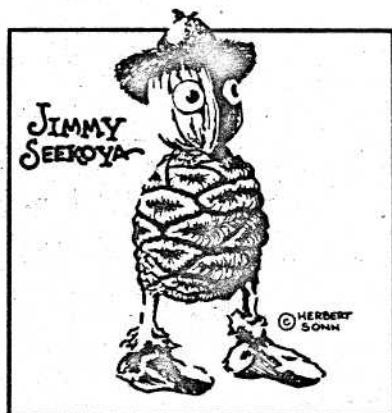


YOSEMITE

OCTOBER, 1975 VOLUME FORTY-FOUR, NUMBER 5



HERBERT SONN - THE BIRD MAN OF YOSEMITE According to family legend, Herbert Sonn, the well-loved "bird man of Yosemite," arrived in the park in 1914 when he was thirty-five years old, and knew it was his home. His letter sent to his family in Newark, New Jersey, "Send my things. I'm going to stay."

And stay he did, with his love and warmth for the park unchanging. He found adventure and new fields of study. It was here that he made friends with the animals; almost any bird would eat out of his hand. His bird calls were so perfected that he could call the birds to him, especially the Steller's Jays.

After arriving at Yosemite, his chief occupation became the fashioning of novel bird caricatures from cones of large trees, twisted stems, gnarled roots, acorns, and bits of bark. It was from the sale of these and postcards that he made the major portion of his living.

Della Taylor Hoss, an artist who did the concessioner's publicity, said she remembered Mr. Sonn very well for, "He had a workshop at the Old Yosemite Village, then called Kenneyville, where he made his fantastic bird creations out of pinecones, acorns and whatnots — from what nature provided. I remember particularly, the pinecone owls. He used to welcome any visitors who came to his shop — and I think he knew just about everything about birds. It was a pleasure for me to visit his shop and I became a dedicated 'nature goof' — after I went to live in Yosemite."

When Old Yosemite Village was dismantled to make room for the Ahwahnee Hotel, Sonn was provided with a special area at Camp Curry by Mother Curry (west of bungalow 76 A and B). Here, he pitched his tent and developed an area surrounded by a fence of brambles and sticks with seats inside for his guests during his shows.

Wendell H. Otter, former Assistant Manager at Camp Curry, tells of the interesting Steller's Jay shows that Sonn put on during summer afternoons in his small amphitheater. He lived behind the amphitheater and there made his curious birds.

It was here that the former president of the Yosemite Park and Curry, Stuart G. Cross, started his career by working for Herbert Sonn. He tells of his apprenticeship in a letter:

"When I was 12 years old, I spent my summer at Camp Curry and Mr. Sonn 'employed' me as his assistant. My duties consisted primarily of packing souvenir birds for shipment, arranging the chairs before his lectures which, as I remember, took place once in the morning and once in the afternoon, and sometimes raking the yard where the public sat. I do not remember that I was overpaid for this work. I think that an occasional quarter was my remuneration and that was not on a very fixed basis, although it seems to me that he was quite meticulous about the payment when it took place. This was, I believe, before his marriage. I recall that he lived very simply in a tent, set somewhat aside from the one he used for his office or business and which had a hammock behind it where he took afternoon naps. I have a clear recollection that he did not like to be disturbed at this time. He also kept a slingshot and a supply of ball bearings with which he discouraged ground squirrels in the area, and it was sometimes my duty to retrieve these ball bearings for him."

"As for the birds, themselves, it seems to me that there were 30 or 40 of the caricatures which he used in an amusing and well-received lecture. There were three or four souvenir birds; one made from the Sequoia cone, one from a Tamarack cone, and one from a Fir cone, I believe. These were turned out on a production basis and were also sold at the Camp Curry studio."

"For years it has been my conviction that he was the first person to successfully tame the Steller's Jays in the Curry area. They would flock around his camp during his lectures and he could identify the individual birds who had learned to perform for him. Some would catch nuts in the air, others would perch on particular branches to receive their food, and there were one or two that would come to his shoulder or hand. Today this does not seem particularly remarkable as the Steller's Jays at Curry are insolently tame; however, this was not the case in 1930 and was a source of considerable wonder to the guests. He was also a vigorous defender of the jay against the charge that it was a 'robber' bird or persecuted other birds and, perhaps in reaction, he had few kind things to say about robins."

