

# YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES

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*In the Mariposa Grove of giant sequoias  
—Ansel Adams*



*Courtesy of John Howell Book*

Hermann Herzog's oil painting of Cosmopolitan Saloon and Sentinel Rock, 1874

# Yosemite Nature Notes

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## HERZOG'S PAINTING OF THE COSMOPOLITAN SALOON

By Laurence V. Degnan

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Visitors to Yosemite Valley since 1884 have known the name of Degnan, for the little store and bakery that Mr. and Mrs. John Degnan founded in that year in the Old Village have evolved into the oldest continuing business in the park. As one of several children born to this pioneer couple, Laurence V. Degnan grew up in Yosemite, later to become a prominent civil engineer in San Francisco, while retaining a deep interest in the studying and recording of human events in this region. The following article is one of the many fine contributions of historical knowledge and materials he has made to the research library and collections of the Yosemite Museum.

In John Howell's bookstore in San Francisco, on a board about 15 by 30 inches, is a striking oil painting by the noted landscape artist, the late Hermann Herzog. The scene is a portion of the south wall of Yosemite Valley, showing Sentinel Rock and the adjacent cliffs, towering above the meadow at the present Old Village. In the foreground near the center appears what was perhaps the most famous Yosemite resort of its day, Johnny Smith's "Cosmopolitan Saloon." This became a widely known institution, a tradition, if you please, that promised to rival the valley's scenic features and to crowd into the background the stories, authentic or otherwise, of Yosemite and its Indians. Herzog's painting, dated 1874, shows this now legendary establishment at the height of its glory.

A general picture of the atmosphere of this fabulous place, and of its introduction to a person to whom the horrid word s-l--n was anath-

ema, may be obtained from Helen Hunt Jackson's *Bits of Travel at Home*, published in 1878 by Roberts Brothers, of Boston. Miss Hunt (she did not become Mrs. Jackson until 1875) visited Yosemite in June 1872, 2 years before the first wagon road was completed to the valley—a time when modes of travel and living accommodations were very different from those of today. After a horseback ride of 8 or 9 miles from the end of the stage road at Gentry, she arrives at Hutchings' hotel, where she finds that her bedroom floor is rough pine boards, and the bedroom walls are thin laths covered with cotton cloth; that there is neither chair nor table nor pitcher, that the washbowl is a shallow tinpan, and that the water must be dipped from a barrel in the hall.

Her discovery of the Cosmopolitan Saloon, after a long, fatiguing sight-seeing trip on horseback, may be described in her own words, quoted from her book, beginning on page

137. Her guide is John Lucas Murphy, a native of Virginia and an old-time guide of Yosemite. (Later on he was a great friend of my father's, and I remember him as a lean, wrinkled, sandy-whiskered old fellow, in a blue jumper and Levi Strauss' copper-riveted overalls.)

But here is Helen Hunt Jackson's account of the saloon:

As Murphy lifted me from my horse, he looked at me closely, and said, with a little hesitation of manner:

"Feel a little stiff, don't ye?"

Pride rebelled at the suggestion; but candor conquered, and I replied:

"Yes, Mr. Murphy, I must own that I do. So many hours on horseback is a pretty severe thing to one unaccustomed to riding."

"I only wonder the ladies stand it so well's they do," said Murphy courteously, detecting, I have no doubt, my foolish pride. "But, if you was to take a good long hot-bath to-night, you'd feel as good as new tomorrow."

"A long hot-bath," exclaimed I, remembering the shallow milk-pan which served me for wash-bowl. "Are any corners of the Merced heated?"

"Yes," replied Murphy, with perfect gravity. "A good deal of the Merced is kept hot all the time."

It was my turn to stare now. Murphy twinkled, but did not speak till I said:

"What do you mean, Mr. Murphy?"

"Just what I say," he replied, slowly, enjoying my bewilderment. "There's a good deal of the Merced kept hot all the time in the bath-tubs in Mr. Smith's saloon. And, what's more, you won't find any nicer bath-rooms anywhere, not even in San Francisco."

This sounded incredible. The fourth [sic] of the three buildings in the little plaza was a long, low, dark-brown house, with a piazza on two sides, which I knew was called saloon, and at which, for that reason, I had looked without interest. But I was soon to discover that it was one of the wonders of Ah-wah-ne.\*

This long, low, dark-brown house, called the "Cosmopolitan Saloon" and kept by a Mr. Smith, consists of nine rooms. A billiard-room, where are two fine billiard-tables; a reading-room, where are the California newspapers, and a long writing-table, with stationery ready to one's hand; a small sitting-room, furnished with sofas and comfortable easy-chairs, and intended exclusively for the use of ladies; and five small bath-rooms, perfectly appointed in all respects and kept with the most marvellous neatness. A small store-room at the end completes the list of the rooms.

