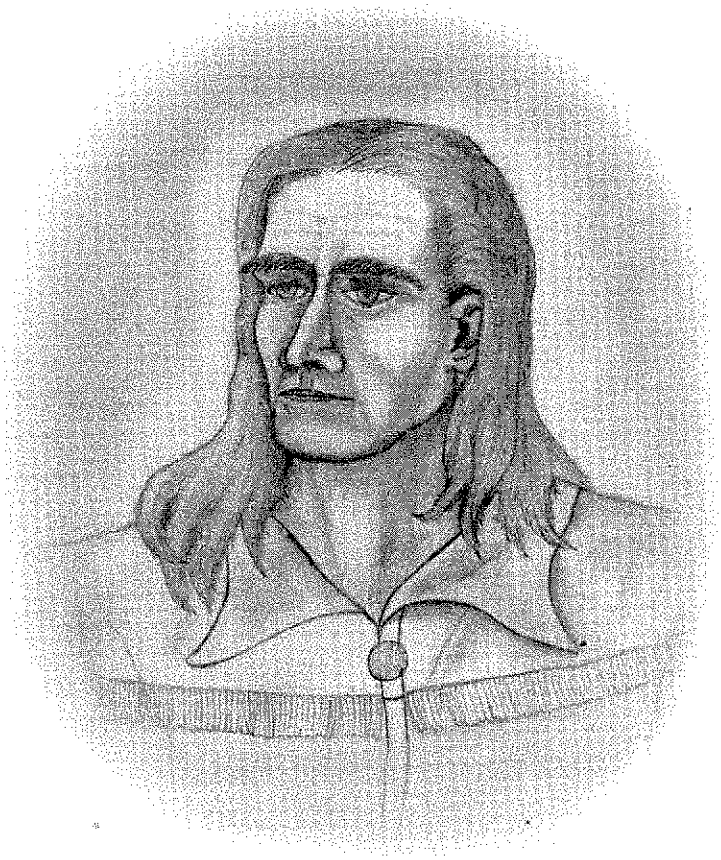
Yosemite Nature Notes

VOL. XXX NOVEMBER, 1951 NO. 11



Drawn by Lloyd D. Moore, Ranger Naturalist

An impression of James D. Savage

No photograph or picture of Maj. James D. Savage, the key figure in the story of Yosemite Valley's discovery, has ever come to light. The above impression of his probable likeness is based on the excellent description appearing in "A White Medicine-Man" beginning on the opposite page.

Cover Photo: Aerial view of Half Dome and part of the Yosemite high Sierra, vicinity of Yosemite Valley. Made and donated to Yosemite Museum by Mr. Clarence Srock of Aptos, California. See back cover for outline key.

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

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A WHITE MEDICINE-MAN[1]

By James O'Meara

Of the early life of the subject of this sketch, very little is known. It is only of his career in California that mention will be made. He was a pioneer of the Territory before the period of Statehood; and the vast region then included in the boundaries of Mariposa was his broad field of action. He was above medium stature, of Herculean frame, with a broad, square chest and sturdy limbs, and from his large and grandly supported head the thick suit of long and uncut yellowish-brown hair fell in a graceful wild mass about his Taurus-like neck, and upon the heavy-set shoulders. His face was of striking mold and expression, with broad forehead of fair front, strongly formed, projecting eyebrows, deep-set, large eyes of deep blue, tinged with gray, which changed in hue and luster with the humor of the man —ordinarily as placid as the motionless surface of the mountain lake, but in moments of passion, as flashing and penetrating as the fiery beams of torrid sun; bold and high cheek-bones, large and finely formed nose, a strong, firm mouth, with lips thin and denoting great decision, a well-rounded and prominent chin, and heavy, powerful jaws—all betokening the indomitable will of this master of his kind: and his complexion was of that hearty bronze which robust health and constant exposure to the elements impart in course of time. At his home, overseeing his large force of working and dependent Indians, or going about the country, he always went without other covering for the head than its natural protection against storm and rain and sun; and likewise he covered his feet only with moccasins, but mostly wore nothing upon them. It was only when he visited San Francisco that he indulged in the civilized wear of hat and boots; and these always seemed distasteful to him, as though they imposed an uncomfortable restraint upon him, to satisfy the demands or to conform to the exactions of town life. And his walk and action were so apparently confirmed in Indian characteristics, that the ordinary ob-

