these animals hibernate for several months, and do not appear in the spring until the first blades of new grass or other food are available. Many of these marmots have not yet learned that they are supposed to wake up on a certain day in February, but instead they sleep right on through that day.



Digitized by
Yosemite Online Library

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

Dan Anderson