

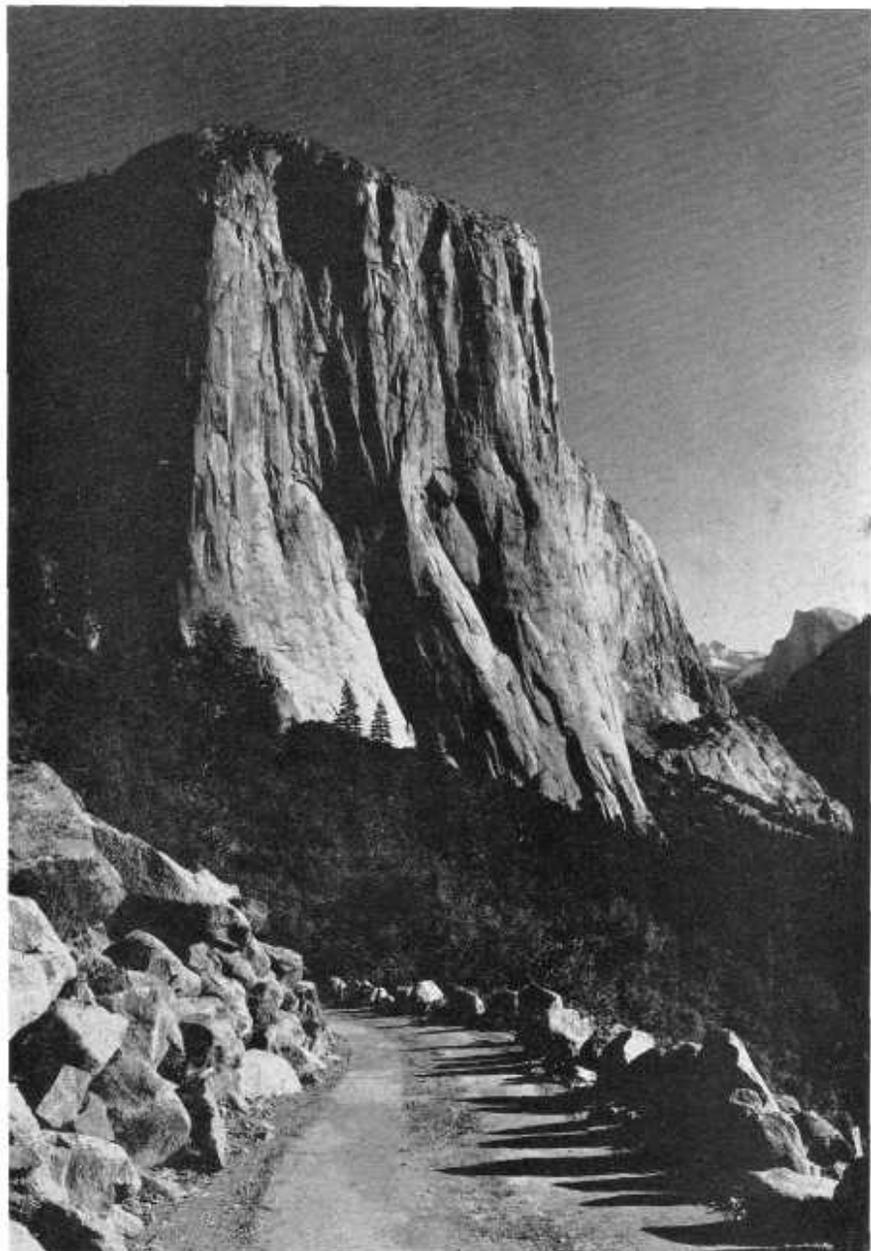
YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES

VOLUME XXXII • NUMBER 3

MARCH 1953



Yosemite Falls and its ice cone, March 20, 1952
—Ralph Anderson



Ralph Anderson

The impressive view of El Capitan from the old Big Oak Flat Road.

Cover Photo: Yosemite Falls and its ice cone, March 20, 1952, by Ralph Anderson. The ice cone develops each winter at the base of upper Yosemite Fall. Photographed a year ago, this is perhaps the greatest size of the cone ever recorded on film.

Yosemite Nature Notes

THE MONTHLY PUBLICATION OF
THE YOSEMITE NATURALIST DIVISION AND
THE YOSEMITE NATURAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION, INC.