\*Note: Mrs. Jackson refuses to accept the name Yosemite, and adheres to the original Indian name, Ahwahnee (*Bits of Travel at Home*, page 87).

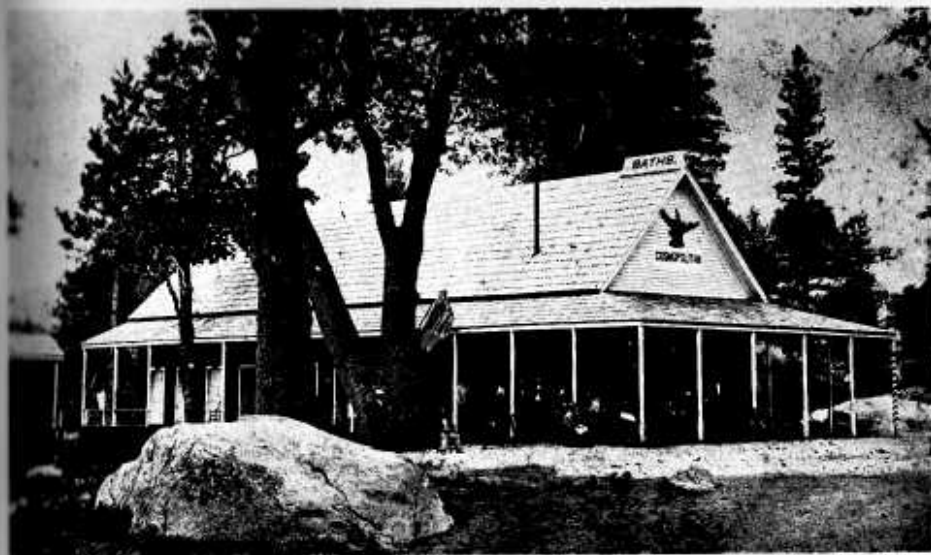
The bath-tubs shine; the floors of the bath-rooms are carpeted; Turkish towels hang on the racks; soaps, bottles of cologne, and bay rum are kept in each room; a pincushion stands under each glass, and on the pincushion are not only pins, but scissors, needles, thread, and buttons of several kinds. Has anybody ever seen public bath-rooms of this order? And Mr. Smith mentions, apologetically, that the button-hooks for which he has sent have not yet arrived.

A tall and portly black man, with that fine polish of civility of which the well-trained African servant is the only master on this continent, attends to every requirement of Mr. Smith's customers, and exhibits the establishment many times a day, with most pardonable pride.

Mrs. Jackson's description of the building, as far as it goes, tallies with the structure as I knew it, long after it had been "demoted" from its glories of Johnny Smith's day.

John C. Smith was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, and came to San Francisco by way of Panama in 1850. After a period of mining and saloon-keeping at different places, he came to Yosemite from Sonora, Tuolumne County, California, and in 1870 started the construction of the Cosmopolitan. The enterprise was hailed as the supplying of a great civic need, with the promise of a more abundant life for Yosemite visitors and residents alike. The following remarks are quoted from the *Union Democrat* of Sonora, issue of November 5, 1870:

One of the great necessities of Yosemite Valley during the past ten years has been a saloon such as will be owned and conducted there by Mr. John C. Smith and opened on or before the 1st of May next for the reception of visitors. Each year we hear of the complaints of travellers with regard to the accommodations and the absence of those refinements which are inseparable to [sic] celebrated watering places. . . . The main building is 80 feet by 25 with a porch 10 feet wide extending entirely around it. Connected with the saloon will be bath rooms furnished in the most approved and comfortable style with hot and cold baths for ladies and gentlemen, also a Gent's Reading Room where files of the latest papers can always be seen. Lounges, hammocks, and easy chairs will be scattered around the porch.



The Cosmopolitan Saloon during its heyday in the 1870's.

and saloon. A ladies parlor will also be attached. The bar will be furnished with the latest and finest styles of glass and silver ware, and the bar room will contain two superb billiard tables manufactured of California laurel. Swings, shuffle boards, quoits and a shooting gallery will afford amusement for those whose time hangs heavily on their hands. The entire appointments and finish of the saloon will be unsurpassed by any saloon in the State. The cigars, liquors and wines will be of the first quality, and no pains or expense will be spared to render it one of the most attractive places outside of San Francisco. To those who are acquainted with Mr. Smith, it is unnecessary to state that he possesses the taste and other qualifications necessary to carry on such a saloon in a manner to give entire satisfaction to those who visit the valley.