1. Editor's Note: This is the best character sketch of Maj. James D. Savage, the discoverer of Yosemite Valley, that has come to our attention. It is reprinted here from *The Californian* (now defunct) of February 1882, a photostatic copy of which has been furnished the Yosemite Museum by the University of California Library. Its presentation is another in our series on Yosemite history in observance of this Yosemite Centennial year—the 100th anniversary of the effective discovery of the valley by Major Savage's Mariposa Battalion, on March 25, 1851. Because of the length of this sketch it appears in two installments, the second of which will be in the December issue.

server would intuitively fancy that he was himself a native and to that wild life born and bred. But his visits were never for pleasure or curiosity, or without motive and purpose, business or otherwise. He was essentially a man of affairs, whether at home or abroad.

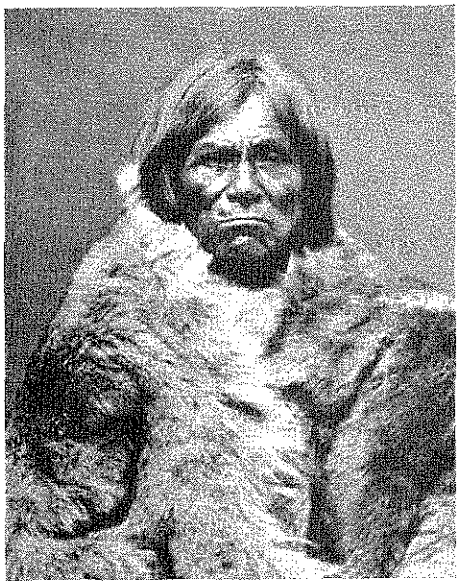
Where, or under what circumstances, Major James D. Savage became addicted to the life he adopted in California, is not known; but it remains an undisputed fact, that he had mastered every phase of Indian nature. There was nothing that the most active, the most expert, the fleetest, bravest, or craftiest, of any tribe he ever encountered or dwelt among, could do or had done, that he would not excel them in. He made it a point always to be first in the chase, foremost and fiercest in the fight, last in the field, and most effective in the attack or defense. He surpassed the "medicine-man" of the tribe in his mysterious specialty, by working wonders more astounding and appalling, by the efficacy of his treatment and the skill of his cures, and in mystifying and terrifying the tribe by the marvels and mysteries he wrought by artful means, to them inexplicable, to confound, awe, sway, and rule them to his purpose and profit, by simulating the supernatural tokens they most dreaded, and imposing upon their untutored and superstitious minds the conviction that he possessed and could exercise at will the awful attributes and all-controlling powers of the Great Spirit which they feared and worshiped. And even in their barbarian sports and dances, their wild orgies, and in the celebration of their victories in battle, by the savagest of savage saturnalia, and most diabolical ceremonies, he led and surpassed them all. Uneducated in his mother language, incapable of reading or writing a line of English, he was nevertheless as ready in the acquisition, and as facile in the use of the vernacular of all the various tribes he dwelt among, as was the famous Major Hopkins of the Florida Indian war campaign, in Jackson's time, or the celebrated Albert Pike of Choctaw and Creek and Cherokee renown. He could speak the peculiar dialect of each of the five great confederated tribes which then possessed the country from the Tuolumne to the Kern River Mountains, as glibly as their respective most fluent chiefs; and he had also mastered the key tongue of the head chiefs, in which they conversed among themselves, and which only themselves, of all their distinctive tribes, understood. It was their most important secret council "talk"; and by what means or strategy Savage acquired it, was unknown to the chiefs. These varied accomplishments and surprising powers caused the Indians, at the same time, to respect and fear him. By them he was more dreaded, and even more venerated, as well by their warriors and chiefs as by the tribes, than the aged and mighty Naiyakqua, the great head chief of the leagued Howechees, the Chookchanees, and Chowchillas, the Pohoneeches, and the Nookchoos; than Tomquit and Pasqual, head chiefs of the warlike and powerful Pitoachees, Capoos, Toomanahs, Tallinochees, Poskesas, Wacheetes, Itachees, Choonemnees, Chokimenas, Wewachees, and Notohotas. And while these three ranking chiefs were as the ministers of his cabinet, their several tribes regarded and obeyed him as the most devoted and most humbled of Asiatics regard and obey the despots who rule over them with the power of life and death.

