

# YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES

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*Ansel Adams*

Skiers setting out from the Snow Creek Lodge in the 1930's.

**Cover Photo:** Skiers near the top of Tenaya Peak, by Ansel Adams.

# Yosemite Nature Notes

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## STORY OF THE SNOW CREEK LODGE

By Mary Curry Tresidder

The register of the Snow Creek Lodge\*—the somewhat grandiose name of our original little ski cabin—takes me back to our early skiing days here in Yosemite.

In the late winter of 1928-29 Dr. Donald Tresidder had made a trip on skis to Tuolumne Meadows in a party which included Ernst Des-Baillets—who was in charge of winter sports for the Yosemite Park and Curry Co., O. G. Taylor—then the park engineer, Jules Fritsch, and one or two others. He came back full of enthusiasm for the ski terrain, and as a result the cabin was built the next fall in order to give an opportunity for the study of snow conditions on the north rim of Yosemite Valley. The slopes from there to Snow Flat and May Lake were considered to be where the snowfall in the park was heaviest, as the drifts were always deepest there when the Tioga Road was opened in spring.

The All-Year Highway had been completed by the fall of 1926, and that had materially changed the tempo of winter life in Yosemite, bringing the Yosemite Park and Curry Co. a difficult problem of high week-

end housecounts, with goose eggs, practically, for the remainder of the week. Winter sports seemed to give some hope of spreading a thin layer of guests over the lean days. We were more hopeful than that, as a matter of fact. We had ourselves been infected by the deadly ski virus, and we saw Yosemite with its background of beauty as an outstanding winter place. We confidently expected that within a few years the High Sierra Camps would be a series of winter huts like those in the Alps or the Tyrol with skiers touring from one to another. We found, however, that people at that time did not know enough either about skiing or about ski-mountaineering to make that dream workable, and by the time they knew more about skiing the lift type of the sport had pushed ski-touring far to the rear (Appendix, No. 2).

The floor of Yosemite Valley did not give adequate slopes; the moraine near the present stables was our "Ski Hill" and the scene of our early ski school. It will be remembered that at that time the Wawona Tunnel superseding the old Inspira-

\*This register and other documents relating to early-day skiing in Yosemite, listed at the end of this article, comprise an appendix which Mrs. Tresidder has also donated to the historical files of the Yosemite Museum Library.—Ed.

tion Point grade was not even begun, nor the Glacier Point Road; bringing the Big Oak Flat and the Tioga Roads to modern standards was not even being debated as yet. Later we headed to Chinquapin and then took our skiers up the old Glacier Point Road to its high point at Badger Pass, a little way beyond the meadow where the ski development now has its headquarters. Meanwhile the Snow Creek Cabin, located on the westerly slope of Mt. Watkins at about 7,650 feet elevation, gave an opportunity to those skiers who wanted more extensive ski terrain than the valley afforded.

Skiers had to be hardy. In a mild winter we could ride on horses all the way up the Tenaya Zigzags to the rim, about 2½ miles from the cabin, or even to the cabin itself before the snow became too deep, with the horses floundering through the drifts of the last ascent. Sometimes we could ride only part way to the rim, and on occasion we hiked and skied all the way up, and we usually came down on foot. The picture below shows the rigging evolved by the packer, Kenneth Hanville, for carrying the skis on a horse.



Ansel Adams

Packer Kenneth Hanville and his ski-carrying rig on "Coon."

In a brief history of western skiing published in the *British Ski Year Book* for 1939, Vol. X, No. 20, Joel Hildebrand says:

The first hut system for ski-mountaineering is the Sierra started in the Yosemite National Park in 1929. In that year, Snow Creek Ski Cabin was built and cabins at Tenaya Lake and Tuolumne Meadows converted for winter use. These were heavily stocked with food in the fall of each year, and during the winter months high-mountain trips were operated at fairly frequent intervals under the leadership of Jules Fritsch, one of the most competent ski guides in California. In 1930, Fritsch led the first ascent of Mt. Hoffmann from the Snow Creek Cabin as a base. He conducted parties from the Tenaya Cabin for the first ascent of Tenaya Peak, and from the Tuolumne Cabin he conducted parties over Tioga Pass, up Ragged Peak, over Vogelsang Pass, Mammoth Peak, and the Lyell Fork.

