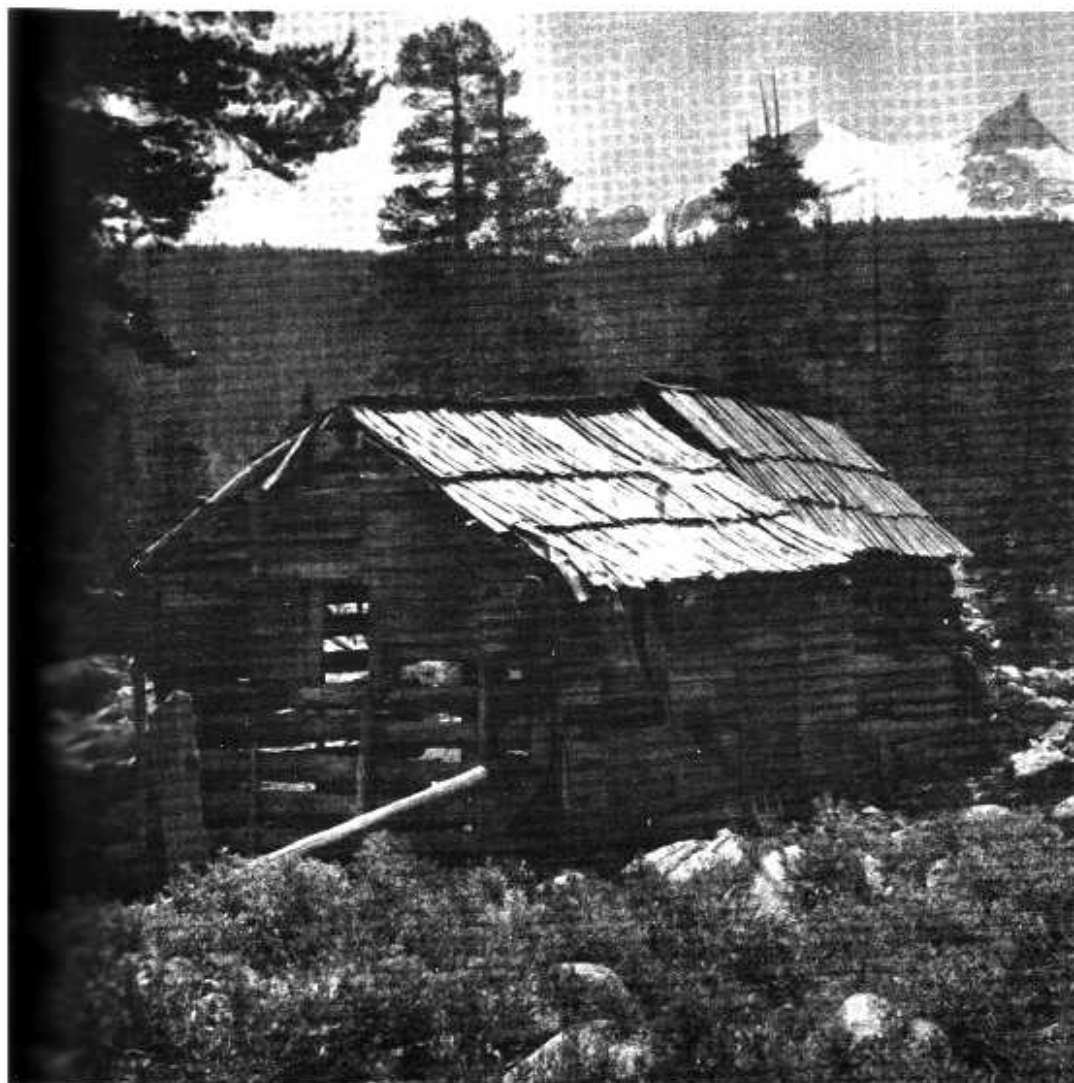


YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES

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LAMBERT'S OLD CABIN IN TUOLUMNE MEADOWS—1904

Yosemite's Pioneer Cabins

By ROBERT F. UHTE

(Continued from September)