But to maintain this extraordinary and arbitrary supremacy over the numerous Indians subjected to his mastery, illiterate and unlearned as

he was in books and science, Savage found it necessary to have recourse to craft and strange devices, by which he was enabled to work what appeared to them as miracles, possible only to the power of the Great Spirit; and by these means he succeeded in impressing them with the belief and awe which only that invisible and incomprehensible power could command, to the effect that to himself was confided the authority to punish them for their misdeeds, and to exercise over them the dispensation of their destiny, whether to save or to destroy; and his cunning interpreted to them his disposition in either case, by his spells of feigned, unspeakable sorrow or of vehement anger, displayed solely in his looks and actions. Although uneducated, he was far above a state of ignorance. His intellect was naturally of high order, and his quick, apt, intuitive, and comprehensive mind was alert to grasp, and instantly to turn to good account, everything which learning, invention, and science had developed of practical nature. He had learned the Indian character well enough to know that, as with other savage, pagan, and simple-minded races, they were superstitious to the last degree, and therefore that they were moved and swayed more through their fears than their impulses or passions; that their awe of the mysterious, or that which they considered as beyond human agency, was greater than their dread of the most terrible of earthly or visible powers. And it was by invoking the mysterious, and to them incomprehensible, agency of electricity, in one of its simplest forms, that he imposed upon, awed, and governed them as he did.

At some period of his life, Savage had made himself fairly conversant with the powers and marvels of the galvanic battery, and in California he had obtained a battery of sufficient force to serve his crafty purpose among the Indians. He had measurably learned how to use it, and received instruction as to what were or were not conductors of the electric fluid. Thus equipped and instructed, he made effective use of his little machine in terrorizing and governing his unsophisticated and untutored subjects. He had watched and studied the arts and mysteries of their "medicine-men," in working their spells and cures, and he took crafty advantage of their trick of choosing the skins of wild beasts, or of serpents and reptiles, as essential agencies to their charms and incantations; and to better adapt his scheme to their superstition in this respect, he chose for his chief charm the skin of a grizzly bear cub, as he knew that the Indian felt for the grizzly a fear and reverence above that with which they regarded any other animal or created thing. Indeed, to some of them, this huge and intractable monarch of the wilderness was held as sacred; and the proudest hope of the warrior was that, after death, his spirit might roam again in the substantial form of the mighty beast. Inside of the aptly prepared skin, Savage concealed his little battery, and from it extended his operating wires, easily regulating the charge, and directing the application as the wondering and obedient Indians formed the line or circle to receive it. Already he was their generally acknowledged best friend and trusted counselor, without a superior among even the highest chiefs; for he could outrun their fleetest of foot, excel their bravest warrior in battle, and from the strong Indian bow shoot the arrow with quicker aim and greater precision than the most expert in its use among them. He more tirelessly

pursued the game, more undeviatingly tracked the fugitive foe, and when the hunt or the fight was over, could show less fatigue, dance longer, yell louder, leap higher, squirm and twist his body into more extraordinary contortions, and, under all circumstances, preserve a more imperturbable demeanor, and exhibit a severer stoicism, than the most conspicuous for any of these performances or qualities among all the tribes. Moreover, his skill and power as "Chesara," or "medicine-man," was immeasurably superior to that ever exercised by the most consummate of that rank and art they had ever known.



A Yosemite Indian in deerskin robe

These various accomplishments and qualifications, of themselves, were ample and more than enough to recommend him to leadership in Indian life, and to win him respect and reverence as one superior even to their chiefs; but Savage had strengthened himself in this topmost rank, by taking to wife the daughter of one of the great chiefs of each of the five commanding tribes; thus securing, by such binding alliance, the stronger friendship of the chiefs and the firmer loyalty of the tribes.