Plans for the Snow Creek Cabin were drawn by Eldridge T. Spencer, with Dr. Tresidder poring over them and making suggestions. We had a book of pictures and plans of Swiss mountain huts, I remember, which we referred to. Bill Kat did a good deal of the work on the cabin, and Dick Michaelis, later the caretaker there, and Jules Fritsch, the little Swiss ski instructor, also worked on it.

It had a kitchen with a wood-burning stove and a metal-lined hidey-hole to keep supplies safe from the bears (vain hope!), a narrow passage with two bunk-beds, and a larger room with a table and six more bunks. A steep, narrow stairway led to the loft, which was divided into two rooms with cots for six or eight people.

The cabin stood at the edge of a wood near a swampy meadow, and there a well was dug. Digging out the well-cover from the snow was one of the first things to be done each time we went up to the cabin. A couple of hundred yards to the south was a small dome (known to us as Herringbone Hill) which we used as a practice slope, but our main run

came down from Mt. Watkins by any one of several routes, and that entailed a climb of about a thousand feet. The energetic ones would climb up two or three times in a day and perhaps run down below the cabin several hundred feet, as far as the snow was good, but it was usually better above.

The ridge which runs toward Snow Flat was named Monticola Ridge by us for the handsome pines that grow along it, and we made many excursions there, too. We would head for May Lake or Mt. Hoffmann, or drop down into Ten-Mile Meadow, climb the ridge above Hidden Lake and descend that slope to the meadow again, or run out toward the dome beyond Mt. Watkins, which we called Tenaya Dome. This has a spectacular view of Clouds Rest and the depths of Tenaya Canyon, with its glacier-sculptured walls. I can still hear the sharp crack and the boom of avalanches as they broke loose from those walls after a storm, and see the cascading snow there or below Half Dome.

In spite of our inexperience we never had any serious accidents in our winter days there, except for the time Jules dislocated his shoulder on a trip up Mt. Hoffmann, near the end of our sojourns at the cabin. I don't see it noted in the register, but I think it must have been in 1934 (Appendix, No. 4).

Ski bindings were different then, of course; we probably did not attain such speeds as even novices may do nowadays with modern techniques of checking and turning, even though we sometimes thought we rode the wind. I suppose, too, we were conscious of the remoteness of the place, and I know Jules exerted an influence of caution on that account.

Jules was our ski guide and mentor, thoroughly familiar with snow and mountains in all their aspects, and possessing a tremendous sense of responsibility for these ski-crazy, irresponsible Americans he was trying to work with and look out for. He was a stickler for doing things as they should be done. On one of our trips Ansel Adams made a very dynamic picture of him in the midst of a jump turn, an extremely effective shot, which was widely used in our publicity and as a cover for ski magazines, etc. But his skis were not in the proper parallel position at the moment, and I think Jules never quite forgave Ansel for using that photograph instead of a much tamer but more correct one.

The sheet from the register which gives the names of the first visitors to the Snow Creek Cabin on January 8, 1930, is missing; my recollection is that it was a group of employees whom we wished to inform about the cabin and the skiing there because they were in touch with guests. We rode all the way to the cabin that time, I think, but we practically killed them off on a climb up Mt. Watkins in the afternoon. I wasn't much of a skier myself, then, but persistence got me about.

After all this preliminary talk I will go down the pages of the register to recall other interesting details. On February 17, 1930, I note that Jules Fritsch brought up Fred Pabst of Milwaukee, a "real skier," with experience abroad, and they made the first winter ascent of Mt. Hoffmann. I still remember with what respect we watched Fred Pabst's jump turns! The Telemark turn was the thing in those days, with stemming in the Swiss style and a little effort at the "scissors" or "open" Christiania; both Telemark and open Christie are now in limbo.