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YOSEMITE — THEN AND NOW 1894 — 1953

By William E. Colby*

Foreword: This article is prompted by the recent publicity which has been given to the increasing crowds that frequent Yosemite Valley, especially over holiday week ends. The Memorial Day week end last year brought nearly 44,000 visitors into the valley, while the total attendance for the 1952 travel year was 963,536 people. The visitation this year promises to pass the million mark. Although this congestion creates crucial problems, there are certain redeeming features of the Yosemite of today, as described in the following article.

It was on a perfect June day in 1894 when, with two companions and two donkeys, I first entered Yosemite Valley. We descended on the winding Big Oak Flat Road, where we were confronted with the enormous bulk of El Capitan, while across the valley the dainty Bridalveil Fall swung lazily in the breeze. It was a Sunday morning, and, prepared by our assiduous reading of John Muir's descriptions of the region, we fell into the mood which he has so poetically portrayed—of entering into one of the unrivaled mountain temples of the world. On our way down, inspired by the vision of Bridalveil Fall swaying with the prevailing winds, we had decided, when we should reach the valley floor, to camp overnight on the edge of Bridalveil Meadow directly opposite the fall. We did have our lunch there, but only with intense suffering. Mosquitoes by the myriad came

up out of the water-soaked meadow and made life intolerable. We hastily decided that the enchanting view did not compensate for mosquito-misery, so after lunch we hurriedly packed up and trudged along the road on the north side of the valley, ankle-deep in dust, until we found a campsite alongside Yosemite Creek, less frequented by but not entirely free of mosquitoes.

We were impressed by the fact that the dust from the road, stirred up by travel and carried by the winds, had covered all the foliage on both sides of the road for great distances. Ferns, bushes, and trees were all a monotonous dust color. Very few visitors today will appreciate the terrible dust problem which caused such discomfort in those days. If a conveyance passed by on the road on which a person was hiking, he would be enveloped in a cloud of choking dust, and if he

*Mr. Colby, an attorney at law and venerable member of the Yosemite Advisory Board, was a longtime personal friend of John Muir. Recommendations contained in his article do not necessarily constitute an official opinion of the National Park Service.—Ed.

rode in the vehicle itself, it was impossible to escape from the accompanying affliction and get any relief. The first greeting for a stagecoach passenger upon arrival at his destination was to be met with feather brushes and whisk brooms for removing as much as possible of the impalpable coating before he shed the long "duster" which everyone wore in those days. Yosemite Valley residents could always gain advance notice of the arrival of the four-horse stages by looking toward the lower end of the valley from any elevation and observing the huge clouds of dust which invariably accompanied the stages' progress.

As we traveled up the valley we had one great advantage, however, over the present-day visitor. We could enjoy splendid open views of El Capitan, Cathedral Rocks and Spires, Sentinel Rock, and other of Yosemite's noted formations. The dense growth of small pines and cedars that have since multiplied immensely has created veritable thickets along the roadways, so that it is only at rare intervals that one can now freely view Yosemite's cliffs and waterfalls. At that former time the tree cover consisted mainly of nobler examples of oaks, pines, and cedars. These were sufficiently separated to give to the entire valley floor a fine parklike character which was the delight of photographers and sightseers.

We chose a campsite on the west bank of Yosemite Creek just below the main road crossing on the bridge. Shading the campsite at that time were a few scattered ponderosa pines, not more than 6 or 8 inches in diameter, and 20 or 30 feet tall. There was every indication that only a few years previously this had all been open ground, free from any considerable tree development. It is

hard to recognize the place now, which is the easterly end of the Yosemite Lodge cabin area, for the trees have made remarkable growth in the last 59 years.

We set out to find some place where we could stake out our donkeys. Though they required comparatively little in the way of grazing, our search was difficult because the meadows in the entire upper end of the valley were fenced in. These enclosures were used either for hay fields or for cow and horse pastures. Except in those where hay was cut, there was much evidence of overgrazing. The contrast with the fenceless, open meadows of today, grazed only by deer, is one to create a feeling of thankfulness for the wise management of Yosemite Valley which is now practiced. We finally found a little meadow that had not been fenced, far up the valley, close to the junction of the Happy Isles and Mirror Lake roads. It was only there that sufficient unfenced native grass for our two burros could be found in all that part of the valley.