Yet, above and beyond all this respect and reverence, and the influence he had thus acquired, by which to impress and to govern the Indians, it was upon his galvanic battery that Savage mainly depended to more thoroughly and strictly command them. He utilized it in various ways to accomplish his designs. Now, as Mahomet had recourse to his visions, to perfect his Koran and sway his devotees; or as Brigham Young fabricated his "revelations," to make his own will and desires the unquestionable faith of his infatuated Mormon believers; and then, as the all-compelling Jove, to inspire and move by fear the rebellious, who had continued stubborn against persuasion, or could not be otherwise wrought to obedience and submission. The flashing sparks and the tetanic shocks which they saw and felt, as Savage applied his duly charged battery, evoked their wonder and subdued their refractory or turbulent spirit; and they regarded him as the man-god, possessed of the dread power of the Great Spirit they alike reverenced and feared above all else in life and death. Only on one occasion did he ever find it necessary to prove to any of the Indians the deadly power of the battery. It was in the case of a powerful young chief, who had in his youth been taken by the Catholic fathers, at Santa Barbara Mission, to educate and rear. He had been schooled and disciplined at the Mission, two or three years, and then escaped to regain his tribe and return to the wild life more congenial to his nature; signalizing his flight by stealing the fleetest and most valuable horse at the Mission. His little learning was a dangerous thing at times, to himself and his tribe; and Savage found him

intractable, headstrong beyond patient endurance, and capable of great mischief. His rank gave him a standing among the Indians, of which he was ever quick to take advantage upon every occasion when it served his purpose; and his life at the Mission had enabled him to nearer comprehend some of Savage's actions and marvels than any other of the tribe. He was the thorn in the side of the crafty Savage, the lion in his path; and it at last came to the extremity, at a critical moment, when either the obstinate and defiant young chief or Savage must show himself the master. The electric battery was Savage's sole resource and sure agency. He chose his opportunity at a fresh act of open and perilous rebellion on the part of the young chief, and cunningly managed to apply the battery, with heavy charge. It came near proving too much for the stalwart brave. He fell prone to the ground, and for a while, Savage himself feared the shock was fatal. Above two hundred of the tribe were gathered around, many of them more or less impregnated with the defiant and rebellious spirit of their young chief. His certain death might possibly awe them into instant submission to Savage; or the impulse of the moment might be to serve him as they were wont to serve their "Chesara," in instances where death befell instead of cure —to fall upon him at once, and cruelly put him to death. Savage clearly comprehended the desperate situation, and felt that his life depended upon his tact, and nerve, and adroitness. A heaving of the chest of the prostrate and otherwise motionless chief satisfied him that the shock was not mortal, and his revival was only the question of a few minutes. His craft came immediately to enable him to turn the apparent catastrophe to the very best account. The Indians, with their squaws, were still standing a little distance away, awe-stricken and nonplussed. To a few, who had started to come up to the fallen chief, he had sternly motioned an instant halt, which was obeyed. He had shown to them his mysterious power to strike the stubborn warrior instantly dead—as they believed he was; he would now show to them that also he possessed the power to restore him to life. Then uttering his ceremonial incantation, as if communing with the Great Spirit, and with solemn imploration, he kneeled by the side of the young chief, breathed into his mouth, gently stroked his eyes, his forehead and cheeks, muttering all the while, in deep, gutteral tone, the nonsensical gibberish he improvised for the strange scene, and at last rubbed the arms and legs, and lifted the now partly conscious wretch to a sitting position. As his senses returned to him, the chief felt apparent bewilderment at his situation. His face betokened the commingled emotions of fear and joy and amazement which possessed him. He seemed perplexed or irresolute whether to remain as he was, or to rise to his feet. Savage further availed himself of this quandary. The surrounding Indians were still held fixed in their places, gazing with intense curiosity, or glancing with awe or doubt. A motion, by Savage, stilled them all into a deeper silence, and another wave of his hand imposed upon the half-erect chief the maintenance of his awkward position. Savage then broke forth in a brief, low, earnest, impassioned invocation, and, suddenly turning to the young chief, bade him leap to his feet. The act followed the word, and as he stood erect, but visibly tremulous, Savage went to him, took him by the hand, and led him to the old chief, his father, and then to his squaw, who

were alike recovering from the terror and stupefaction which the startling scene had occasioned. The event was made the more impressive by the craft of Savage in then hastening to his own tent without speaking another word. That night the tribe held a dance of uncommon order, to celebrate the restoration of their brave young chief to life. From and after that day, he was the most submissive and loyal of all the tribe to Savage, and never again had the wily leader to invoke the mysterious power of his battery to subdue the most rebellious and most defiant of his Indian subjects. Near and far, among neighboring and remote tribes, after the fashion of the marvelous communication of intelligence peculiar to the race, the word sped and spread, of how the strong young chief had been instantly struck dead, of his miraculous restoration to life and strength, and of the power of Savage thus to command both life and death; and it served him, as he shrewdly reasoned it would serve him, to such purpose, that wheresoever he went among the tribes, he was hailed as chief over all, and dreaded quite as they dread the Great Spirit alone.