"A few years ago I walked down past Bungalow 76 A and B to the site of Mr. Sonn's camp and can still quite clearly see where the tents stood, the water pipe which brought water to wet down the dust and maintain his garden, and in my mind's eye could still see the gatherings which took place there every summer day some 40 years ago. He was very kind to me and I remember him with affection."

This account given by Cross tells us a lot about Herbert Sonn from the time he left the Old Village and set up his tent at Camp Curry, at the foot of the Ledge Trail. Unfortunately we do not have any information about how he spent his winters during the period of time that he was at Camp Curry.

Homer B. Hoyt, once park ranger, also remembers the "Bird Man" when he lived in his tent at Curry. He tells of Mr. Sonn's not only giving lectures outside his own tent but giving talks at Camp Curry as well. In addition, the "Bird Man" conducted a nature school for children during the summer months. Of all the people at Yosemite, he was one of the more popular with the tourists, especially the children. Hoyt was so interested in Sonn's pinecone birds; that he made copies of them for friends and himself. He has his own copies to this day.

In 1930, N.P.S. Director Horace M. Albright expressed appreciation for Sonn's work in augmenting the efforts of the Government Nature Guide Service.

Ernest P. Leavitt, twenty years a park ranger and Acting Superintendent of Yosemite during 1929, met this author in Oregon a number of years ago and mentioned that he was a friend of the late Herbert Sonn and of the wonderful work that Mr. Sonn had done while living at Yosemite.

John W. Bingham, a park ranger in the 1920's, knew Sonn well. Bingham reported that, "Mr. Sonn was a quiet man, interested in birds; he took hikes about the Valley. I don't believe he made long hikes, as he never seemed particularly strong or well."

W. J. Fitzpatrick a noted 'birder' and Yosemite postmaster during the period that Sonn was there is one of the few people who remembered Mrs. Sonn as well. He remarked that they were a kindly and gentle couple and vividly recalled Sonn's pinecone birds.

Practically everyone who recalls Herbert Sonn makes mention of his gentleness. He "melted" into the Yosemite life so quietly that few thought about him as being highly individualistic, but his remaining there was the result of positive decision, when he knew he had found the right life for himself. He didn't just drift in.

Of a brilliant and individualistic family, Sonn was born a twin, on August 9, 1789 in Newark, New Jersey, the son of John and Ernestine Sonn. An uncle, Professor George C. Sonn, was the "little wizard" of Menlo Park, an assistant to Thomas Edison during the period that Edison was perfecting the phonograph, and a lifelong friend. (When he left Edison to become chairman of the Physics Department of a New Jersey school, Edison presented him with one of the three original models of his phonograph.) Although a linguist (he spoke nine languages), he was first a scientist, and perhaps this influenced young Herbert too, for we know the "Bird Man" worked with Professor E. O. Essig of the University of California in collecting insect specimens and that much of his nature teaching in Yosemite today would be called "ecology."

Sonn is referred to as an artist in Yosemite Nature Notes of August 1929, though people remember mainly his folk art and bird caricatures. However, art was a pronounced trait in his family.

He was the third member of his family to follow art as a profession. An older brother, Edwin Julius Sonn, was an artist in charge of the art department of New York City printing company; another older brother, Albert H. Sonn, also was head of a printing house department in N.Y.C. and the author of several art books.

Sonn returned to visit relatives and friends in New Jersey in 1931, thirteen years after making Yosemite his home and fourteen years before he died in 1945.

One of the few letters to be found to the Bird Man of Yosemite was from Eleanor Roosevelt in which she responded to the letter and gifts he sent her after her visit there.

Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt
The White House
Washington
District of Columbia

My Dear Mrs. Roosevelt:

I am mailing you today, as a little remembrance of Yosemite, the pine-cone birds that you wanted for your grandchildren. I trust that they will reach you none the worse for their journey across the continent. Accompanying the birds is a descriptive note.

