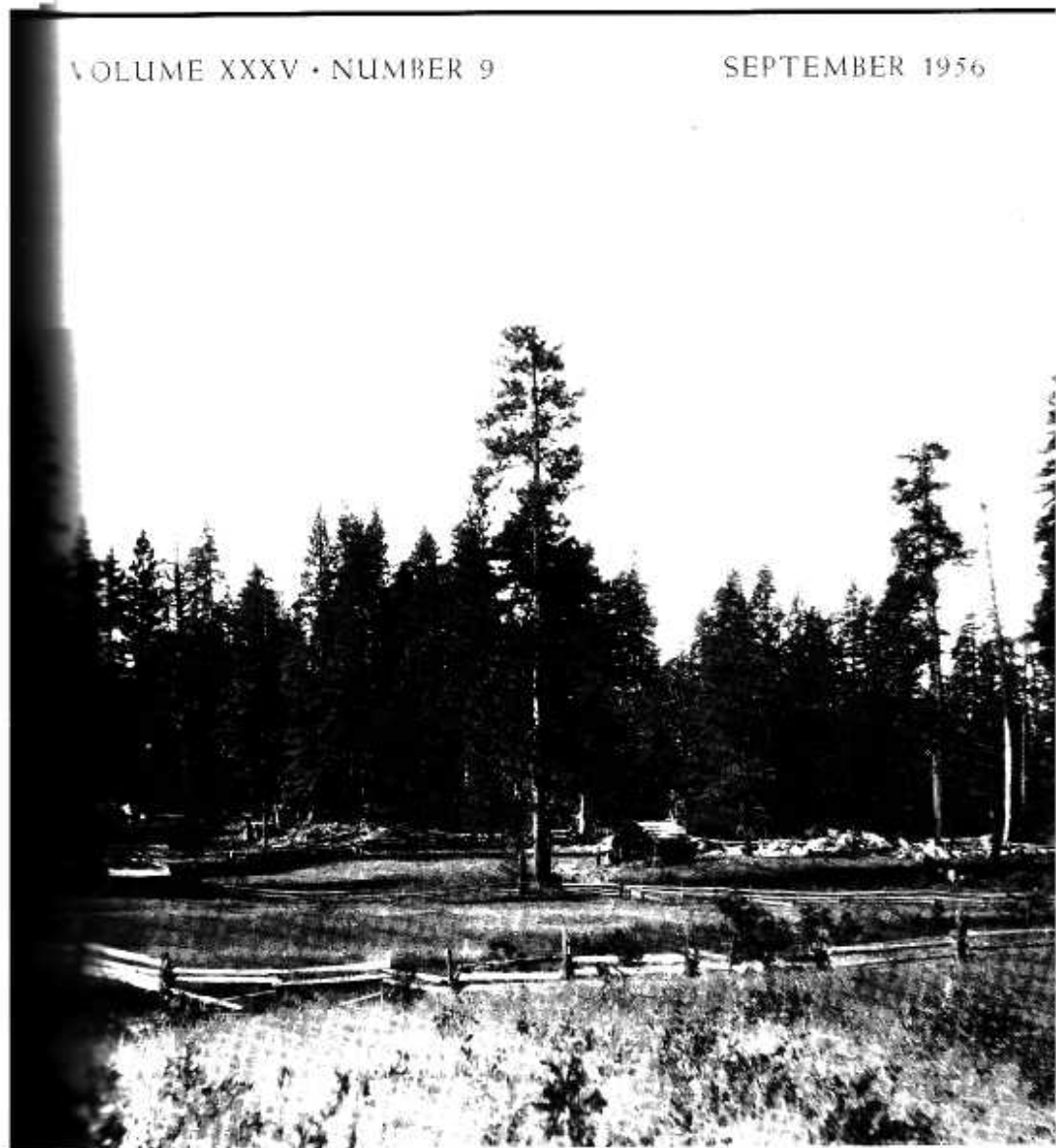


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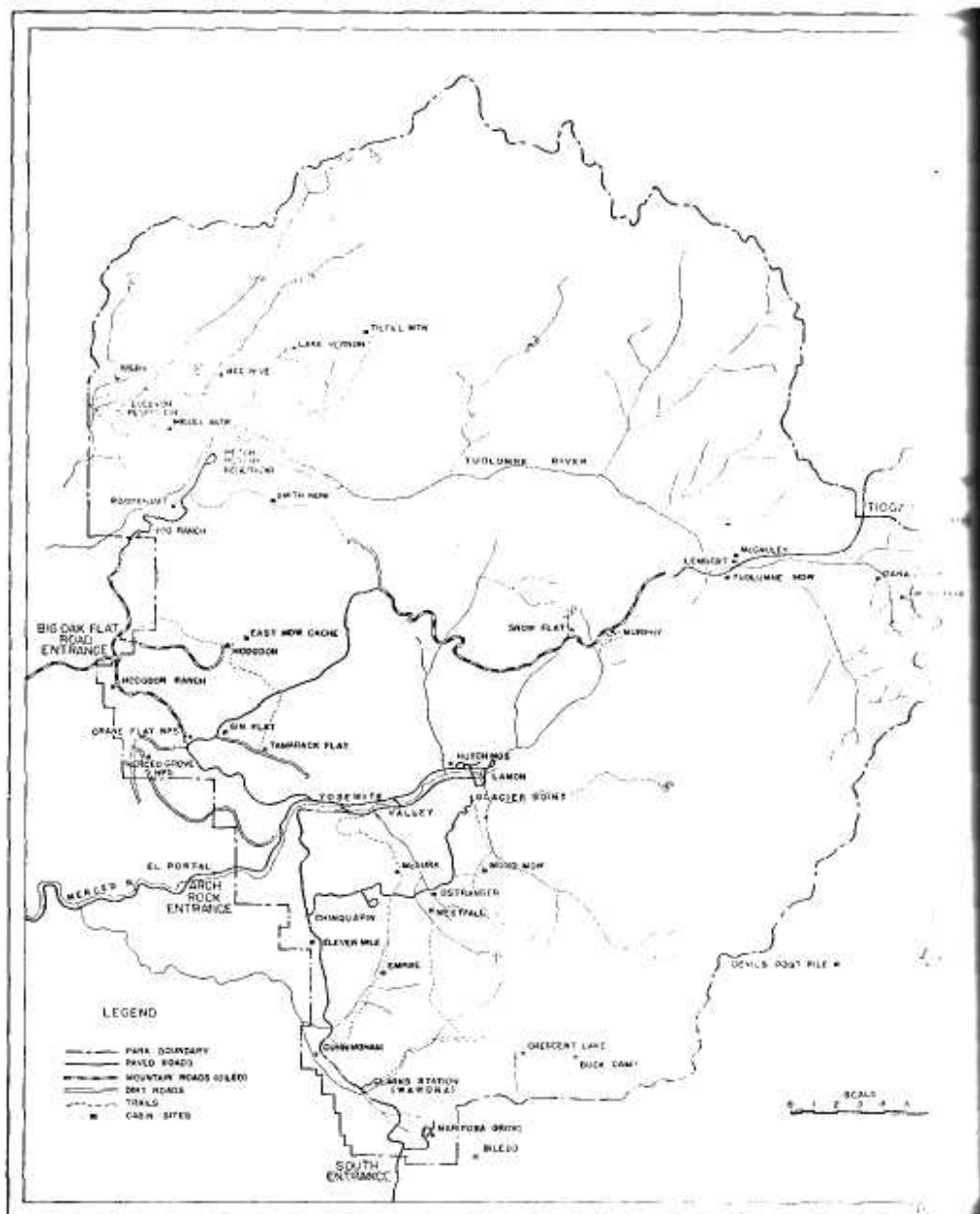
SEPTEMBER 1956



McGILLS CABIN IN 1896

Yosemite's Pioneer Cabins

By ROBERT F. UHTE



Pioneer cabins in Yosemite National Park

EDITOR'S NOTE: We are indebted to Mr. Robert F. Uhte and the Sierra Club for permission to reprint this article which appeared in the *Sierra Club Bulletin* for May 1951. The National Service is interested in the preservation of the historic buildings within Yosemite National Park and an active program is in process to protect, preserve and restore many of these buildings, especially the cabins. In a future issue we hope to present to you what has been done and what is planned along this line.

