

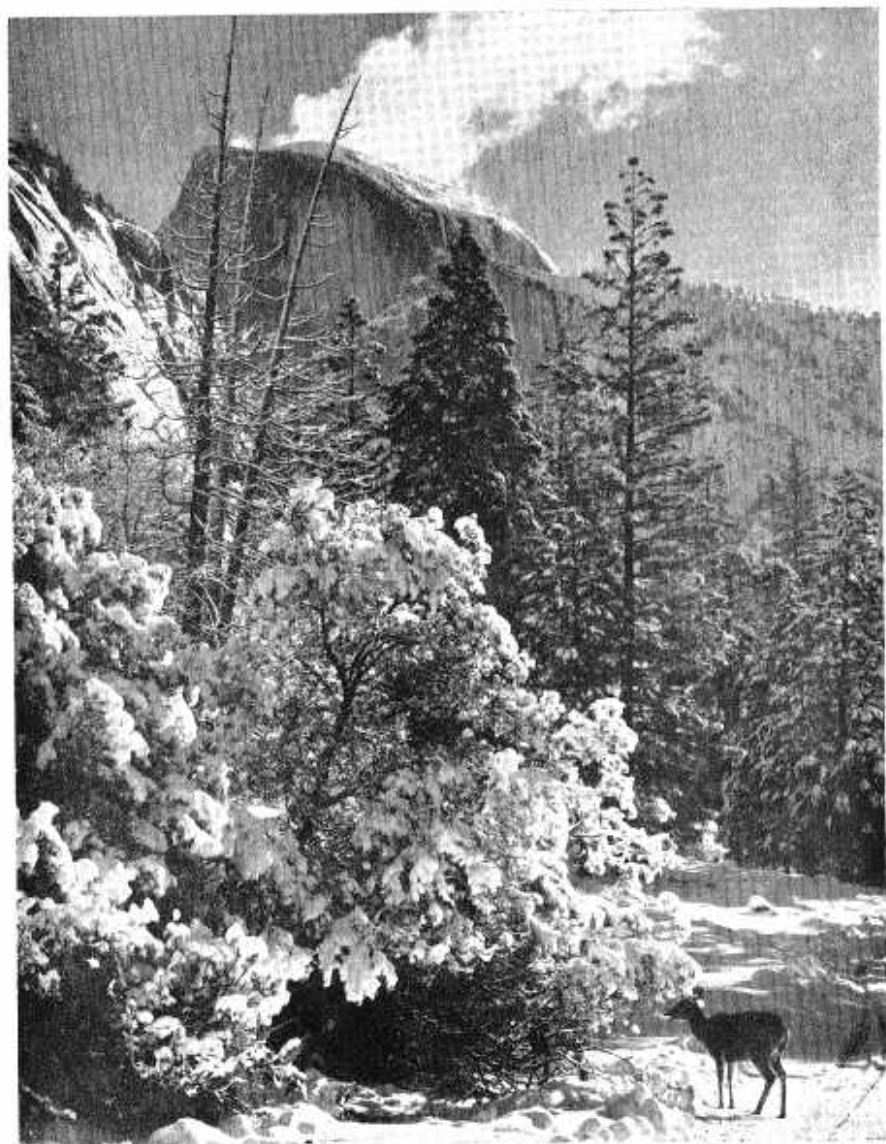
# YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES

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Yosemite Falls, Winter  
—*Fiske*, c. 1885



Winter In Yosemite

—Ansel Adams

# Yosemite Nature Notes

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NO. 2

## THE YOSEMITE VALLEY SCHOOL

By Laurence V. Degnan

### PART I

For a decade or two after its first settlement by white men, the wilderness that was Yosemite must have been "Paradise enow" to the boy of school age who was fortunate to live there — where a special set of three R's, "huntin', fishin', and swimmin'", had no competitors. But into this Eden too, the serpent crept, to beguile the grown-ups with subversive ideas.