In the same box are two paper knives which I made from California manzanita. They will give you an idea of the color, ranging from ivory white to deep browns and reds, to be found in this beautiful wood.

We were happy to have you with us here in Yosemite, and personally I appreciate your visit to my camp very much. We hope that you will come to Yosemite again.

With very best wishes to you from Mrs. Sonn and myself, I am,

Respectfully yours,
Herbert Sonn

Mr. Herbert Sonn
Box 136
Yosemite
California

My Dear Mr. Sonn:

Thank you so much for the pine cone birds and the two paper knives. You are more than kind to send me these and I greatly appreciate it. I am keeping the birds for my grandchildren to add to their Christmas presents.

Very cordially yours,
Eleanor Roosevelt

It was some time before 1934 that he married Elizabeth Parce, a maide for the Curry Company. They had no children. She died in April 22, 1958. Both she and her husband were buried in Riverside, California.

Sonn died at the age of 65 in 1944 at Laguna Beach, California and funeral services were held in Redlands, California.

Yosemite Nature Notes of August, 1929, contains an article by H. E. Perry called "Yosemite's Bird Man." Here again we find highlighted Mr. Sonn's qualities of gentleness, patience and love of nature. Mr. Perry described how the "Bird Man" recognized individual Steller's Jays and had given many of them such names as "Brownie" and "Old Timer." These and other Jays could catch peanuts in mid-air.

Mr. Perry concludes his article "Yosemite's Bird Man":

"In private life, the "Bird Man" is known as Herbert Sonn, an artist who is filled with a love for the out-of-doors and a keen appreciation of human nature. His years in Yosemite Valley have been filled with kindly labor and his efforts have brought increased happiness to all who have known him. In a very practical way, Sonn has augmented the work of the Government Nature Guide program and it is to be hoped that as time goes on there will be a more complete realization of the splendid service he has rendered."

Little is to be found in records of his life at Yosemite, but the "complete realization of the splendid service" is found in the warmth with which old-timers have recalled him, a slight, gentle, brown-eyed man, a part of the Yosemite of which he wrote home, "I'm going to stay." Jerome E. Leavitt, School of Education, California State University, Fresno, CA (Dr. Leavitt plans to publish Birdman of Yosemite in booklet form - with illustrations in the fall.)"

THE DIRECTOR: Gary E. Everhardt was appointed Director of the National Park Service at the beginning of the year by the (then) Secretary of Interior Rogers C. B. Morton. He succeeded Ron Walker who resigned in 1974. The park service people we work with were pleased that the appointment had come from within the bureau and they seem to have considerable respect for his professional abilities.

Everhardt was born in Lenoir, N.C., where he attended elementary and high schools. He received a Bachelor of Civil Engineering degree from North Carolina State University, Raleigh, in 1957.

His National Park Service career commenced immediately after graduation, beginning as a civil engineer on the Blue Ridge Parkway in North Carolina, Virginia and Georgia. He also served in engineering positions in several N.P.S. regional offices.

In May 1969, he was appointed Assistant Superintendent for Operations at Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming, where he was directly responsible for all park operations including visitor protection, interpretation, maintenance and administration. He was appointed Superintendent at Grand Teton National Park in January 1972. That park, one of the most popular in the National Park System, last year had more than three million visitors.

In our opinion, Mr. Everhardt has a great opportunity to give his support to the completion and finally to the implementation of a Yosemite Master Plan about which this Bulletin carries a story.



SIGHTINGS: Recorded in the Chief Naturalist's Office are the following natural history field observations for recent weeks.

Mountain lion (*Felis concolor*) Running down road approx. 4 mi. north of Wawona; in early afternoon. D. Davis/K. Higgins

Same, seen walking near backside of Lembert Dome, Tuolumne Meadows area. "When it saw us, it crouched or lay down on ledge and watched us until we were out of sight." F. Zavala/S. Tobriner

(As only a few days separated the above sightings, and as they were noted in widely different parts of the Park, it is believed that each one was a different animal.)