Yosemite Nature Notes

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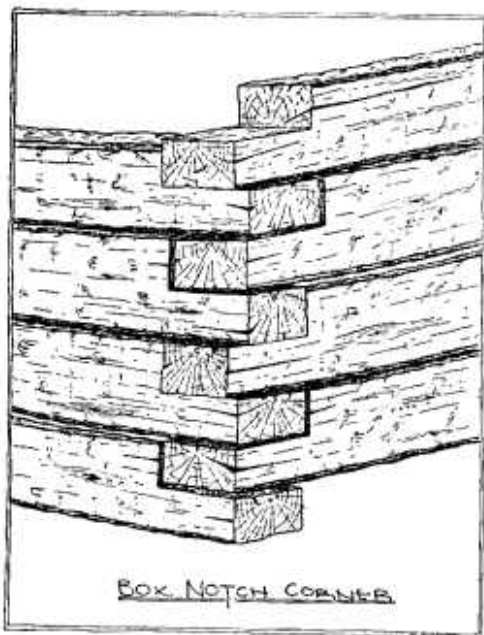
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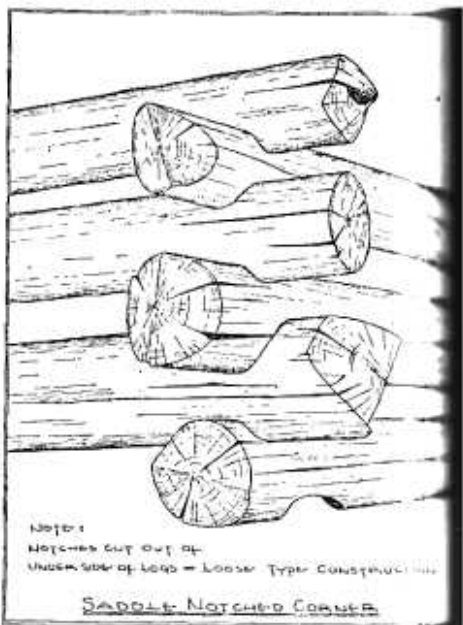
PHYSICAL EVIDENCE of the many cabins built by pioneers in the Yosemite region is disappearing so rapidly that persons interested in the history of the region have felt it worthwhile that such material as is available be gathered together quickly. The project of digesting and presenting data on the subject was assigned to me as an official duty in the course of my work as a park ranger in Yosemite National Park. The sources available to me were the field notes and rough sketches and photographs made by the several park rangers who investigated the old structures during the summers of 1949 and 1950. The account here does not pretend to be complete, and it may not be possible ever to obtain the full story of some of the cabins—even of some of those which are still standing; there may be no survivors to relate the details. It is hoped that some further information will be brought to light by readers of the present article.

As a bit of background, we know that log-cabin construction was common in the Delaware River Valley as early as 1640, and credit for the basic design has generally been given to the pioneer Swedes and Finns. Later, logs were used to construct forts and prisons in the English colonial settlements. In Pennsylvania the Germans used logs for "temporary" homes, many of which stand today. Log cabins housed the first schools and churches in many parts of the West, and helped to house the first seat of government of the Republic of Texas and elsewhere on the frontier. The construction of the cabins themselves reveals some of the culture of the early settler—his personality, character, experience, his national antecedents, and his ability to cope with the situations which confronted him. In general, the old cabins of the Yosemite region are not architectural gems; most of them are simple, even crude, but they reflect some of the hard-bitten qualities of their builders and they are worthy of attention from those who would know more of the history of the pioneers in the Sierra.