The Cosmopolitan started operating in 1871, and appears to have fulfilled every one of the mouth-watering expectations with which the project was launched. Smith was a high type of man personally, and conducted his establishment with decorum. The *Mariposa County Gazette* for June 12, 1875, has this to say about Johnny Smith and his saloon:

John C. Smith, an isolated member of the great Smith family, and who has won the distinction of being the most tasteful and expert saloon-keeper and bar-tender in Cali-

fornia, is now located at Yo Semite, and has established there the brag saloon of the State. . . . The Governor of the State, and other notables, sometime since, visited Yo Semite, and on their return, in recognition of his enterprise in this line, and of his power to please, sent him a complete service of silver ware, comprehending every article used in a saloon. . . . "See Paris and die" has passed into a proverb, but a better one is, "Visit Yo Semite and take a drink at Johnny Smith's Saloon."

When the place was established, it must be remembered, much of the material and all of the equipment and furnishings for the saloon had to be carried into the valley on the backs of packmules. Doors, mirrors, and the like, to say nothing of the bulkier and heavier items, all contributed their own special problems and demanded their own special "hitches," and no doubt sometimes taxed the ingenuity of the packers. The front of the building consisted of three pairs of large glass doors, six in all, and one of the oldtimers of Yosemite told me that these doors, after assembly at the mill, were dismantled for transportation piecemeal, on muleback.

On November 18, 1874, Smith married Miss Susan E. Hayes, at the home of the bride's parents in Oakland, California. The story is that the two met in Yosemite Valley, where Miss Hayes had been employed as a telegraph operator. In the summer of 1875 Mrs. Smith was badly burned by the explosion of a kerosene lamp, and the following March, when she was able to travel, her husband took her to Merced; where they made their home thereafter. On the first part of the trip Mrs. Smith was transported on a sled hauled by men.

They had two children (born after the Smiths had left Yosemite), a son John (deceased), whom I knew in Merced as a prominent dentist, and a daughter Edith, who, as Mrs. Edith Smith Harrell, lives in Oakland.

Smith was resourceful and energetic, bouncing back after reverses, losses by fire, and other ill fortune. He was highly respected, and his good name helped him in getting new starts.

The Cosmopolitan was operated for a time by Smith and his brother-in-law, Ben Hayes, as a partnership, under the name of Smith & Hayes. After Smith left Yosemite his brother-in-law conducted the business, which subsequently passed into other hands, operations finally ceasing some time around the middle eighties. One of the later owners was Capt. Eliakim Stannards Utter, who married Elizabeth Coffman, the stepdaughter of William Coffman, once a well-known political figure of Mariposa County, and in my time a partner in the firm of Coffman & Kenney, stable operators in Yosemite.

An interesting and valuable feature of the Cosmopolitan was a massive register, in which Smith and his successors in interest invited visitors



*Courtesy of Mrs. Edith Smith Harrell*

Johnny Smith, proprietor of the famous  
Cosmopolitan Saloon

to sign their names, and which is now a cherished item in the Yosemite Museum. As might be expected, the book contains a wonderful assortment of names, great and near-great, and also a few not-so-great.

In 1874, whether by accident or design, a view of the famous saloon was preserved in Herzog's painting, referred to at the beginning of this article. The beautiful scene, from some point north and east of the present pavilion in the Old Village, shows Johnny Smith's saloon from the rear, with its windmill and its bathhouse appurtenances, as the establishment must have appeared when it was going full blast.

Hermann Herzog was born in Bremen, Germany, on November 15, 1832, and studied at the Dusseldorf Academy. He visited Norway, Italy, Switzerland, and the Pyrenees, and in 1869 he came to the United States,

settling in Philadelphia. He was primarily a landscape painter, and his works include numerous mountain scenes, among which are views in Yosemite Valley. He exhibited often in Berlin, even after his departure from Europe. He won many medals and awards, and his patrons included Queen Victoria and the Grand Duke Alexander of Russia. Herzog lived to be almost 100 years old, dying at his home in West Philadelphia on February 6, 1932.

By 1890, or perhaps a year or two earlier, the auxiliary buildings that appear in Herzog's painting had vanished, but the main structure was substantially as the artist shows it.