TYPE II: ROUND LOGS JOINED BY A V NOTCH

Beehive.—The two Beehive cabins, seven miles north of Hetch Hetchy Reservoir on the Jack Main Trail, were both built by the same family but are of different construction types. One was built on a loose rock foundation and had five horizontal logs on one side and six on the other. Short stumps or uprights were placed between the logs at various intervals to keep them from sagging—an expedient used in no other Yosemite cabin. The overall size is fifteen by twenty-four feet. Shakes covered both roof and sides. The cabin had no flooring; the occupants slept on bear rugs, believing this to be warmer. The roof has disintegrated.

This cabin was built in 1888 by Lewis and Eugene Elwell, early settlers and cattlemen in this area.

Crescent Meadows.—The Crescent Meadow cabin near Wawona was built of lodgepole logs about nine inches in diameter, joined by a V notch, the four-inch clearance between logs being chinked with wedge-shaped strips and split shakes laid flat to cover the crevices. Several large rocks were placed beneath the base logs to serve as a foundation. The fireplace and chimney, which have collapsed, were of a dry masonry type.

According to Bob McGregor, a government packer, the cabin was built by Robert Wellman for the livestock partnership of Stockton and Buffman. Some residents of Wawona believe it was built about 1887 and contemporary photographs sustain this idea.

Dana Fork.—An old sheep-camp cabin is situated on the Dana Fork, about a mile and a half from the Tioga Road on the Mono Pass Trail. Two photographs, one taken in 1925 and the other in 1949, show that the structure has deteriorated very slightly during the last twenty-five years. Construction was of white-bark pine logs eight logs high, which make an overall height of not more than seven feet. Deeply cut V notches at the corners allow for a tight-fitting chinking. Four long stringers spanning the length of the structure on each side of the ridgepole give support for the roofing material. This consisted of small poles laid parallel to the end of the building and bound together by split shakes. The shakes have disintegrated. All other features are much the same as those discussed in other cabins of this general construction type. No inkling of the history of the builder has been obtained.

Lamon.—The Lamon cabin is recorded as the first log cabin built in Yosemite Valley. James C. Lamon was one of the mountaineers who aided in the construction of the "Upper Hotel" or "Hutchings House" in 1858. The next year he located a preemption claim at the upper end of the valley and built this small but comfortable log cabin. Lamon used unusually large logs for his home, but they were so skillfully notched on both the upper and lower sides, and joined so proficiently at the corners, that the result was a very tight, compact little shelter. The logs were graduated in size from the base log up to a small gable which was filled in with hori-

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zontal split shakes. The perlins were parallel with the sides and were covered with split shakes. These overlapped the ridge on one side, assuring complete drainage for the roof. Numerous pictures of this cabin were published in the early books pertaining to Yosemite.



Lamon cabin

Lamon recorded his claim to 160 acres of land in Yosemite Valley on May 17, 1861.* At the same time that he built his home he planted a fine apple orchard in the valley which still flourishes today. Lamon resided here for fifteen years and endeared himself to his Yosemite neighbors. His death in 1875 marked the passing of one of the most colorful and best known pioneers in early Yosemite affairs.

Mono Pass Miners.—The Mono Pass Miners' cabins are a series of shelters at the head of Bloody Canyon. They were erected by the mining company which owned the Golden Crown mine to house its employees during a period when it was believed that the summit country would produce

*"Land Claims" (K) p. 363, Mariposa County Records.

riches. Although the cabins were erected in the 'seventies they have withstood time and the ravages of the elements.

White-bark pine logs were employed, the first of which rested on the ground, and all corner notching was V-shaped, producing a tight fit. Wedge-shaped chinking was inserted between timbers at both interior and exterior angles, making the cabins doubly protected. The stringers spanning the roof are parallel with the facade, and over these were laid vertically a series of short, small logs, placed tightly together and extending from the center ridgepole to the eaves. Apparently sod from the near-by meadow once covered the log roof.