Present-day cabin builders find it next to impossible to equal the better structures of the pioneers, owing chiefly to the growing scarcity of good materials and of inexpensive but painstaking labor. Nowadays builders in many parts of the country are content to sacrifice true logs for a log veneer on the exteriors, and to compensate by making the interiors more

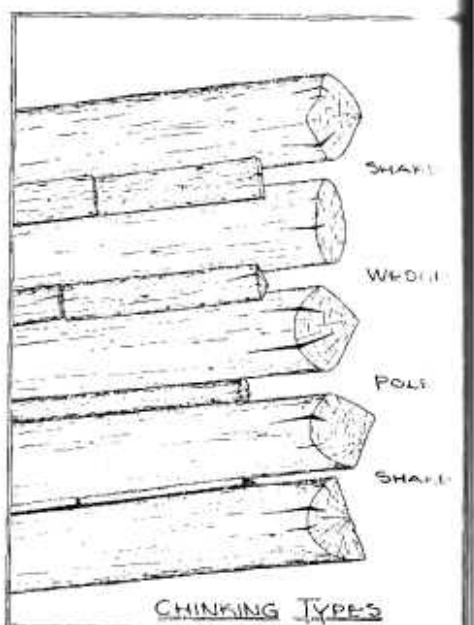
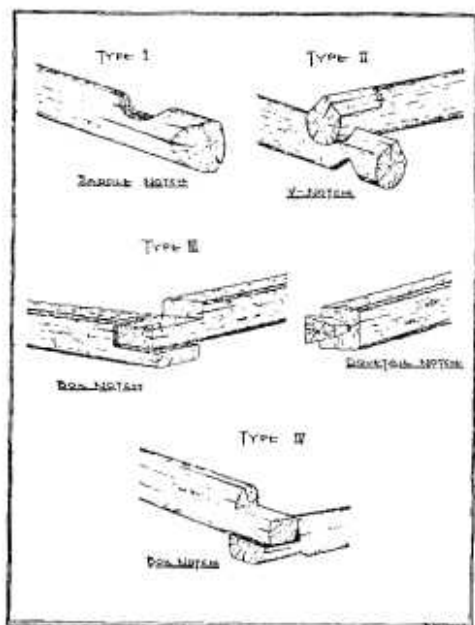


BOX NOTCH CORNER



Notes:
Notches cut out of
under side of logs = Loose Type Construction

SADDLE NOTCHED CORNER



CHINKING TYPES

Notching and chinking types

elaborate by far. To the pioneers the construction of chimney and fireplace must have been something of a challenge; nevertheless much of their stonework appears incapable of toppling even if all mortar were magically to be removed. All in all, we have come to look upon the surviving frontier cabins as almost indigenous to a natural setting and have tended to retain the pioneer log-cabin architecture when a domicile in the woods is desired.

Two basic types of construction are represented in the Yosemite cabins—they are built of hand-hewn logs which are round in one type, square in the other. The methods of corner joining are more varied, however, and it is by these variations that I have classified the cabins, also taking into account the character of the logs themselves, as well as the methods of chinking. Most of the Yosemite cabins investigated were built with round logs and saddle notching at the corners. This type of construction was easy and rapid, for if the saddle notches were not cut deep enough for a tight fit, then larger chinking could be used. The cut I have called a V-notch, for lack of a better name, was also sometimes used with round logs, and was probably easier to make than the saddle notch, a V being easier to cut than a U. Although we may speculate which was better, the saddle notch at least produced a more finished appearance. A more difficult but better method of corner joining was the dovetail or box corner, customarily used with hand-hewn logs but occasionally found on round logs. Dovetailing made for a tighter fit, and chinking could often be dispensed with. When necessary, various methods of chinking were used—split shakes laid flat or on edge between the logs; small poles cut to fit snugly into the crevices; wedge-shaped slabs laid between the logs, or a complete covering of split shakes, laid vertically against the side walls as on a roof. This latter type of construction was quite common in the Yosemite region because of the ready availability of sugar pine from which the shakes could be made right at the cabin site.