Accordingly, in the spring of 1875, the heads of the Yosemite families, including George F. Leidig, Alexander G. Black, James M. Hutchings, William J. Howard, and others, petitioned the Mariposa County Board of Supervisors to establish a Yosemite Valley school district. The petition, drawn up by Howard, was granted by the Board, at their meeting of May 3, 1875. The action of the Supervisors is recorded on page 16, Book C of their minutes, in the following language:

In the matter of Petition of J. M. Hutchings, A. G. Black, G. F. Leidig and others for the establishment of a School District to be known as the Yo Semite Valley District, bounded and described as follows to wit: — Embracing all that portion of the

County North and Easterly of the South Park of the Merced River including the Big Tree Station, and immediate neighborhood—

Commencing at the Big Tree Station aforesaid — running thence along the new road of Washburn, Chapman & Co. to the Hermitage, including the vicinity of said road upon the Southerly and Westerly side thereof

Commencing again at and including the immediate vicinity of said Hermitage—thence Westerly along the boundary line of the Yo Semite Valley — thence down the Main Merced River to and including Hennesseys place — thence in a North Easterly direction to the Northerly boundary line of the Yo Semite Grant and including the Gentry Station — thence Easterly to the most eastern boundary of Mariposa County—Ordered that said Petition be granted and that said District as above described be declared a School District.

Another Mariposa County school district with a similar name, the Yosemite School District, not far from Coulterville, and about 40 miles from the Yosemite Valley, had existed since 1870; and for some years the list of school districts in the County included two Yosemites; the Yosemite School District, and the Yosemite Valley School District. The obvious confusion resulting from the similarity of names was commented on at different times by the *Mariposa Gazette*, but it was not

until 1884 that the Yosemite District was renamed the Greeley District.

After the enactment of the ordinance creating the Yosemite Valley School District, there seems to have been little delay in opening for business, and the school plant progressed rapidly from a log under a tree, to a tent, to a sure enough school-house, built specifically for the purpose. The following account of the school's beginnings is quoted (with some changes) from the *Stockton Daily Independent* for Wednesday, August 2, 1876:

**YOSEMITE VALLEY SCHOOL.**—We are furnished with the following facts in relation to the establishment of the first school in the Yosemite valley, a year ago: The Pioneer public school in Yosemite valley was organized by J. A. Chestnutwood, (now principal of the public school at Linden), July 6, 1875. The school was formally opened and taught for a week under a large oak tree, about one mile distant from the Yosemite Falls. The children were seated on a prostrate log and on boxes. A dry goods box was used by the teacher for a blackboard, on which he printed small words, there being no books in a class of seven beginners. During the first week Mr. Anderson, a Scotchman by birth, was engaged in building the school-house, a cloth structure 12x16 feet. The upright posts were hewn by Mr. Anderson from a fallen cedar. This is also the gentleman who subsequently was the first person to ascend South Dome, 4,990 feet above the valley, and, there planted the starry flag of his adopted country. The School Trustees were W. J. Howard, J. M. Hutchings and George F. Leidig. The following are the names of the pupils who attended the school:

Ida Howard	Sammy Harris
Della Howard	Charles Leidig*
Carrie Howard	Tennie Keith
William Howard	Charles Keith
Albert Howard	Victoria Tiscornia
Royal Howard	Ella Tiscornia
Gertrude Hutchings*	Johnny Boitano*
Flora Hutchings*	Nellie Gordon
Esther Harris	*Born in the valley
Annie Harris	

The preceding transcript differs from the original newspaper article in that I have corrected the spelling of some of the names of the pupils, and omitted an erroneous statement that George Leidig was the first

white child born in the Yosemite Valley. George Frederick Leidig, Jr., the oldest son of George F. Leidig, was born in Coulterville, California, on May 11, 1865. Florence Hutchings, born August 23, 1864, was the first white child born in the valley.



Florence Hutchings

Her sister Gertrude (known as "Cosie"), born October 5, 1867, was the next, and Charles Tuttle Leidig, born March 8, 1869, also listed among the pupils, was the first white boy born in the Yosemite Valley. In later years Cosie Hutchings was one of my teachers in the Yosemite Valley school.

The exact site of the first "fresh air" school probably cannot be determined now. The testimony of Cosie Hutchings that it was near the foot of Indian Canyon is corroborated by Charley Leidig, who says that it was close to Indian Creek, both agree within the expected limits of approximation, with the newspaper's statement that the school was about a mile from the Yosemite Falls. The need of a water supply would make the bank of a creek a desirable site, and with no other

source nearby, that consideration seems to support Charles Leidig's statement.