Coyote (*Canis latrans*) and Black Bear (*Ursus americanus*) Coyotes howled and chased after bear in meadow behind Rangers' Club. Bear climbed tree to escape. L. Woebling/F. Hemphill/D. Hale

Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) Single bird seen soaring near cliffs above Mirror Lake. K. Zahl/A. Skirvin

Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) Single bird seen gliding and diving near Cascade Falls. D. Anderson/J. Hilt

Cinnamon Teal (*Anas cyanoptera*) Single bird seen feeding along water surface in Merced River at Sentinel Bridge. (Cinnamon Teal is a casual visitant to the Yosemite region, most likely to be seen in the early spring. J. Krisko/C. Vandiver.

Bobcat (*Lynx rufus*) Observed stalking and killing Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus griseus*) at Cunningham Flat, Wawona Campground. J. Duffy/S. Schwartz

Sierra Ground Squirrel (*Citellus beecheyi sierrae*) Squirrels with the physical characteristics of Sierra Ground Squirrels, but with white fur, observed near Indian Caves and Happy Isles Trail Center. E. Berrey/G. Burley/B. Calkins/J. Peterson.

BEARS AND PEOPLE: The National Park Service this spring launched a vigorous campaign aimed at letting park visitors know that black bears inhabit Yosemite, and that bears sometimes plunder **improperly** stored food. Signs are posted at trailheads, on restroom walls and scattered through campgrounds. The **YOSEMITE GUIDE** carried stories suggesting ways campers might discourage bear-intrusions. 200,000 'bear-safety' leaflets were printed and distributed. And, there is now a federal regulation prescribing the legal method of **caching** food in campgrounds; violators are subject to citation and a fine.

One can thus assume that the visitors were warned about the bears, with whom they **share the park**.

At about the same time that program began, park management installed 'bear-proof' **garbage** receptacles. Bears now have left but two sources of food . . . they can go back into the woods and eat **grubs and berries** among other natural foods (many, it appears may have partially lost this characteristic, **at least temporarily**) or they can try to outsmart the wily camper. Some have chosen the latter course. The number of **reported** 'bear-incidents' is up from last year.

Despite this increase, park officials feel that it is temporary and that continuation of the program will in a few years result in bears concluding that if dinner's to be had from neither campers nor **garbage cans**, the only source left is the forest — which is where they properly should be.

FOLLOWING UP: In the March, 1974 issue of the Members Bulletin, we reported about the proliferation of hang-gliding — from Glacier Point to the Ahwahnee Meadow.

According to the Chief Ranger's department, hang-gliding is the most tightly controlled activity in the park and a ranger, experienced in the sport, checks each flyer to determine among other things that **he or she** (there have been several lady hang-gliders) is qualified for 2000' descents.

There have been more than 600 flights in the past two years and only one mishap, a **minor one**. It is felt that gliding causes no impact on Yosemite's resources and it is not considered a 'spectator sport' because all flights must take off before 8:30 a.m.

There has been some opposition voiced to the activity, with respect to its propriety in a 'natural area' and the Federal Register for Aug. 20, 1975 carried a proposal for a "ban on powerless flights in natural areas." Within 60 days, or by October 20, the National Park Service Director will consider the pros and cons and the expression of the public and decide whether there will or won't be hang-gliding in Yosemite. If you **have any** feelings about the matter, you may write to the Director or to the Yosemite Superintendent.

P.S. The sport may be pursued in National Recreation Areas (such as Lake Mead) at the **discretion** of the superintendent.

Two construction projects, a sewer line and plant and a Valley-long bicycle path were **described** in the August, 1974 Members Bulletin. The sewer plant and the attendant transmission lines are moving **right** along. But the bike path plan, brought nearly to a point of work starting, has been stalemated while the **master planning** processes develop. Meanwhile, though without their own pathways, bikers are enjoying the **freedom of the upper end** of the Valley and the one-way roads elsewhere. We hope bike paths become a part of the **M.P.**

In the June, 1975 issue of the Members Bulletin, we discussed the procedures that were **being followed** by the Yosemite Master Plan Team in arriving at a plan for this park.