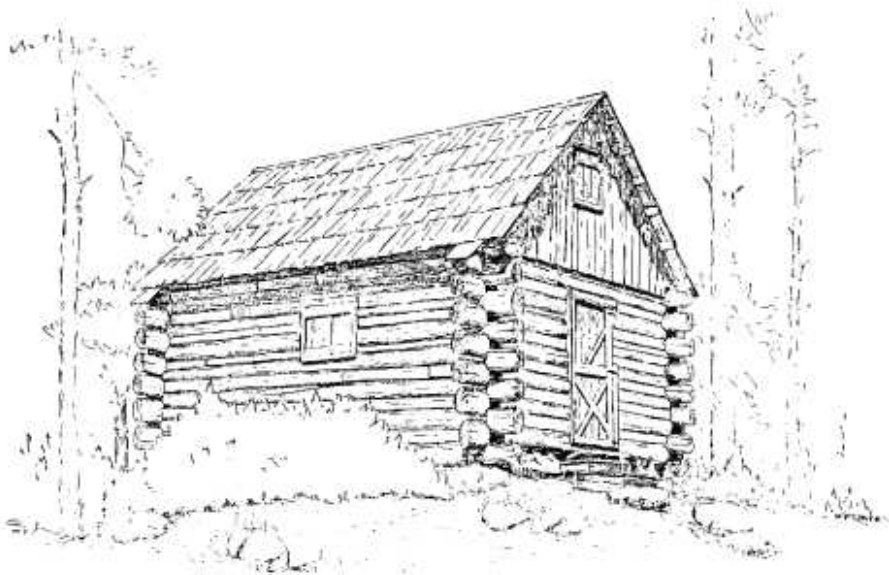
TYPE I: ROUND LOGS JOINED BY A SADDLE NOTCH

Biledo Meadows.—Southwest of Mount Raymond near the enormous springs of Biledo Meadows just outside of the park are two unusually handsome cabins, one of hand-hewn square logs, the other of round timbers. The latter was built in 1890 by Thomas Biledo,* a French-Canadian miner who came to the vicinity in the 'eighties and was employed by the Mount Raymond Mining Company. The logs are eight-ten inches in diameter and laid on a loose rock foundation. The cabin is sixteen by four-

*The name should be spelled "Biledeaux" according to John Wegner (assistant chief ranger, 1916-1944), who knew the builder.

teen feet in area, with an overall height of sixteen feet. It is chinked with hand-split shakes laid parallel to the logs; the gable is filled in with vertical boards. A new roof and superstructure were added by the present owner in about 1932. The cabin was originally built with meticulous care and is in excellent condition. It finds regular use each summer and fall and, evidently, will last for many years.

Crane Flat.—Three log structures were erected by the National Park Service in 1915 as guard stations—the Crane Flat cabin, which still stands, although altered in recent years; another, now gone, in the Merced Grove of Big Trees; and the Hog Ranch cabin, which was replaced by the present Mather Ranger Station in 1935. The Crane Flat structure is the most spacious one studied. It originally had an enclosed floor space of 850



Biledo cabin (type I)

square feet, plus a lean-to for supplementary sleeping quarters and storage. The building had many refinements owing to its late date of construction, such as a number of glass windows, indoor plumbing, a large stone and mortar fireplace and chimney, and mortar chinking. It has shake roof, stone foundation, and saddle-notched corners. It finds use each summer by National Park Service rangers stationed at Crane Flat.

Cunningham.—Stephen Cunningham, born and educated in England, assisted Galen Clark as keeper of the Big Trees; on the flat below Camp

A. E. Wood, Wawona, and approximately eighty-five yards from the South Fork of the Merced River he built his log cabin and lived for many years. The flat which now bears his name is under development at this moment by the National Park Service as a modern campground. Cunningham filed on this land in 1861, but it is not known when he built the cabin. The structure has disintegrated to the point of complete ruin. It was eighteen by twenty-one feet, fronted on the river, and was quite luxurious compared to many of its contemporaries. All that remains of the fireplace and chimney is a pile of angular pieces of granite; no mortar was used. The walls, built of eight- to twelve-inch yellow-pine logs were neatly saddle-notched; in spite of the general ruinous condition many of the logs still fit together snugly. There is no evidence of chinking; the shakes found in the ruins were probably from the roof.

Cunningham supplemented his income as an employee of the Yosemite Grant by making curios which he sold to visitors in the Mariposa Grove. He had his own wood lathe and devoted his spare time to turning out souvenirs. A carriage road from Clark's Station (Wawona) gave access to his cabin and it persisted as a dim trail through the forest until recently when it was obliterated by the construction of a modern road into the new Cunningham Flat Campground.