The records of the early history of the Yosemite Valley school are incomplete, and the situation is complicated by mutually corroborative written statements by Jack Leidig and Mrs. Esther Harris Nathan, in the files of the Yosemite Museum (and further confirmed by Jack Leidig's older brother Charley), to the effect that the first schoolhouse building in the valley was the "Lick House", a building that had been a boarding house for Washburn & McCready's stables, located between Black's hotel and Leidig's hotel, about a mile down the valley from the schoolhouse that I first attended, which, rightly or wrongly, I always knew as the first schoolhouse in the valley. Newman Jones was said to have been the teacher at the school described by Mrs. Nathan and Mr. Leidig. The "Lick House" that they mention should not be confused with the "Lick House" of my day, likewise a boarding house of Washburn's on the left bank of the Merced River below Clark's Bridge, across from the site of the present Company stables.

The accounts given us by Mrs. Nathan and the Leidigs seem inconsistent with the story told by the *Stockton Independent*, but the use of the original Lick House as a temporary schoolhouse during, or even before, the formal organizing of the school, may not necessarily contradict the apparently straightforward newspaper report. Perhaps some additional contemporary evidence may in time be produced that will reconcile these versions.

There was in fact a Newman Jones, who obtained a teacher's certificate in Mariposa County on September 6, 1873, when he was 20 years old, and who later was dis-

trict attorney of the county. The records of Merced County show that he taught the Plainsburg school in that county from October 1875 to March 1876, and it might have been possible for him to teach in Yosemite for a short while. On the other hand, it is puzzling to find his name omitted from an account purporting to tell of the beginnings of the school.

The newspaper quoted says that John A. Chestnutwood organized the pioneer Yosemite school on July 6, 1875, and there appears to be no doubt that he taught school immediately thereafter. He also taught in Merced County from September 1874 to June 1875, and according to the *Stockton Independent*, was principal of the school at Linden, San Joaquin County, in August 1876. His tour of duty in Yosemite would therefore appear to have occupied part of the latter half of 1875, sandwiched in between his assignments in Merced and San Joaquin Counties.

The "Annual Report of the Condition of Common Schools of the County of Mariposa" for the year commencing July 1, 1874 and ending June 30, 1875, filed in the State Department of Education in Sacramento, mentions the Yosemite Valley school district with a census of 22 children between 5 and 17 years of age, and names W. J. Howard as District Clerk. No other information for the Yosemite Valley school is given for this year. In addition to the Yosemite Valley district, three other school districts were created by the Board of Supervisors at the same time, and on one page of the report the four new districts, Yosemite Valley, White Rock, Chapman, and Live Oak, are grouped together in a sort of footnote, with the notation, "No report".

The regular report for the Yosemite Valley school begins with the

next school year, July 1, 1875 to June 30, 1876; the census statistics show 17 boys and 13 girls of school age. The sex (male) of the teacher is given, but his name does not appear. The teacher's salary, including board, is reported as \$80 per month, and the school was in session four months, at a total outlay of \$310 for teachers' salaries. The sessions, as in my time, appear to have been limited to the summer and parts of spring and autumn, an average term of about six months in all, and there is some difficulty in matching a school term that was confined to a single calendar year, with a report that covers parts of two calendar years.

From 1887 on, the school registers are available in the Yosemite Valley, in the Yosemite Museum, and

in personal matters at least, the record of that period is fairly complete. I am indebted to Mrs. Thelma McGregor, of Yosemite, for her great help in transcribing information from these registers. Her copious and accurate notes represent an immense amount of labor in summarizing and pulling together in convenient form the data from these primary sources.

From available information the following table has been constructed, showing the names of the teachers and the lengths of the school terms, from the time of the official organization of the district to the beginning of its "modern" era, when the full school term was adopted. From 1886 on, the list is correct; the preceding decade may be subject to correction in spots.