Tiltill Mountain.—The stockman's cabin at Tiltill Mountain was built by the Elwell brothers in 1888, the same year they erected the Beehive cabins. It is not known how long the Tiltill Mountain cabin was used, but indications are that it was occupied only seasonally and for the several years that the Elwell cattle grazed in that area.

Two large trees have fallen over this cabin in recent years, but structural features can still be distinguished. The walls were five logs high, and the corners were V-notched. Chinking of split shakes approximately eight inches wide was used to bridge the interval between logs. The overall dimensions of the shelter were ten by twelve feet. Roofing was of split shakes. The base log rested on the ground. Flooring was of packed earth.

John Muir.—John Muir, "The Father of Yosemite National Park," came to Yosemite on foot in 1868 and made headquarters in Yosemite Valley for about five years. He obtained employment at Hutchings' saw-mill cutting lumber for the hotels and cottages then being built in the Sentinel group. He boarded with the Hutchings family and occupied a cabin he built for himself near Hutchings winter home along Yosemite Creek. The Muir cabin was a small hideout almost obscured from view by the surrounding trees and shrubbery. Muir used round logs for his home, joining them with a V notch. The perkins were parallel to the ridgepole and extended beyond the cabin two to three feet. A shake roof covered the structure and overlapped the ridgepole on one side.

The shady environment of this cabin was not conducive to rapid melting of the snow on its roof, so Muir compensated for this by constructing a steep-pitched roof which tended to rid itself of the snow when the roof became too heavily burdened. Shakes laid flat covering the crevices between the logs produced adequate chinking for the abode.

Muir used his hands and heart in the construction of his home. A description of the cabin interior in Muir's own writing* will give the reader

**The Life and Letters of John Muir*, I, pp. 207-208.

the best picture of the quarters. "This cabin, I think, was the handsomest building in the Valley, and most useful and convenient for a mountaineer. From the Yosemite Creek, near where it first gathers its beaten waters at the foot of the fall, I dug a small ditch and brought a stream into the cabin, entering at one end and flowing out the other with just current enough to allow it to sing and warble in low, sweet tones, delightful at night while I lay in bed. The floor was made of rough slabs, nicely joined and embedded in the ground. In the spring the common pteris ferns pushed up between the joints of the slabs, two of which, growing slender like climbing ferns on account of the subdued light, I trained on threads up the sides and over my window in front of my writing desk in an ornamental arch. Dainty little tree frogs occasionally climbed the ferns and made fine music in the night, and common frogs came in with the stream and helped to sing with the Hylas and the warbling, tinkling water.

"My bed was suspended from the rafters and lined with libocedrus plumes, altogether forming a delightful home in the glorious Valley at a cost of only three or four dollars, and I was loath to leave it."

Hutchings.—James Mason Hutchings is another name that has grown to be almost synonymous with early Yosemite history. In addition to his proprietorship of the Upper Hotel or Hutchings House in the Valley, he publicized Yosemite in his *California Magazine* and in his several books on the Sierra. His *In the Heart of the Sierra*, 1886, bears the imprint, "Published at the Old Cabin, Yo Semite Valley." Hutchings was born in Towcester, Northhamptonshire, England, February 10, 1820. He left England in 1848 and arrived in Yosemite June, 1855. In 1863, he purchased the Upper Hotel from the Hite brothers, George and John, and after acquiring this primitive two-story inn, he laboriously supplied it by pack mules over the narrow rugged fifty-mile trail from Coulterville. At first, the hotel structure was most unrefined, as records indicate when Hutchings first purchased it. The windows, doors and partitions were all of thin muslin, but Hutchings proceeded to make improvements and additions so that it eventually became a reasonably comfortable lodging for the many guests who resided there while visiting the wonders of Yosemite. He used 109 saddle and pack horses to carry guests from the hotel to points of interest in and around the valley, and his fame as a guide was quite as notable as was his reputation as hotel keeper.