Hodgdon.—At the southeast end of the Aspen Valley meadow is the Jerry Hodgdon cabin, the only two-story log cabin in or near the park. Several additions to this structure were made in later years—a front porch, a lean-to kitchen on the west side, and an outside stairway on the south end. The overall size is twenty-two by fourteen feet. A shake roof covers the perkins, which are parallel to the sides and extend about two feet on each end of the cabin. The base log suffices for a foundation. The building timbers, carefully notched on both upper and lower sides, give a neat appearance. The wedge-shaped chinking is barely distinguishable at a distance.

Hodgdon began work on this cabin in 1879, and was assisted by an old Chinese called Babcock (see below). The cabin was built for living quarters on the Hodgdon homestead and was occupied as such until a still larger home was constructed. The cabin was later used for summer billeting by a detachment of cavalry soldiers. Descendants of the Hodgdon still own and reside upon the Aspen Valley property.

East Meadow Cache.—The small trapper's shelter in the East Meadow portion of the Hodgdon Estate near Aspen Valley has rotted almost to the ground, but its features are still distinguishable. It was only eight feet long and six feet high. It had no windows and was entered by means of a

trap door in the roof. The cabin housed a very small stone fireplace and chimney.

This shelter was built by a Chinese called Babcock, an employee of Jerry Hodgdon, and used as a cache on Babcock's trap line. It is the only structure of this type known to be in the park.

Lembert.—John B. Lembert took up a homestead at Soda Springs, in Tuolumne Meadows, in 1885 and occupied himself at his high mountain summer quarters raising angora goats and collecting plant and insect specimens from surrounding meadows for museums all over the country. Lembert was living at Soda Springs at the time Prof. George Davidson was doing triangulation work in his temporary observatory on Mount Conness. Davidson reimbursed Lembert for the use of his property as a base camp and pasturage.

Lembert built his crude, one-room cabin of large round timbers laid on a granite stone foundation. The logs were chinked in a rather random manner with shakes, which were also used for the roof. Crude though this cabin was, it was adequate for summer occupancy. Lembert spent his winters in his cabin at the Indian Village, just below El Portal.

Mariposa Grove.—Galen Clark built his first log hut in the Mariposa Grove in 1858, a year after his discovery of the grove. Two photos taken about this time purport to be of the original cabin, but the differences in the photographed structures indicate that there were two different cabins on the same site. The two cabins are of the same size and in the same place, but the earlier one had shake chinking and an uncovered triangular stockade at one end, which possibly was used as a kitchen. There was no covering over the triangular area so a chimney was unnecessary.

According to the Yosemite Valley Commissioners' Biennial Report, 1885-1886, still another one-room log cabin was constructed in the grove, "for the shelter and convenience of visitors." Several years later, it was lengthened by the addition of another room. This structure, generally known as the "Galen Clark Cabin," stood for the next forty-five years, and its fame spread throughout the world, largely through the agency of photographs depicting it and its astonishing setting. In 1930 the Park Service replaced it, for owing to decay its collapse seemed imminent.

The new cabin stands on the original site, and while not an exact duplication of its predecessor, resembles it enough to carry on the tradition. We can fancy it is just the sort of log cabin Galen Clark would have built had building conditions been as favorable in his day. It differs structurally from the cabin it replaced, but not in general design. Every measure has been taken to insure it long life. It has a rubble masonry foundation and

a reinforced chimney. It is constructed of carefully fitted sugar-pine logs tied with steel dowl-pins and chinked with split-log strips over oakum packing. The shake roof is laid on roofing paper and solid sheathing. It has doweled, random-width oak flooring. The cabin now houses a small museum exhibit devoted to the sequoias.



Galen Clark's first cabin—Mariposa Grove
Replaced in 1885-86; second cabin rebuilt in 1930

McGurk Meadows.—In McGurk Meadows, one mile west of Bridalveil Creek and about one mile north of the Glacier Point road, is the site of a stockman's cabin similar in appearance and construction to the cabin in Mono Meadows. Lodgepole logs, notched on the under side only and about ten to twelve inches in diameter, were used to a height of four and a half feet for the walls, the base log being laid on the soil. Fireplace, windows, and flooring have been omitted. Wedge-shaped chinking filled the wide gap between logs. The doorway is four feet high. Shakes were used to cover the roof, which measured nine feet from eave to ridge.