Year	Length of term	Name of teacher
1875		John A. Chestnutwood
1876	4 mo. 1875-76	Miss Ida Howard
1877	6 mo. '76-77	Miss May Anderson
1878	6.5 mo. '77-78	Miss Ida Howard
	(resigned about	end of April 1878)
		J. C. Tichworth
		(vice Miss Howard)
1879	6 mo. '78-79	J. C. Tichworth
1880	5 mo. '79-80	A. M. Chadwick
1881	Not reported	Miss Alice Willatts
1882	6 mo. '81-82	Miss Mary E. Adair
1883	6 mo. '82-83	Miss Mary E. Adair
1884	5.5 mo. '83-84	Miss Anna Robinson
1885	6 mo. '84-85	Miss Elisse Raymond
1886	6 m. '85-86	Miss Mamie Kerrins
1887	May 2 - Oct 21	Miss Mamie Kerrins
1888	Apr. 16 - Sep. 7	Miss Mamie Kerrins
1889	Apr. 1 - Oct. 18	Miss Frances M. Hall
1890	May 5 - Oct. 17	Miss Frances M. Hall
1891	Apr. 20 - Oct. 16	Miss Annie Kerrins
1892	May 2 - Oct. 14	Miss Annie Kerrins
1893	May 1 - Oct. 13	Mrs. Winslow E. Gallison
1894	Apr. 30 - Oct. 12	Mrs. Winslow E. Gallison
1895	Apr. 29 - Oct. 11	Miss Nettie L. Craighan
1896	Apr. 27 - Act. 14	Miss May E. White

1897 Apr. 19 - Nov. 5	Miss Mary E. White (left early because of illness of sister)
	Miss Gertrude Hutchings (vice Miss White)
1898 May 2-Oct. 21	Miss Julia McClenathan
1899 Apr. 17 - Oct. 20	Miss Alice Bruce
1900 Apr. 16 - Nov. 16	Miss Alice Bruce
1901 Apr. 15-Nov. 15	Miss Alice Bruce
1902 Apr. 17 - Oct. 24	Miss Nettie L. Craighan
1903 Apr. 3 - Oct. 30	Miss Nettie L. Craighan
1904 Apr. 18 - Oct. 28	Miss Nettie L. Craighan
1905 Apr. 10 - Oct. 31	Miss Kitty Dexter
1906 Apr. 30 - Oct. 26	Miss Kitty Dexter
1907 Apr. 22-Dec. 6	Miss Kitty Dexter
1908 Apr. 27 - Dec. 18	Miss Kitty Dexter
1909 May 10 - Dec. 21	Miss Kitty Dexter
1910 May 2 - Dec. 20	Miss Kitty Dexter
1911 May 1-Dec. 22	Miss Ora Boring
1912 Apr. 15 - Dec. 20	Miss Ora Boring
1913 May 5 - Dec. 19	Miss Ora Boring
1914 Apr. 21 - June 27	Miss Ora Boring
July 1 - Dec. 11	Mary E. Schutze
1915 Apr. 5 - Nov. 12	Mary E. Schutze
1916 May 1 - June 30	Mary E. Schutze
'16-17 7-5-16 to 6-6-17	Clare M. Hodges
'17-18 9-4-17 to 5-1-18	Clare M. Hodges

The preceding list indicates that the system of half a year of school and half a year of vacation, which was the rule in my time, continued for about 40 years and ended in 1916; from then on we have a full school term, just like "city folks". The only children, however, who would enjoy the six-months vacation were the all-year residents of the valley. When I attended the school these were the Degnan children and once in a while, the Cavagnaros. The seasonal families, like the Kenneys and the Barnards, moved away for the winter and their children then attended other schools; in effect, they were deprived of their summer vacation.

Newspaper items, on which for the most part, we have to depend for the early history of the school,

indicate that the creation of the Yosemite Valley school district was quickly followed by the construction of a permanent school building. The *Mariposa Gazette* for June 5, 1875 announced that the trustees had arranged for a teacher, and that school would start in a short time. The school house site, according to the *Gazette*, had been selected, and the building would be erected as soon as lumber could be procured. That the trustees held close to their construction schedule may be inferred from a letter from the valley, dated July 7, 1875, and printed in the *Gazette* for the following July 17. This letter says that the school was then going full blast, with 14 pupils; Mr. J. A. Chestnut-wood was the teacher, assisted by his wife. As for the schoolhouse, the



Yosemite Valley School, 1877. Miss May Anderson, Teacher

letter says: "Our school will be completed today. We have a beautiful location in a nice oak grove in front of Coulter & Murphy's hotel, one quarter of a mile distant."

Another letter from a visitor to Yosemite, dated August 30, 1878 and printed in the *Santa Barbara Press* of September 4, 1878, has this to say about the school:

I visited the school in the valley on Monday. I was surprised to find twenty-three pupils enrolled. The teacher, Mr. Ira Tichnorth (Apparently the name should be J. C. Tichworth. LVD) from Ontario, Canada, is a most faithful and efficient teacher . . . The schoolhouse is a rude little structure in the shadow of Glacier Point, and it is surrounded by a beautiful growth of trees, and a good supply of massive boulders, which form lovely play-houses for the children. . . . The school house was built last year. The first school ever opened in the valley was held in a tent, within a lovely grove on the banks of the Merced.