The Phase I Workshops, in and out-of-state, were completed mid-June. The data, "**citizens input**," received as a result of these workshops were codified into two categories: operational issues and **planning issues**. An example of the former might be — "clean up campgrounds," "plow roads in winter." Such as **these were** sent to the Yosemite Superintendent. Examples of the latter might be "wilderness use" "visitor facilities," etc. Those issues pertinent to planning were fed into a computer which sorted the responses into **26 categories** "accommodations" alphabetically through "wilderness" and shown by park location and issue-subject.

So, now in hand are the planning issues from the several sources: position papers and **group letters**, individuals' letters and phone calls, the public workshops (of Phase I) and previous planning efforts.

At this point, the planning process was altered somewhat. Rather than moving to the **former Phase II**, which would have gathered the public (again) for the workshop sessions, a "workbook" is in **preparation to be** distributed by mid-September to the nearly 15,000 people or groups who personally or in **writing** responded to the Phase I workshops as being interested in contributing to the park planning. In the **workbook** will be presented the

proposals gathered, classified by issue, i.e., accommodations, etc., in eight park areas: Park general, Yosemite Valley, Wawona, Glacier Point "corridor" (Badger Pass, Bridalveil, Sentinel Dome, Glacier Point), the Tioga Road "corridor" (Hodgdon Meadow, Crane Flat, etc.) Tuolumne Meadows, El Portal and the "backcountry" (concessioner High Sierra Camps).

Via the workbook, respondents will select their choices of the suggestions presented — or may write in their own if theirs was not among the options offered. Completed workbooks must be received by the Master Plan Team by November 30, 1975. Anyone not already on the Master Plan mailing list who wishes to receive a "workbook" may get one by writing the Yosemite Master Plan Team, Golden Gate National Recreation Area, National Park Service, Fort Mason, San Francisco, California 94123.

The task then before the Planning Team, with professional counsel, consideration of NPS prerogatives, earlier plans, etc., will be to assemble these into a workable number of alternative plans. These alternative plans will be assessed on their ecological, sociological, and economic impacts. The environmental assessment will be ready for further public involvement by March of 1976.

In a subsequent issue of the Members Bulletin, we will attempt to describe what lies further down the Master Plan road.



YNHA AFFAIRS. By now Association members will have received the 'Announcement of Election' letter which relates that our by-laws are now constructed so that the membership-at-large may vote for the board candidates recommended by the nominating committee or that they (the membership) may nominate other candidates. We sincerely hope that all members will take the time to vote, when the final ballot of nominees is mailed between Sept. 25 and Nov. 25. We want the members to care what happens to the association. This seemed a first step in encouraging participation.

At the June Trustee's meeting, the Board approved a contribution of \$800 for the Research Library. Steve Medley, librarian, is selecting some ninety publications for the Library, which is for the use of the public as well as park service people. (see article)

Another donation of \$2000 to the park interpretive program was approved. Len McKenzie, Association Director and Chief Park Interpreter, says that this amount will be used for programming or equipment needs not foreseen at the time he prepared his request for N.P.S. funds.

Board Chairman Dana Morgenson directed two seminars on 'Photography for the Botanist' during our summer program. One of his pupils writes:

"Dear Dana:

All 220 slides I shot with you July 26 and July 27 have been processed and I'm very pleased with the results.

That weekend with you opened and awakened many new senses and paths for me. I sincerely enjoyed being a part of your "field seminar" and thanks for showing me the Tuolumne Meadows-Tioga Pass area.

The snow flowers you sent me looking for, between White Wolf and Porcupine Flat, were in a variety of sizes and conditions. They make a superb addition to any collection along with the other species; also discovered in that area.

I look forward to seeing and reading your upcoming book. I'm sure it will be justifiably excellent."