This cabin was intended to have been part of the homestead of John J. McGurk, but through an error in description, the wrong property was filed upon. Thomas M. Again originally filed for the 160 acres intending to claim what is now known as McGurk Meadows, but the description entered into the county records placed the claim well up Illilouette Creek. Hugh Davanay subsequently acquired this mistaken title from Again, and sold to McGurk in 1895, who continued in possession until August 1897, when he was removed by U.S. troops, then the custodians of the national park. Their basis for this removal was the error in the original description of the claim patented by Again; the patent was for an area six miles di-

rectly east of his intended homestead. After his removal, McGurk forced Davanay to reimburse him for his loss and Davanay in turn tried to effect a trade with the General Land Office for the desired piece of land, but was refused. The land covered by the original patent was exceedingly rough and was considered worthless; Again could not dispose of it. Thus, Mc-



McGurk cabin

Gurk Meadows has always been in government ownership although occupied by several persons over a considerable period of time.

Mono Meadows.—The Mono Meadows cabin is on the Mono Meadows trail about one mile east of the Glacier Point road. It is built of small lodgepole pine logs with no indication of chinking. There is no foundation, window, or floor. The doorway faces north, and is four feet high and three feet wide. The overall size of the cabin is fourteen by fourteen feet. The walls are doorway height and the gable extends to nine feet.

This construction is like that of the McGurk cabin except that the logs used average only six inches in diameter. This shelter was built by Milt Egan and used seasonally as what is generally known as a "summer line cabin." Its later use was probably restricted to shelter for a sheepherder or cowboy when the adjacent meadow was grazed. The cabin is in a poor state of repair and is useless at the present time.

Murphy.—The west shore of Lake Tenaya is the site of a one-time long

rectangular structure built by J. L. Murphy on the Tioga Road as a home and a hospice for wayfarers. Murphy's roadhouse actually antedated the building of the road. Murphy occupied it only during the summer season, at which time he employed a cook and catered to travelers and campers. In winter he lived in Mariposa.

A photo of this cabin taken about 1890 shows a group of travelers, one of them being Galen Clark. This cabin has long since perished, but from this old photograph one is able to ascertain most of its physical appearances, and discover the substantial manner in which it was constructed. About one-third of it—that which housed the dry masonry rock fireplace and chimney—was built of exposed logs and chinked with large boards laid horizontally. Evidently this was Murphy's basic cabin. The other two-thirds appears to have been a later addition and differs greatly in that it is a frame structure completely covered by split shakes laid horizontally. The entire cabin is covered by a roof of split shakes which overlap on one side of the roof ridgepole, thereby sealing the roof from rain and snow.

An excellent description of this shelter and its surrounding terrain is found in an excerpt from the *Daily Free Press* of Bodie dated August 18, 1882: "The ample meadows surrounding Lake Tenaya at its eastern and western extremity are now owned by J. L. Murphy, who settled there and fenced in the property years ago. This gentleman also stocked the lake some years ago with trout, which are now quite abundant in its waters. On the northern shore, at a point about half way between the two ends, he has built a comfortable log house for the accommodation of guests, all the board work for which, roofing, etc., has been turned out by the laborious process of whipsawing."

Snow Flat.—The remains of the Snow Flat cabins can be found along the trail that leads to May Lake, about a hundred yards off the Tioga Road. No actual history is known of these cabins, and they have deteriorated to the point where one can only deduce what they looked like. The only trace of one of them is a pile of large granite boulders, presumably a dry masonry fireplace and chimney. The other cabin, a short distance away, has been reduced to a small square enclosure four logs high which look like a corral. The cabin was built of rough round logs laid on a stone foundation—a large boulder placed at each of the four corners. The logs were saddle-notched above and below and were closely joined at the corners. Wedge shaped chinking was used. Piles of ore samples are to be found around the cabin sites.



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Dan Anderson