The statement in this letter that the schoolhouse was built "last year", that is to say, in 1877, is contradicted by the more nearly on the spot evidence furnished by the *Mariposa Gazette*, previously referred to, and no doubt can be dismissed as a pardonable error. But even the *Gazette*, in a later number (June 17, 1876) makes the evidently incorrect statement: "A new school house has lately been built near to Mirror Lake in the valley, and Miss Ida Howard is the teacher." It seems pretty certain that no schoolhouse ever existed in that location, and the error may have arisen from the writer's confusing the schoolhouse with Ida Howard's residence at Mirror Lake.



The reference to Coulter & Murphy's Hotel, in the *Gazette* for July 17, 1875, and the statement in the *Santa Barbara Press* that the schoolhouse was "in the shadow of Glacier Point", tie in definitely to the schoolhouse in which I spent my first school years. Coulter & Murphy's hotel was none other than the one from which J. H. Hutchings was evicted by Sheriff John F. Clarke on May 11, 1875, which Coulter & Murphy operated in 1875 and 1876. On January 1, 1877 it was leased to John K. Barnard, who in turn, was forcibly evicted by Sheriff R. A. Prouty on May 11, 1893 (by coincidence the same month and day as Hutchings' eviction). Barnard's successor in interest, A. B. Glasscock, named the hotel "The Sentinel", a name by which it was well known in recent times until the buildings were torn down about 1940.

The hotel comprised a group of

buildings on the south side of the Merced River, immediately west of the Sentinel Bridge. The schoolhouse was on the same side of the river, about 250 yards above the bridge, and 40 or 50 yards south of the present (1955) highway. It was, as the *Santa Barbara Press* states, and the accompanying photograph shows, close to the south wall of the valley, surrounded by trees and boulders. The statement in the *Gazette* of July 17, 1875, that the schoolhouse was a quarter of a mile from Coulter & Murphy's hotel, is probably within the limits of precision to be expected from such off-hand estimates. The boulders shown in the photograph still mark the site, which is very easy to find.

As all but about one term of my Yosemite school days were spent at this location, the incidents and details of school life that I describe will in general be centered here.

(To Be Continued)



Yosemite In Early Days, Sentinel Hotel on Left

From a painting by Thomas Hill

## BOOK REVIEW

## OUTDOOR HAZARDS — REAL AND FANCIED

Mary V. Hood

Illustrations by Don Perceval. Macmillan Co. 1955 Pp. 242. \$3.95

Do you approach the outdoors with misgivings? Do you worry about bats, horned lizards, water snakes, "and things that go bump in the night?" You need not. Do you recognize a danger in deer, range cattle, rabbits and ticks? You should. Can you cope with the gift of an uninhibited skunk, recognize the symptoms of rabies in a dog, and distinguish the pattern of a harmless snake bite from that of a venomous snake? And do you know the correct procedure for crotaline and elapine snake bites? If you fear danger where it is not and do not recognize danger where it exists, then **OUTDOOR HAZARDS REAL AND FANCIED** offers some highly informative and reassuring reading.

Mrs. Mary V. Hood has camped and explored by sea and forest and mountain throughout the West. While assisting the park naturalists in Yosemite National Park she became interested in outdoor hazards, investigated them exhaustively with the help of leading authorities, and then wrote the first truly

"safety first" book for the outdoors. Even veteran naturalists will read it gratefully to check their own evaluations of fact and folklore.

Covering the entire country, dangerous animals and plants are described, their range noted, the hazard evaluated, cautions advised and first aid prescribed. The section on poisonous snakes is particularly complete. As a veteran camper, the author helps the reader anticipate other dangers of trail and camp. Sage advice is given on water, woodcraft, and health precautions. The avoidance of lightning strikes is especially significant for those going into high country.

**OUTDOOR HAZARDS** should be read before any extended camping trip, and certainly before exploring new terrain. I enjoyed it as much for its natural history as for its safety first content. It is a most competent and a thoroughly enjoyable book.

I. R. Barnes

(From the *Atlantic Naturalist*  
November-December 1955)





Winter Forest Detail

—Ansel Adams



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Dan Anderson