I remember wandering out to the Cosmopolitan building one day as a small youngster, and watching my father and three or four other men completing some demolition work and cleaning up the area. Among the rubbish that they removed was the double barrel of a muzzle-loading shotgun, a type of weapon that was much used at that time. This barrel, though rusty and full of mud, was still intact, even to the tiny nipples for the percussion caps—a lovely plaything for a kid like me, and it broke my heart to see it thrown into the wagon to be hauled away to some remote, unknown dump.

Another relic yielded by the demolished structure was a lady's bustle, in perfect condition. (Strictly speaking, this item could scarcely be called a relic, as we were then very much in the "bustle era.") A fellow kibitzer of mine was a small woolly dog named Solomon, belonging to Charley Atkinson, one of the men in the group. Atkinson or one of his companions tied the bustle lengthwise by its own strings on top of the dog's back, where it fit perfectly, and to my delight the dog trotted around

for a while wearing the bustle with the grace and aplomb of the original owner, whoever she might be.

In 1886 the windmill and bathhouse equipment of the Cosmopolitan were acquired by John K. Barnard and installed at his hotel. I remember Barnard's bathhouse and wooden water tanks, the general arrangement and functioning of which presumably copied that of the Cosmopolitan. The water was heated by circulating in iron pipes through a firebox which was stoked with wood. But as I recall the bathrooms, they were a bit on the rough-and-ready side, without the delicate luxuries that are attributed to Smith's establishment.

After the Cosmopolitan as such had ceased to operate, the premises continued for many years to be used for various purposes. The front part of the building became the office and living quarters of the administrative officer, or guardian, of Yosemite Valley, which was then still a California State park. The facilities were occupied in turn by Guardians Walter E. Dennison (who gave my father his first employment in the valley), Mark L. McCord, Galen Clark, and Miles Wallace. The last two guardians under the State regime, John F. Stevens and George T. Harlow, in the period from 1899 to 1906, were assigned a new structure erected a short distance east of the site of the present Old Village general store.

During Galen Clark's second term as guardian, from 1889 to 1897, his office, in the large, bright, cheery front room of the departed saloon, with its glass doors, became a sort of club, or lounging room, well patronized by the men of the village and by visitors. Clark had a large table there, covered with newspapers and magazines, while a huge

stove in the middle of the room was a popular attraction on cold winter evenings.

In addition to the guardian's office, I recall, although indistinctly, another large room, near the center of the building it seems to me, that served on occasion as a place of assembly. This was the scene of a very ambitious school entertainment (of which I still have the program, in the teacher's handwriting) during one of the terms of Miss Annie Kerrins, who taught the Yosemite school in the summers of 1891 and 1892. Here also was held, in one of those same years or near that time, a community Christmas party, attended by every one of the 30 or 35 permanent winter residents of the valley, with the unforgettable thrill of a huge Christmas tree, the first I had ever seen.

At any rate, even in Johnny Smith's time, the Cosmopolitan Saloon was the locale of meetings of one sort or another—for instance, a meeting to organize a celebration to honor the completion of the Coulterville Road, the first wagon road into

the valley, which was opened on June 17, 1874. The room that I seem to picture in my memory might well have been the place of these gatherings.

The excess space in the Cosmopolitan, not needed by the guardian, was used for sleeping quarters, generally in connection with the hotel, and at times housed the hotel bar room and the barbershop. Part of the rear of the building was remodeled into a small bunkhouse for workmen, and the ensemble—bunkhouse, barroom, and barbershop—was for a while known as the "Collar and Elbow." After the guardian's office and living quarters had been moved to the new headquarters building, the front part of the Cosmopolitan thereby vacated was used at different times for the post office, the express office, and similar services.

Thus, like a retired racehorse dragging a milk wagon while dreaming of past glories, the famous Cosmopolitan continued in its prosaic anticlimax, although with an aura of its romantic past, until its destruction by fire in December 1932.

## WHO'S THAT?

By Charles G. Danforth, Ranger Naturalist

One afternoon in the Yosemite Museum wildflower garden, while watching an argument between a jay and a chickaree, I heard a rustling near at hand. A black oak leaf lying on the ground was moving spasmodically, as though a trapped grasshopper were underneath; but the black, beady eye that suddenly appeared from under the leaf was certainly not that of an insect. After the other eye and an in-

quisitive intervening nose had freed themselves from the leaf, there was no question. A pocket gopher had come up for lunch.

His big incisors looked ludicrously out of place in the flattened head, and his small eyes were so inefficient that he had to depend primarily upon his sense of smell to detect the presence of an enemy.