Stemming, Swiss style, was our meat for daily practice, however, and Jules was a firm taskmaster.

One event of that first winter was the arrival of a number of members of a visiting polo team from the Argentine. They arrived on horseback in a blinding snowstorm, muffled to the ears and frozen withal. As we had no short-wave radio in those days arrivals were unheralded unless someone had come through with messages. The South Americans were plucky but not really ski-minded or equipped.

The list of names for the first year is rather short, 56, to be exact, but the next winter it increased materially and in the spring Dr. Tresidder wrote to a friend that he was very much heartened by the response and hoped that another season we could keep the cook there throughout, which would lessen the expense for visitors.

I see that in February 1931 I stayed from the 1st to the 21st, and wrote myself down as "oldest living inhabitant." Many of the Yosemite Valley people came and went,



*Photo courtesy of Yosemite Park and Curry Company*



through the winters from 1930 to 1934—the Hosses, the Oehlmanns, the Goldsworthys, and Doris Schmiedell being among the most interested, and many were our expeditions. A number of doctors and their wives came, too; for some reason doctors took to skiing at a great rate in its pioneer days in California; some had studied in Austria or Germany and had a taste of skiing, for one thing, and then many of our friends were doctors and the enthusiasm was contagious. Rea Ashley, Ned and Billy Butler, Otto and Margit Barkan, Hans and Friedel Klussmann, Dohrmann and Margery Pischel, all from San Francisco; Bill and Dorothy Grishaw, from Los Angeles; and Hartley Dewey, who was our Yosemite doctor at that time, were among them. And one of Dr. Dewey's assistants, Jack Blemmer, took his bride there for a skiing honeymoon, being careful to pick a time when they would have the place to themselves!

National Park Service rangers en route to Yosemite Creek or Tuolumne Meadows would stop in on their snow-survey trips, and each spring we sent several men to fill the snow houses at Tuolumne Meadows and at Merced Lake—our means of refrigeration there. Jules Fritsch and Ralph dePfyffer (another Swiss skier who is still with us, but nowadays in charge of the darkroom) made that trip in 1930, and with them Ansel Adams, who made photographs of that high country in winter.\* They made an ascent of Tenaya Peak, and from Tuolumne Meadows they went over Tuolumne Pass and on to Merced Lake, and came back thrilled by those peaks and canyons. Ansel came up to Snow Creek several times to make skiing pictures; I remember him descending from a

good-sized pine on Mt. Watkins, which he had climbed in order to get the perspective looking down from above us. It was after a snowstorm, and by the time he got down most of the snow was off the tree and a lot of it down his neck, and he had the gift of tongues.

Came '32, and that was notable for our discovery of two bear dens—one near the top of Mt. Watkins, covered that night by a heavy fall of snow so that we couldn't find it again, and the other down near the bridge across Snow Creek, near the foot of an old stump. On January 16 we saw the footprints of the mother bear where she had apparently gone down to the stream for water, and thereafter we would make a detour on our trips back and forth, in order to check on the hole. A little later we could sometimes hear the cubs mewling in its depths; they are born during hibernation of the mother. Bert Harwell, park naturalist then, came up on March 2 with Ralph Anderson in a rather skeptical frame of mind to see the place and try to get some pictures, but when one of them put his arm down in the hole to set off a flash bulb he retreated in great haste with claw marks to show for it!

On March 4, 1932, Dennis Jones of Soda Springs and Milana Jank, a German woman who had lectured with slides on "The Radiance of Ski" earlier in the winter in Yosemite, came through after making the first winter crossing of Tioga Pass. They had hitchhiked most of the way from Lake Tahoe to Mono Lake, and then crossed on skis, spending the night out in Ten-Mile Meadow in a snowstorm, after almost going into the depths of Tenaya Canyon itself because the trail blazes were obscured by snow.

\*See photograph on cover.—Ed.



Ralph Anderson

Mount Hoffmann viewed from Snow Flat in winter.