(To be concluded in December issue)

BEAR QUADRUPLETS

By Lloyd D. Moore, Ranger Naturalist

About 6 p.m. on May 18 of this year, I saw a mother bear with four cubs in tow near Bridalveil Fall. I was driving along and suddenly saw this cavalcade of bears walking down the middle of the road. Two of the cubs were jet black and the other two were brown.

After first sighting the car the mother bear halted the entourage and sent them scurrying into the woods. All complied with the maternal command with the exception of the runt of the brood. He was about a third smaller than his brethren and seemed much more mischievous. He decided to remain on the road and see what the two-legged creature was. His mother waited until I had approached to within the danger area and then she swatted him on the rear and sent him scrambling. He went up the nearest tree and stayed there until I had moved off a safe distance, then he descended and rejoined the rest of the family group. Since this first observation the cubs have been seen many times in other parts of the park.

When first seen in May the cubs were about the size of a long-legged, big-headed cat, around 6 pounds in weight. At last report they were growing like bad weeds and were about 50 to 60 pounds in weight.

"NOTHING BUT ROCKS"

By Shirley Sargent

"Fall's a terrible time of year to go to Yosemite," a friend warned us. "The waterfalls are dry, the river's low, it's dusty and the weather's uncertain. Why, the valley's not the same at all—nothing but rocks."

Knowing Yosemite as we do, we disregarded his vehement argument and arrived last October 19 to find that incredible, indelible mountain-blue sky. Our friend was correct: most of the falls were dry and the silence seemed odd. The thunder of Yosemite Falls, however, was a vivid, echoing memory. Though low compared to May's frothy torrent, the Merced was still a river to be reckoned with, channeling deep and cold over and between grotesquely tumbled rocks. Along its banks which showed the erosion of 1950's flood, dogwood sprang crimson-bright against the more somber evergreen background.

While the dogwood's red was most spectacular, yellowing azaleas, oaks, and maples added to the splendid autumn coloring. Even the ferns, like the rich yellow-gold of uncured tobacco leaves, contributed to the cornucopian wealth which was especially lovely along the Big Oak Flat Road. In contrast to the meadows' green grass of June, and wildflower bloom of July and August, their yellow-brown was a surprise, but the gold-leafed aspen relieved the drabness.

Dusty? Very. We stayed near Big Meadow and everything along the Coulterville Road was coated. Animal tracks were easily discernible on the trails—bear, coyotes, and some deer. So, though we were sorry to see the clear, brisk days obscured by clouds, we welcomed the rain that washed trees and ferns clean, heightening their color, and settling the dust. At slightly higher elevations the first snow fell, fulfilling the uncertain weather prediction.

During the summer months throngs of people and virtual automobile parades swarm throughout the valley, but few tourists were there at such a "terrible time of year." Consequently, the uncrowded conditions were as distinct a relief as driving slowly around the valley was a pleasure. And the rocks—those towering granite cliffs—as always awed us by their rugged magnitude.

Photo by Ralph Anderson

El Capitan

With the first light snow powdering every peak, the panoramic view was unusually impressive. On our way home, after a thoroughly enjoyable week, we tried—in vain—to think of a way to tell our friend that we prefer rocks to people, no matter what the season.

AQUATIC RATTLESNAKE

By Walter N. Powell, Ranger Naturalist

It was lunch time along Tamarack Creek in mid-July. I rested myself near the edge of a pond and ate leisurely. Presently a movement caught my eye and I watched as a 42-inch rattlesnake traveled slowly along the rocky ledge that bordered the stream. Intermittently and unhurriedly he moved toward me. When he was about 6 feet away I reached for a small dead branch behind me, at which he stopped. For nearly 5 minutes he watched with unwinking eyes as I sat motionless.