Hutchings' home for his family of wife and three children was erected on the warm side of the valley near Yosemite Falls. James C. Lamon assisted in the building. Round logs were placed on a stone foundation, and joined with a V notch. A covered open porch or lean-to occupied

one side of the building. Later, a frame addition was built on the opposite end to supply added living space for the family. The cabin boasted a large stone fireplace and chimney. Two extremely large granite slabs were used to form the mantel and hearthstone. Split shakes were used to roof the cabin and to chink between the logs. This residence was torn down during the early years of Army administration in Yosemite Valley.

Hutchings served as Guardian of Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove from 1880 to 1883. Florence, one of two daughters born to the Hutchings, was the first white child born in Yosemite; she died there at the age of 18 and Gertrude, the other daughter, affectionately known today as "Cosie" by the local Yosemite inhabitants, came back to the park in the 1940's after many years of absence and resided there until 1949.

TYPE III: SQUARE HAND-HEWN LOGS JOINED BY A BOX NOTCH

Biledo Meadows.—A compact hand-hewn log cabin is the second of two cabins on the Thomas Biledo claim on the southern boundary of the park near the Mariposa Grove of Big Trees. The builder is unknown, but available information indicates it was completed about 1880. The cabin is in excellent condition today; a new roof and superstructure were added by the present owner in 1932. Hand-hewn logs, eight to ten inches, rest on a loose rock foundation, and rise to a height of seven feet. Deep notching of the logs made a tight durable corner joint and thus chinking was omitted. A gable of about six feet rises to the ridgepole and is enclosed with vertical boards and bats.

Gin Flat.—The Gin Flat cabin stands about 150 feet east of the old Big Oak Flat road in the south end of the meadow. Actually, there are two separately built cabins placed so close together as to give the appearance of one long unit. The larger unit is 16 by 24½ feet, and the smaller 14 by 18½ feet. There is a common porch 6 feet in depth spanning both structures. Wedge-shaped chinking was inserted between the pine logs which were hewn on the two exposed sides, and secured at the box-notch joints by large oak dowls. Granite was used for the foundation and again for a dry masonry fireplace built in a corner of the larger unit. The perlints are parallel with the sides and covered by a sugar-pine shake roof. The gable is filled in and sealed with vertical boards.

Construction was begun in 1883 by John Curtin, a stockman who had frequented the Gin Flat area since the early seventies. Mr. Curtin lived at Keystone, California, near Knights Ferry.

Kibbe.—This structure was erected on the shores of the natural Lake Eleanor by Horace J. Kibbe, a homesteader; the building and its site are

now under the waters of the Lake Eleanor reservoir. Very little is known about either Kibbe or his residence. An oldtimer of the Lake Eleanor area, Theodore B. McCleod, when questioned, recalled his first visit to Lake Eleanor in 1877 when he was six years old, at which time Kibbe instructed him in the art of catching trout. McCleod volunteered the information that Kibbe was a "Squaw Man" and had his squaws pack trout from lake to lake, thereby stocking them so the Indians and Kibbe would have good fishing. The cabin consisted of one room and the sides were covered with



Biledo cabin (type III)

overlapping shakes. The perlns were parallel to the ridgepole. The deed to the Kibbe place was not recorded until 1890.

Hodgdon Ranch or Branson Meadows.—About two miles within the park on the Big Oak Flat road is the former Hodgdon Ranch. T. J. Hodgdon, a colorful pioneer, was the father of the Jerry Hodgdon who later built the two-story cabin at Aspen Valley, previously described. The site of this ranch was first called Moore and Bowen Camp, then Bronson Meadows, and eventually, when Hodgdon acquired the land, Hodgdon Meadows. T. J. Hodgdon was only twelve years old when he first visited Bronson Meadows, and perhaps this visit instilled in him the desire to

own the place. On May 15, 1865, he purchased the land by squatter's title. Hodgdon raised cattle here and two log cabins constituted his first physical improvements.

In 1870 Hodgdon's ranch was at the end of the Big Oak Flat wagon road. Passengers en route to Yosemite would spend the night at Hodgdon's and travel in the saddle from that point over the trail to the valley. In 1872, Hodgdon, together with a Mr. Shoup, engaged in a staging business and continued in this enterprise for seven years.