One night that I remember vividly, in 1931 or 1932, Don and I climbed to the top of Mt. Watkins with three or four others to watch the moon rise. We skied about in the moonlight for an hour or so, with an eerie feeling of being in another world, and then we skied down through the trees to the cabin. Shadows and highlights made it hard to tell a bump from a hollow, I recall, but we arrived intact.

Canasta was not in the running then, and bridge was much too serious, but "Concentration" and "Hearts" were frequent of an evening—when we weren't waxing our skis under the stern eye of Mr. Fritsch. Putting a ground-wax on your skis was serious business then, before the day of the modern lacquer finishes; the base wax had to be renewed often, and had to be ironed in smoothly, then allowed to harden.

Then 1933, and there were more trips to May Lake and to Mt. Hoffmann and way stations. Our prize trip to Tuolumne Meadows was written up by me for the *British Ski Year Book*, as well as an account of one of

our climbs of Mt. Hoffmann (Appendix, Nos. 5, 6). For the Snow Creek Cabin, Della Hoss and I composed the "Skier's Ten Commandments" (Appendix, No. 7). She made an illuminated copy which we framed and hung there, but, alas!—some vandal made away with it. I later saw it printed in an eastern ski magazine, without due credit.

One incident that lingers in mind is the picture of an afternoon when a group of us on Herringbone Hill were watching the descent of several skiers from Mt. Watkins through the trees. Ned Butler was one; I forget who else, except that Fritsch was leading. Suddenly at an open place we saw him describe a complete somersault, land on his feet, and ski on, apparently not even momentarily disconcerted. When he got down we said, "Jules, what on earth was that maneuver you did up there, coming through the trees?" "Oh," he replied, "I see I am going to fall, I make myself as less as possible, I am on my feet, I go on!" So making oneself as less as possible became a byword.



With the spring of 1934 our skiing at Snow Creek came to an end. I find that I spent nearly three months there during its five seasons. We had covered the country around there and found it good, but with the construction of the Wawona Tunnel and

Road and the Glacier Point Road, greater accessibility led us to the Badger Pass area, where Jules and I had also been reconnoitering. However, for unrivaled ski terrain, I still give the palm to Mt. Hoffmann and its slopes.

#### APPENDIX IN THE YOSEMITE MUSEUM LIBRARY

The following items which relate to Mrs. Tresidder's manuscript have been deposited with it in the Yosemite Museum Library.—Ed.

1. Register of the Snow Creek Lodge.
2. Letter from Dr. Tresidder to Dr. Rea Ashley about Snow Creek Lodge and ski tours.
3. Rates for ski tours — 1929.
4. Note about Jules Fritsch's accident on Mt. Hoffmann.
5. Account of trip to Tuolumne Meadows, from *The British Ski Year Book* 7(15), 1934.
6. Account of trip to Mt. Hoffmann, from *The British Ski Year Book* 6(13), 1932.
7. The Ski-runner's Ten Commandments, and Ski Maxims.

### JAYS WARN OF RATTLESNAKE'S PRESENCE

By Douglass H. Hubbard, Associate Park Naturalist

While my wife and I were sitting in our back yard in the Lost Arrow residential area of Yosemite Valley at about 5:15 p.m. on August 25, 1952, our attention was attracted by the continuous and excited squawking of a blue-fronted jay (*Cyanocitta stelleri frontalis*) on the roof of a nearby garage. This jay was promptly joined by others until there were eight of them on the garage roof and on the woodpile stacked against its west wall. A Sierra ground squirrel (*Citellus beecheyi sierrae*) ran from near the woodpile, pausing on the rock wall of a diversion ditch at the rear of the building before continuing up the slope as we approached. Close examination revealed the presence of a Pacific rattlesnake (*Crotalus viridis oreganus*) coiled on a smooth board at the bottom of the woodpile. At no time did the snake rattle, nor did it move until it was taken from its place of refuge by means of a long stick.

Mr. Charles Hill, a neighbor, reports that a rattlesnake has been



Blue-fronted Jay

found at the rear of this residence each summer for the last three years, and that on two of these occasions the reptile's presence was announced by the blue-fronted jays. Perhaps the warning given by these birds is more dependable than that which may or may not be given by the rattlesnake.