Finally the snake turned back on his course. For about 2 feet he traveled slowly, then turned toward the water. Extending his head out over the water he hesitated, then took off across the pond. Unsatisfied at the far bank, he turned and swam to the most distant part of the pond, about 20 feet away. He swam rapidly with head held about 6 inches above the water. His tail was under the surface and the body coils were large—12 to 15 inches from side to side. Slowly he crawled out of the water and stopped 2 feet away from the bank.

Can rattlesnakes swim? Rapidly and easily. The tail with its rattles in a vertical plane acted as a strong sculling oar, much more effective than the slender tail of a garter snake.

Do rattlesnakes take to water voluntarily? This one seemed to, since he was not touched or threatened in any way.

1851-YOSEMITE-CENTENNIAL-1951

DIGEST OF THE PURPOSES OF THE

YOSEMITE NATURAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION

Yosemite National Park, California

INCORPORATED for the purpose of cooperating with the National Park Service by assisting the Naturalist Department of Yosemite National Park in the development of a broad public understanding of the geology, plant and animal life, history, Indians and related interests in Yosemite National Park and nearby regions. It aids in the development of the Yosemite Museum and library, fosters scientific investigations along lines of greatest popular interest, offers books on natural history applicable to this area for sale to the public, and cooperates in the publication of

Yosemite Nature Notes

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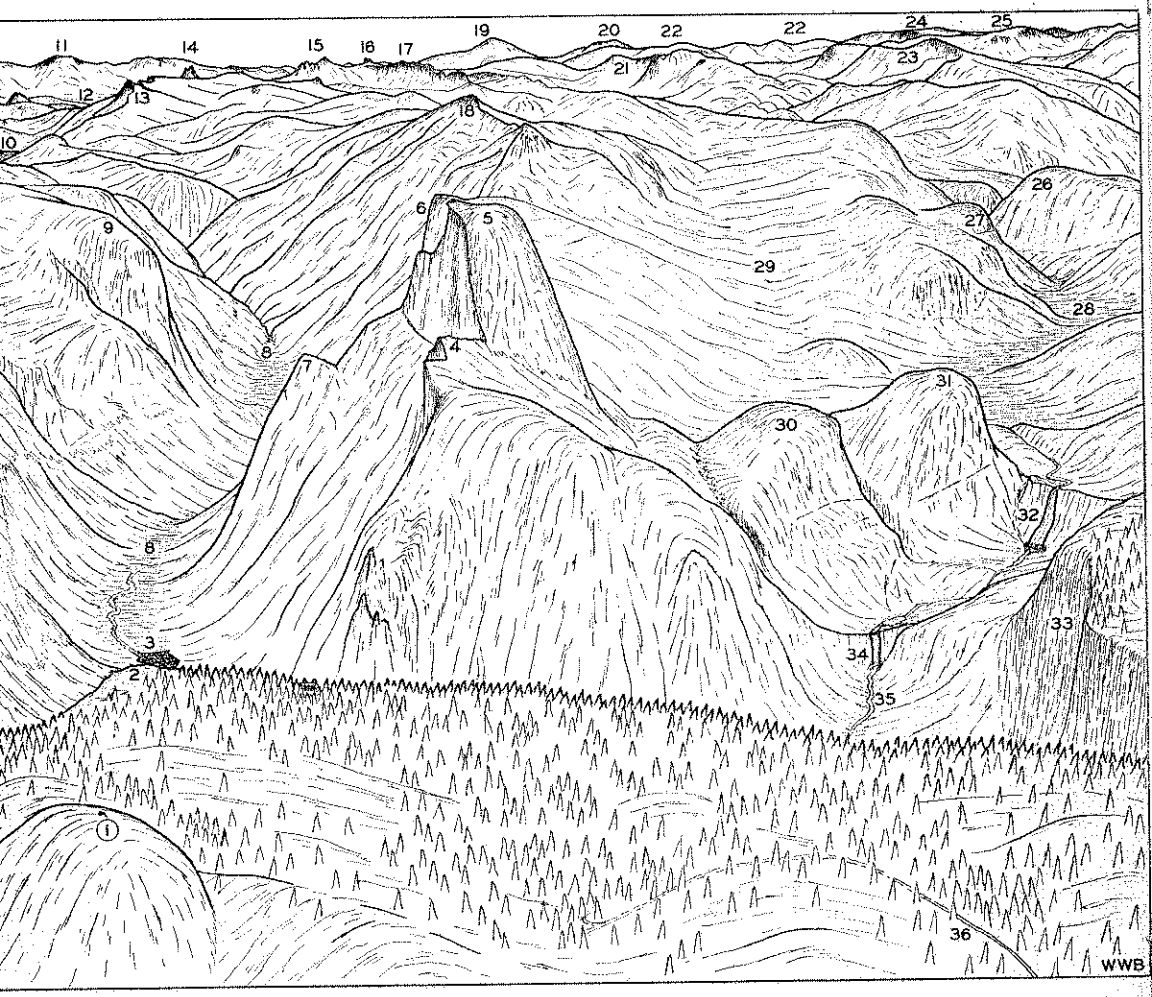
Revenue derived from the activities of the Yosemite Natural History Association is devoted entirely to furthering the progress of research and interpretation of significant interests in Yosemite National Park.