The ranch finally contained a number of buildings, including a hospice for travelers which was completed in 1871. The two early log cabins were tightly constructed of square hand-hewn logs placed on a loose rock foundation and roofed with split shakes. They were chinked with split shakes laid parallel with the building timbers.

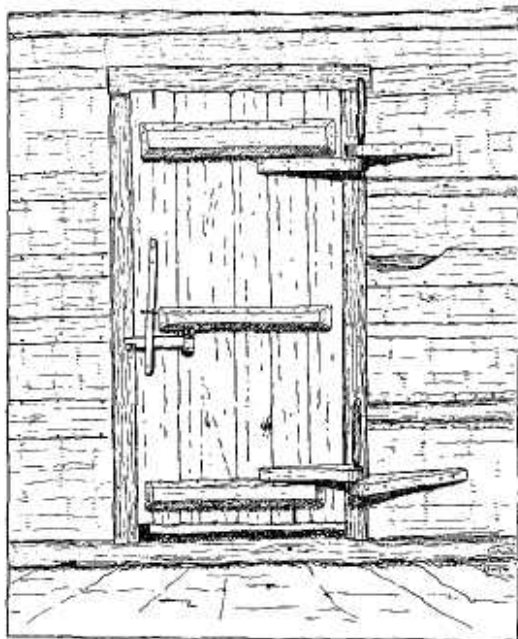
Smith Meadow.—One mile southeast of Smith Peak and Hetch Hetchy Reservoir is a cabin in relatively good condition with only the shake roof in poor repair. Hand-hewn logs were handsomely laid, and the box corners were secured with hardwood dowls driven at an angle to the adjacent log. The cabin is twelve by sixteen feet and rises to a height of thirteen feet six inches. Eight logs approximately twelve inches square constitute the walls. The roof joists are so spaced as to accommodate three-foot shakes and extend five feet beyond the front of the cabin and two feet at the rear. This extension is also covered by shakes. There is an interesting doorway in the front. The door is hung on hand-carved wooden hinges and pivoted on wooden pegs. The wooden latch is so constructed as to allow the occupants to lock the door from the outside. Beveled cross bracing is attached across the upright boards by means of Belgium nails. A small fireplace of dry masonry stone is situated in the rear wall, which appears to be only a blackened niche. The fireplace did boast a mantle, however, held in place and supported by wooden pegs.

Evidently great care was exercised to make this cabin comfortable, for a double chinking was used between the square timbers. From the exterior side, small poles the size of the niche were inserted deeply between the logs, so deeply in fact they can barely be discerned. For further insulation against cold, split shakes were applied over the gap between logs on the interior side, which in addition to affording a double seal also produced a smoother wall surface.

This cabin was built in 1885 by Cyril C. Smith, an early settler in these parts who came from Maine. He had holdings in Merced and settled on lands now known as Mather, Hetch Hetchy, and Smith Meadow, which he used as summer pasturage for his stock. Smith was primarily a sheep

man, but did at one time raise hogs on the Mather site. Cyril Smith was the father of Elmer Smith of Merced, who sold parts of these lands to the City of San Francisco for a recreation camp.

Tamarack Lodge.—On the Big Oak Flat Road was a hospice for travelers known as Tamarack Flat Lodge. A photograph taken in 1903 shows the lodge in reasonably good condition. Several bicycles appear in the pic-



Door of Smith Meadow cabin

ture. At that period more than a few cyclists Yosemite-bound rode bicycles all the way from the San Joaquin. Tamarack Lodge possesses several features unlike any other cabin studied. Granite rocks were piled high at each of the four corners on which the first of the logs were laid. Two large stone steps led up to the doorway. The building logs were square, hand-hewn, and connected with a box-corner joint. Over this corner were nailed short pieces of split shakes to protect it from damp weather.