**RALPH ANDERSON, PARK VETERAN, TRANSFERS TO WASHINGTON**

**By Donald Edward McHenry, Park Naturalist**

Ralph Hopewell Anderson, a veteran of 23 years with the National Park Service in Yosemite National Park, has been transferred to the director's office of the service in Washington, D.C., as information specialist with the Information Division. He left Yosemite on January 17.

Ralph has earned enviable recognition for himself throughout the National Park Service and particularly in Yosemite. Whatever community project arose here, Ralph was either leading it or in some manner in the thick of it. His work in directing fund-raising drives in support of the Red Cross, cancer program, or the like is well known. During the first year of its organization Ralph directed the affairs of the Yosemite Community Council, a group made up of representatives from the more than 30 organizations supported by permanent residents of Yosemite Valley. As an active member of the Yosemite Lions Club, Ralph has served in many capacities as well as having taken part in its spring plays. In fact, wherever there was some help to be given or service to be performed, there was Ralph—always cheerful, encouraging, enthusiastic and self-effacing.

Ralph entered the National Park Service in Yosemite, after having served for 5 years with the U. S. Forest Service in the Skull Valley District of the Prescott National Forest, Arizona, where he became the district ranger. Then, after attending the University of Cincinnati in order to further the studies he had started some time before at Ohio State University, he took employment teaching horseback riding to children of

prominent easterners at a camp near Tucson, Arizona. While there he was encouraged to apply for a job as temporary park ranger in Yosemite, which appointment he received in 1929. In February of the following year his appointment was made permanent.

It was while riding his white horse on campground inspection in Camp 12 in Yosemite Valley one day that Ralph helped a vacationing family put up their tent. In this family was an attractive young lady who in September 1931 became Mrs. Ralph H. Anderson, or Millie to her many Yosemite friends—beloved school teacher to children of the local grammar school for the past several years. The Anderson's 16-year-old photogenic daughter Barbara Jean has appeared in many park photographs as well as pictures which Ralph has taken for other purposes.

This interest in photography was destined to make Ralph well known and admired far beyond the boundaries of Yosemite National Park, for he developed considerable skill in this field of graphic art. It is little wonder, therefore, that he was promoted to park photographer and information clerk in 1932. In a later year he passed a Civil Service examination for information specialist, but because of his love for Yosemite and his desire to remain here he did not accept offered appointments in this capacity which would have taken him from Yosemite.

The responsibilities of Ralph's work here were at first relatively light, but little by little he assumed more duties until he was not only taking official photographs and an-



D. H. Hubbard

Ralph H. Anderson

swering the myriads of inquiries which came to the administration office but he was also made chief liaison officer with the park concessionaires as well as being designated to conduct visiting celebrities about the park. Just a few of these personages whom Ralph recalls are Marconi, the inventor, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, Crown Prince Frederick and Princess Ingrid of Denmark, Charles Edward, Duke of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, Senators Warren

Austin and Hiram Johnson, Lauritz Melchior, and Rt. Hon. Ralph Assheton and Arthur Blenkinsop, M.P. Because of his increasing responsibilities Ralph's position was ultimately reclassified to administrative assistant, the position which he left to go to Washington.

The Yosemite Natural History Association owes Ralph a great debt of gratitude. Not only has he been a member of the board of trustees of the association since 1940 but he is the author of numerous articles published in *Yosemite Nature Notes*. Most of these deal with local history, a field in which he is genuinely interested and very well informed. When asked which article he had the most fun writing he unhesitatingly said it was "We Will Pitch Camp at Bridalveil!" — an account of President Theodore Roosevelt's historic visit to Yosemite in 1903.\* Readers of this booklet know that its pages have frequently been illustrated by Ralph's excellent photographs.

These contributions and the memory of his good deeds, and the splendid record of accomplishment by both Ralph and Millie Anderson in our community will long recall them to their many friends in Yosemite.

\**Yosemite Nature Notes* 30(5):43-46, May 1951.



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Dan Anderson