Regards,

Blair Looney
Chas. A. Looney Advertising
Fresno, California



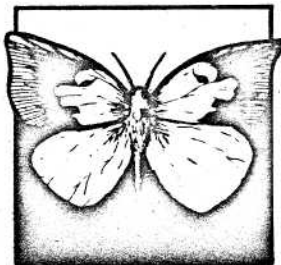
LIBRARY NOTES: At the most recent Y.N.H.A. Board of Trustees' meeting, the Yosemite National Park Research Library was awarded an \$800 grant for the acquisition of new books. With these funds, works on both human and natural history (particularly of Yosemite and California) will be added to the collection which now numbers close to 4500 volumes. The library, operating on a limited budget, serves as an important and unique resource for both National Park Service employees and researchers in Yosemite.

Incidentally, there's a new face to be encountered amidst all those books. Steve Medley, who received his master's degree in library science early this year, took over as Research Librarian in April. Regarding his new position, Steve indicates that he's "excited with the possibilities" and asks that we express his "gratitude for the generosity of the Yosemite Natural History Association that has been manifested recently and

throughout the years." He encourages Y.N.H.A. members to stop in, discover, and use the Research Library whenever they're in the park.

In other related news, the National Park Service is currently undertaking a project aimed at improving its collection of rare books, pamphlets, and ephemera pertaining to Yosemite. The Research Library's accumulation of "Yosemiteana", which includes John Muir material and many of the Francois Matthes papers, is one of the best

in existence. But it is hoped that with continued additions these holdings can be developed into the finest and most complete Yosemite collection anywhere. As in the past, the library is dependent on the gifts of its supporters for the success of any development of this type. Should any persons be interested in donating materials to the Research Library, they are urged to contact the National Park Service, Box 577, Yosemite N.P., Ca., 95389.



STATE BUTTERFLY: Californians may be interested, and perhaps surprised, to learn that the Dog-face butterfly (*Colia eurydice*) is the official state butterfly. It is not common in the Yosemite region but is found in abundance in Southern California foothills. You may have encountered a close relative in the San Joaquin Valley — the Alfalfa butterfly. As you pluck these golden-orange creatures out of your radiator, look for one with the outline of a dog's face on the forewings. This will be the California Dog-face . . . and shame on you.

WINTER ECOLOGY: Wintry weather conditions never seem to chill the enthusiasm of participants in Dr. Carl Sharsmith's Winter Ecology Seminars. While hiking through the quiet, frost-bound woods of Yosemite Valley, observations will be made first-hand of the effect of temperature, wind, light and moisture conditions on plants, animals, soil, rock and microorganisms. YNHA will sponsor these week-end seminars again in 1976. Dates are: February 7-8, 14-15, 21-22 and 28-29. YNHA is notifying members first of these seminars as they fill rapidly.

The same material will be covered in each 14-hour seminar, and for those who elect, the course will earn one quarter-unit of extension college credit through the University of California, Davis Extension. Each course will be limited to 20; the fee is \$20, plus an additional \$9 for those taking the class for credit.

ENVIRONMENTAL CROSS-COUNTRY SKI TOURS: Ostrander Lake Ski Hut will be the destination of three-day Environmental Ski Tours on March 12, 13, 14 and April 24, 25, 26, 1976, led by naturalist Warren White. Participants in past trips have praised this unique approach to study of the winter environment at the 6,500 to 9,100 foot elevations.

The Hut is equipped with bunk beds; tourers are expected to pack their own sleeping bags, plus their personal necessities. The cost for meals (somewhat spartan) and a bunk is \$30 per person. The one-way distance is 7½ miles (12 km.), with an altitude gain of about 1600 ft. (496 m.) and should be undertaken by more experienced and conditioned X-country skiers accustomed to skiing with a pack.

Reservations and further information about either of these two activities may be obtained from the YNHA, Box 545, Yosemite National Park, CA 95389 or call (209) 372-4532.



MEDALLIONS: We were able to get a supply of the National Park Service Centennial Medallions; these are available in bronze or pure silver. Pictured at left is the design on one side; a sketch of John Muir appears on the other. They're quite handsome and have a good, substantial feel. The silver version sells for \$26.50, the bronze for \$5.30, including tax and postage. Let us know if you want one.

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Dan Anderson