Split shakes were used to cover the roof and again to chink between the square timbers. They were secured flat against the logs to produce a good tight seal. The gable was filled in with vertically laid boards. There were two signs over the door, one reading "Tamarack Lodge" and the other "Tamarack Flat."

Miguel Meadows.—What remains of the Miguel Meadows cabin can be seen seven miles from Hetch Hetchy Reservoir on the Lake Eleanor trail. Presently, the cabin is in a state of collapse and will not be found standing many more winters. From an old photo presented by Celia Crocker Thompson of Lodi, California, it appears that in its younger years the cabin was quite substantial and well constructed to carry the winter burden of heavy snows. Split shakes completely covered the exterior, and hand-hewn timbers were used as structural members. A large dry masonry fireplace and chimney in sound condition still stands.

Miguel Herrera and his partner, Jonas Rusk, owned the meadows. They grazed a large herd of cattle and horses in this area in the summer. Herrera is described as a small man with black hair and dark complexion, and was apparently of Mexican or Spanish descent. In addition to Miguel Meadows, he also had holdings at Lake Vernon at one time.

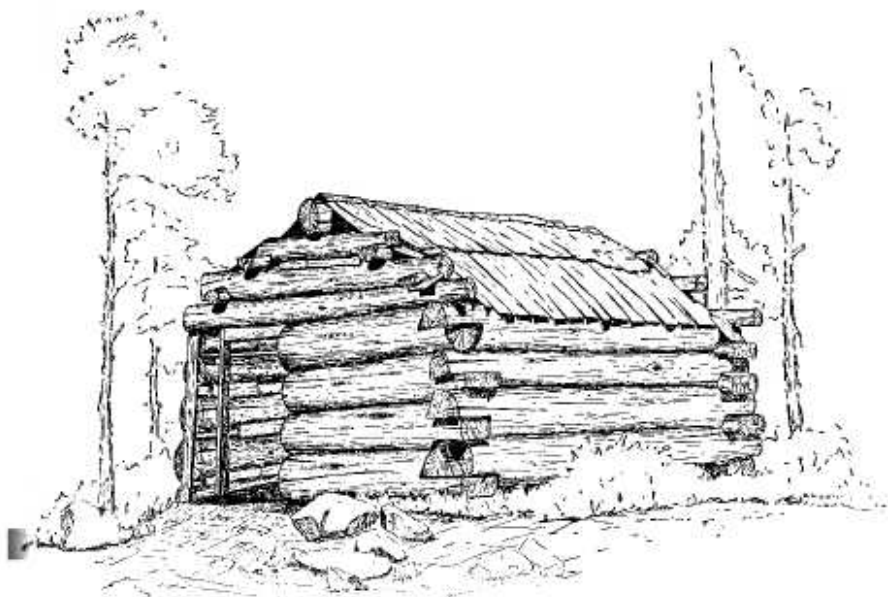
TYPE IV: ROUND LOGS JOINED WITH A BOX NOTCH

Beehive.—The second of the two Beehive cabins, seven miles north of Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, was also established by the Elwell family as summer headquarters during the grazing season. Large logs were used for this cabin, the first of which was half buried in the ground. Five perkins were laid from the center ridgepole down to the wall height, and these were covered with split shakes. The perkins extended approximately three feet over the front of the cabin to shelter the doorway. This extension was covered with split shakes.

The Elwell family also built cabins on Tiltill Mountain and another near Lake Vernon, but the latter is no longer standing. Very little information is available about this family. However, District Ranger John Bingaman talked to a few of the oldtimers west of the park and learned that the Elwells once lived near Groveland, California, and each summer drove their cattle up into the higher country and returned to their home range in the fall. These cabins were built in this period. About 1889, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas R. Reid filed on Lake Vernon by preëmption and built a cabin there. At the same time, Lewis Elwell filed on Mount Gibson and Eugene Elwell filed on Beehive.

McCauley.—One of the more recent of the log cabins in Yosemite is John McCauley's in Tuolumne Meadows. Many modern features are found in this building but they do not conceal its original character. Round logs were used and the corner joints were square or box notches. It stands on a rock foundation, and the chinking is mortar. Alterations include a shingle roof with flashing, screen door, and glass windows.