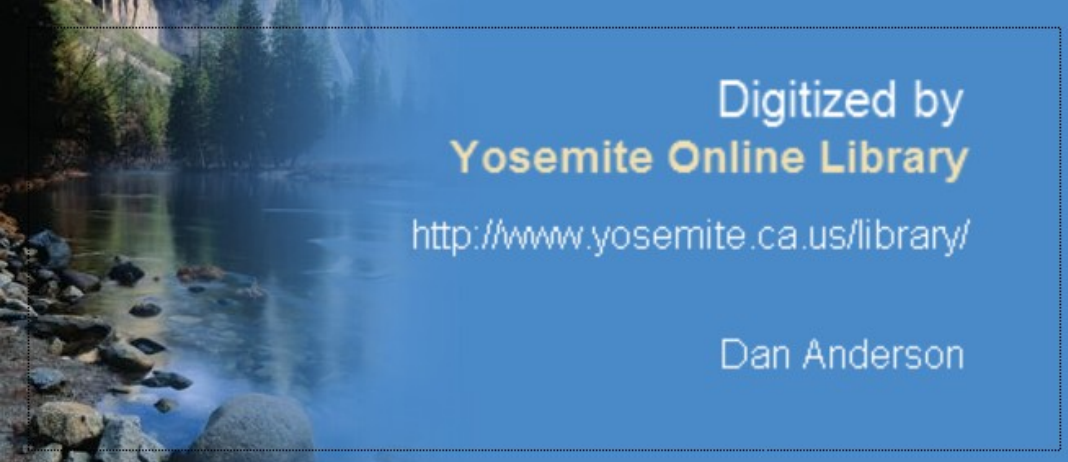
CROWN PRINTING & LITHOGRAPHING CO.

Outline key accompanying photo on front cover.

1. Sentinel Dome, 8,117 ft.
2. Glacier Point, 7,214 ft.
3. Mirror Lake
4. Diving Board
5. Half Dome, 8,852 ft.
6. Quarter Domes
7. Ahwiyah Point
8. Tenaya Canyon
9. Mt. Watkins, 8,235 ft.
10. Tenaya Lake, 8,141 ft.
11. White Mtn., 11,800+ ft.
12. Tuolumne Meadows
13. Tenaya Peak, 10,700 ft.
14. Cathedral Peak, 10,933 ft.
15. Echo Peaks, 11,100+ ft.
16. Cockscomb
17. Matthes Crest
18. Clouds Rest, 9,929 ft.



19. Mt. Dana, 13,055 ft.
20. Mt. Gibbs, 12,700 ft.
21. Rafferty Peak, 11,178 ft.
22. Kuna Crest
23. Vogelsang Peak, 11,511 ft.
24. Koip Crest
25. Parsons Peak, 12,120 ft.
26. Bunnell Point
27. Sugarloaf
28. Little Yosemite Valley
29. Sunrise Creek
30. Mt. Broderick
31. Liberty Cap, 7,072 ft.
32. Nevada Fall, 594 ft. drop
33. Panorama Cliff
34. Vernal Fall, 317 ft. drop
35. Merced River
36. Glacier Point Road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