"Kenneyville," so named after the then survivor of the firm of Coffman & Kenney, consisted of a group of stable buildings and residences of a rather shabby order. It was located somewhere near the present site of the Ahwahnee Hotel. The saddle and pack stock was regularly driven down the valley to El Capitan and Bridalveil Meadows after the day was over and then driven back the next morning in time for use on the trails, creating, of course, great clouds of dust and tremendous, though interesting, confusion in the vicinity of "Kenneyville." Now all of this activity is taken care of in a more secluded portion of the valley where the stables of the Yosemite Park & Curry Co. are situated, and without any serious interference



Taber

The Stoneman House in Yosemite Valley, 1890.

with travel on the main roads because the stock is confined and fed in the barns and corrals in the immediate area. "Kenneyville" has completely disappeared, fortunately, and few are living today who could place its former situs with any accuracy.

We went to the Stoneman House for our mail, and I never felt more out of place than when, wearing overalls and hobnailed brogans in which I had just hiked all the way from Placerville along mountain trails, I clumped up the wooden steps of this hotel and onto the veranda where tourists gathered and sat. This building was a large, unattractive, four-story affair, painted white, standing out like the proverbial "sore thumb" on the edge of the meadow directly in front of where Camp Curry now is. Its only redeeming feature was the fact that it commanded glorious views in all directions of the upper end of the valley. Its destruction by fire a

couple of years later was a very fortunate act of providence. An interesting fact is that old-timers who lived in the valley then have difficulty now in locating the exact position of the Stoneman House. Nature has a way of healing wounds that seem mortal at the time.

We took the hike up the Merced Canyon by way of Vernal Fall, where the trail halted under overhanging rocks in a sort of cave, from the dripping roof of which hung lovely five-finger ferns. Continuing, we had to climb some very wet, rickety ladders to reach the extension of the trail above Vernal Fall. Beyond the Diamond Cascade on the Merced River a ridge of granite lies in the canyon directly in front of Nevada Fall. Here we found Albert Snow's hotel, La Casa Nevada, still standing, but, with most of its doors and windows gone, a sad relic of its earlier days. It was a small two-story structure, also painted white, which stood right square in the mid-

dle of the landscape, but had the advantage of affording a magnificent view of Nevada Fall prominently in front of it. There were also one or two small buildings in the little meadow to the north of the hotel where pack and saddle stock had been kept. Today it would take a Sherlock Holmes to identify the exact place where the little hotel formerly stood, and the same is true of the outbuildings in the meadow.

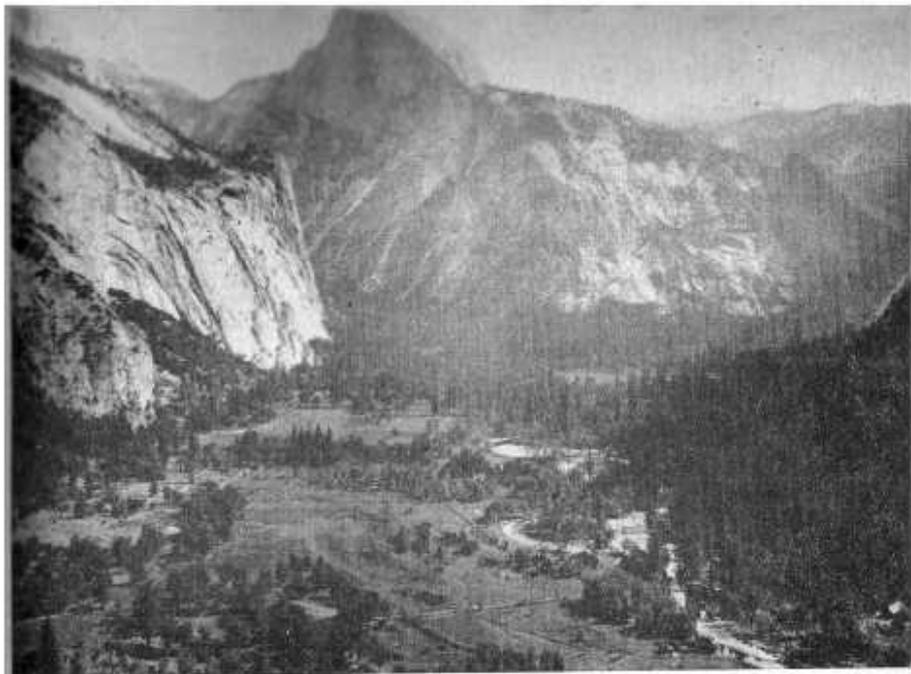
Sanitary conditions at that time on the floor of Yosemite Valley were poor indeed, as might be expected from the fact that the State of California, which then still had custody of the valley as a state park, spent only a very meager sum for its maintenance. In fact, the average appropriated for each year's upkeep was from 10 to 15 thousand dollars, a large portion of which small amount was used for salaries, traveling expenses, and office rental.