McCauley built this cabin about 1912, probably before actually acquiring title to the land which he purchased from Jean B. Lembert, who had obtained a homestead patent here in 1895. Soon thereafter the Sierra Club acquired the property from McCauley.



Tuolumne Meadows cabin

Tuolumne Meadows.—This small house is on the Elizabeth Lake Trail in Tuolumne Meadows and is in reasonably good condition. It was roughly and crudely constructed of unusually large lodgepole timbers, extending from the base log on the ground to a height of approximately nine feet at the ridgepole. Entrance is gained through a doorway about five feet in height at the left side of the façade. The manner in which the logs were joined at the corners produced a fairly tight cabin, thus minimizing the need for chinking. However, some chinking, in the form of small wedges placed parallel between the logs, was used in places.

Although round logs were utilized, the corner joints were secured with a box corner. Only two courses of long shakes were used on the roof, which produced a shabby appearance.

Information regarding the cabin's historical background is sparse. Mr. William E. Colby, who has long known the Tuolumne Meadows area, states that the cabin was there in 1894 to his best recollection, and that it

was built by one of the shepherders who used to drive sheep into the meadows prior to the establishment of Yosemite National Park.

Devil's Postpile.—Southeast of Yosemite National Park is the Devil's Postpile National Monument. It is stated in Gudde's *California Place Names* that Red Satcher, a shepherd, settled in this area about 1878. He built a cabin with a large fireplace at the foot of the Devil's Postpile, easily accessible from the pasturage in the immediate vicinity. Mr. Douglas Robinson of Bishop, California, states that he visited this area in 1909 and that a Mr. Moore was living in the cabin. At that time, the structure was in good repair, indicating that possibly Mr. Moore had rehabilitated it.

Architecturally this cabin has some features not found in most of the early pioneer structures. Large logs were used at the base and as the walls proceeded upward, smaller elements were employed. This produced a sturdy appearance. The doorway and windows were deeply recessed and boxed in by cut lumber. Shake and wedge-shaped chinking were used. At the present time the structure is in a state of collapse, but all of its parts are recognizable.

OTHER CABINS

The additional cabins listed below are known to have been of log construction. Pertinent information on structural features and historical data are not available; they are only mentioned to record their approximate location and to solicit information from readers who may know something about them.

Buck Camp.—East of Wawona. The cabin no longer stands but remains of it were seen by District Ranger John W. Bingaman in the early 1920s.

Cathawood.—In Zip Canyon along the South Fork of the Merced River below Cunningham Flat. Reported by Frank Ewing.

Empire Meadow.—The original cabin was built near the road that leads to Deer Camp, southeast of Chinquapin Ranger Station.

Hazel Green.—West of Yosemite National Park on the Coulterville Road.

Lake Vernon.—Built on the shores of Lake Vernon by Thomas R. Reid in 1889.

Little Yosemite.—In Little Yosemite Valley. Probably belongs in the group of early National Park Service cabins mentioned under Crane Flat.

Ostrander.—Stood near the present Bridalveil Creek Campground.

Rancheria Mountain.—Above Hetch Hetchy on Hat Creek near the trail crossing.

Turner Meadow.—Stockman's cabin four miles below Crescent Lake, east of Wawona.

Westfall.—Built by J. J. Westfall on Bridalveil Creek, south of the present Glacier Point Road.