Apparently assured that no danger was imminent, he retreated into the





M. V. Hood

## Pocket gopher

hole, only to return pushing a load of the freshly dug earth. This continued until the tunnel was cleared, and then it was time to eat. With frequent pauses to recheck for possible enemies, the gopher essayed several trips of the magnitude of 3 or 4 inches away from the burrow, taking a quick bite at almost any green growth nearby. After pulling his "fodder" back into the burrow with the stealth of a shoplifter, he became more brave. On one trip he actually completely left the burrow, and at that time the sensitive, matchstick-like tail could be seen. Since his tail is a wonderful tactile organ, he could use it in backing

up—and back up he did. Having either seen me or gotten downwind, he threw himself into reverse so fast that there would have been an awful wreck if he had missed the hole!

In a moment the nose reappeared, but this time I was spotted. Almost at once a pile of dirt was pushed up to fill the tunnel opening, and Mr. Gopher had apparently retired with a bad case of shock.

As I turned to leave, I was surprised to see him or his twin brother watching me from the vantage point of another pile of dirt some 6 feet away. Since this promised to be interesting, and because my friend seemed to be more curious than scared, I decided to study his next moves. As soon as he was certain that the big thing watching him might be an enemy, he immediately filled up that burrow entrance. This time I elected to try some gopher psychology, and moved to where I thought he might reappear. Sure enough, his curiosity got the better of him, and out he popped just at the tip of my shoe.

Walt Disney couldn't have drawn this rodent any better—the eyes seemed to bulge out, the hair to stand on end, and he straightened



Parker

Earth mound at entrance to gopher burrow

up as though he had sat on a hot stove. One moment he was there, and the next moment there was a terrific scurrying as dirt was piled up to close this ill-fated choice of burrows.

As I stood laughing and wondering why he thought a pile of loose dirt was sufficient protection, lo and behold he dug out a new tunnel to my left. Never daunted, he became more brave, and began pulling in long runners of the yellow-flowered Douglas deervetch. Even though he was underground, I could hear the chewing as he loaded his subterranean storehouse. While a human might have trouble using his teeth both for eating and as digging chisels, our little gopher's lips close *behind* his incisors, thus allowing their use in digging without his getting a mouthful of dirt. And this means his incisors always show.

Next time he came up I purposely moved, and the same routine was repeated—a pile of dirt now plugged

the tunnel, and all was quiet again. But he just *had* to see what the big thing was, so up he came again this time among the roots of a small sequoia. Since I didn't spot him a second time, he must have had plenty of chance to train his myopic orbs on me, but it just wasn't enough. In an apparent frenzy of suspense, he dug his way up in a grand total of several different places, in each case getting a good view and then rushing off for a new perspective. As long as I was quiet, he went from one observation point to another; but when I moved toward a burrow, he immediately plugged it up.

From a gopher's point of view, the world must have been very frustrating—a world in which objects moved, but that didn't try to catch him. And certainly to me it was big for *him* to try to catch.

So as I left the garden I placed a little pile of grass near one closed burrow, in the hope that I would repay the little fellow for his lost time in trying to find out—"Who's that?"

## LYELL GLACIER'S MYSTERIOUS "ICE WORMS"

By Fran Hubbard\*

Lyell Glacier is the largest remnant of the so-called "little ice age" remaining today within the boundaries of Yosemite National Park. As the park naturalists of the 1953 glacier-survey field party were measuring the surface of Lyell's west lobe on the afternoon of September 28, their attention was drawn to a large number of shallow, worm-shaped grooves in the thin crust of 2-day-old snow. At the end of each wiggly groove was a minute object, but no

two were the same. Of the seven examined, three were bits of rock, two, small pieces of dirt, and two small dead insects. Colors ranged from black (the dirt) to almost white (the insects). The grooves followed no set pattern but ran in all directions, uphill and down. They varied in length from 2 to more than 10 inches. The only constant factor was the presence of the small foreign body at one end, as shown in the accompanying photograph.

\*From *Natural History* 63(2):64-5, February 1954, reprinted through courtesy of American Museum of Natural History.—Ed.

Was the wind responsible for the formation of these "ice worms"? If so, why did no two of them run in the same direction? Angle of the slope seemed to have no apparent bearing on the pattern. Was the sun the cause? If so, why didn't the particles melt down out of sight, as larger objects have done on the glacier's surface? Perhaps it was a combination of the two. Or perhaps this will prove to be another unexplained mystery of movement.



Hubbard

The small stone at lower right caused this "ice worm" to form in fresh snow on the surface of Lyell Glacier



Anderson

The curious "worm tracks" were found widely distributed over much of the Lyell Glacier's surface at upper right



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Dan Anderson