These notes serve to crystallize the thought that even the back country of this, the oldest and one of the great scenic reservations in America, did not escape exploitation. We can take satisfaction in the fact that most of the pioneers who occupied their chosen spots in the area which became Yosemite National Park did not bring about such changes as would menace the integrity and values of the preserve. Miners made but feeble scratches as they sought mineral deposits which were never found; sheepmen and cattle ranchers were a very real threat and it is impossible to state accurately the extent of damage done to land and flora, but their period of activity was brought to an end before a great deal of irreparable damage was done; trappers were present but they have left little trace of their activity; homesteaders, generally, wreaked no havoc—their claims with few exceptions have reverted to nature. Two of the exceptions exist in the Hetch Hetchy reservoir and the artificially enlarged Lake Eleanor. Some of the lands acquired by Horace J. Kibbe, J. L. George, M. A. Wheaton, C. C. Smith, Horatio and Eveline Kellett, Nathan Screech, Joseph Screech, George Marshner, and Thomas R. Reid were purchased by the City and County of San Francisco and are now embraced, together with some National Park Service lands, in the Hetch Hetchy water project. Other lasting effects of private ownership are seen in the Wawona area where a section of land in the park now provides homesites for several hundred people. At Foresta near the west boundary of the park a somewhat similar condition has developed on lands which were the homesteads of James M. McCauley and Thomas A. Rutherford. At Aspen Valley and in East Meadow, owned by the Hodgdon Estate considerable timber has been cut, as is also the case on a quarter section near Wawona which originally was patented by Emily V. Dodge. The National Park Service has been quite successful in buying most of the other private holdings touched upon in this account.

All in all, there is little or no mark of the pioneer owner to be found upon these lands other than the old cabins which are slowly melting into the ground from which they sprang.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My deep appreciation is extended to my wife for her cooperation and to former Superintendent Carl P. Russell for his many hours of laborious work in gathering material and for instigating this article. Also my gratitude to former Assistant Chief Ranger Homer Robinson for information freely given, and to the following men who have obtained data, measurements, and photographs of some of the early cabins: Louis W. Hallock, John W. Bingaman, Samuel L. Clark, Harry R. Doring and Carl Danno, Kenneth R. Ashley, John Wilbur and C. A. Walquist; Park Forester Emil F. Ernst provided comprehensive data regarding land titles and Visual Information Specialist Ralph H. Anderson made available his many photos of pioneer structures. I have obtained assistance, also, from the Yosemite Museum staff in locating certain photographs and manuscripts preserved in the Yosemite Museum Library. To Chief Ranger Oscar Sedergren I express appreciation for the coordination he has given to field studies and to my work in compiling this material.

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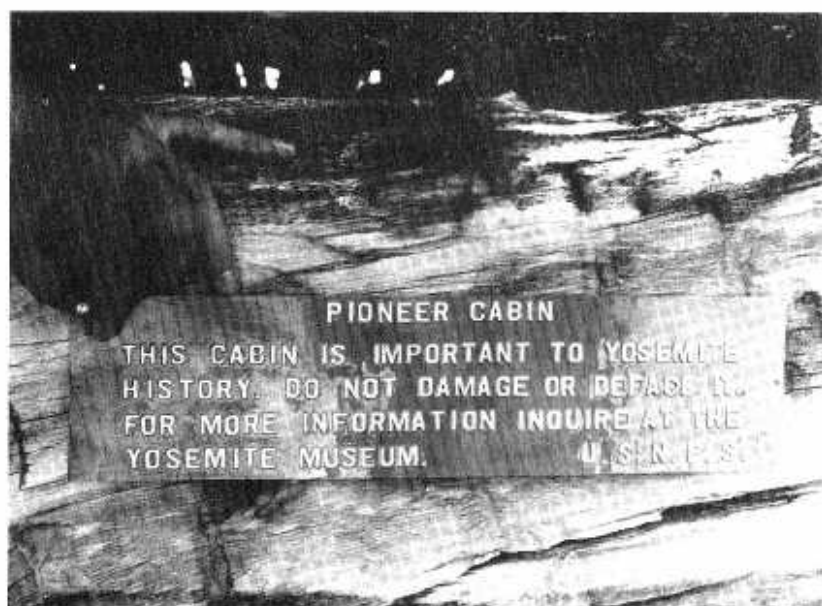
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Metal signs such as this are being placed on all the historic buildings in Yosemite National Park in an attempt to make the public aware of their historic values.



Mr. Kibbey at his Lake Eleanor cabin in 1896. This photo was taken by Lukens.



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