Probably the greatest change which has taken place on the floor of the valley is the one already commented on—the vast growth of trees and brush resulting from the advent of the white man. Previously, the Indians each summer, when the vegetation was dry, had burned off the area for two reasons. One was to lessen surprise attacks from hostile Indians who otherwise would have secreted themselves in a screen of brush and young trees. The other was to keep the ground more open and the meadows more extensive, and thus facilitate the gathering of acorns and the hunting of game. The result of the control when white men took charge of Yosemite Valley and kept its floor free from fires has been this tremendous

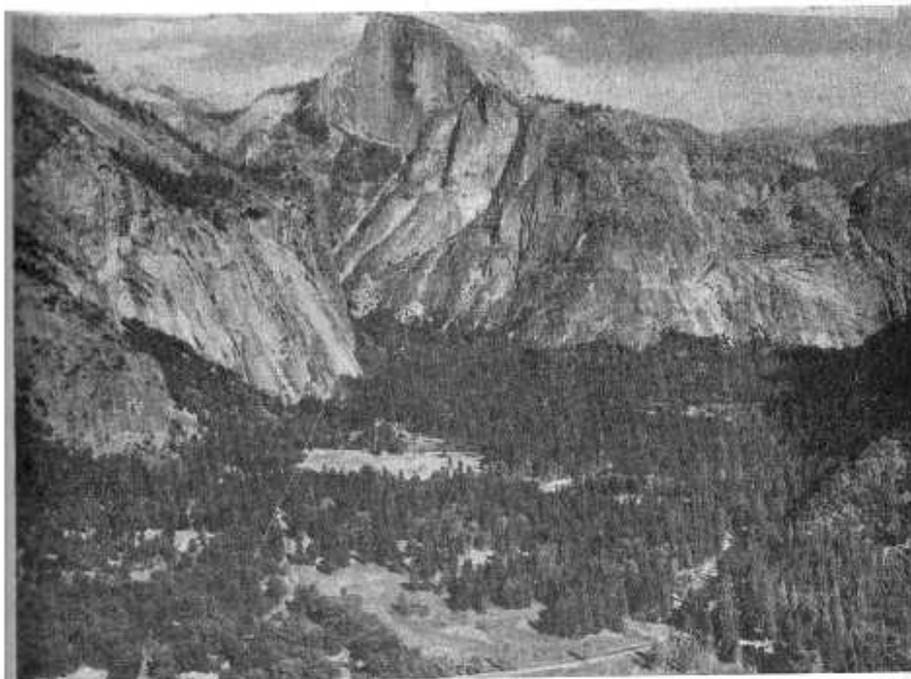
growth of small trees, principally ponderosa pines and incense-cedars, which are massed in dense thickets and which tend to encroach on the meadows and obliterate them. An excellent report on this subject has been made by Park Forester Emil Ernst,* who compared early and recent photographs of various portions of the valley floor, some taken from vantage points above it, like Columbia and Union Points (see opposite page). The early photographs, together with other evidence which Mr. Ernst found in his research, have demonstrated that today the area occupied by meadows on the floor is less than half that which existed in the early days. While this tree and brush reproduction was already conspicuous at the time of our visit in 1894, nevertheless the opportunity for viewing the outstanding rock and waterfall features of the valley from its floor was immensely greater than it is today. It is impossible for present-day photographers to get the same splendid unobstructed views that were obtainable in those early days and which we still have in the photographs of Watkins, Weed, Fiske, LeConte, and others.

If it were not for the efforts of the National Park Service to keep down some of this growth of young trees, even Bridalveil and El Capitan Meadows would now be largely occupied by forest cover. Unfortunately, funds for this work are utterly inadequate, and in many instances the clearing has been done through volunteer and unpaid work of some of the public-spirited rangers and park employees. Because of the failure to check this excess growth when it was taking place it is all the

*"Vanishing Meadows in Yosemite Valley," *Yosemite Nature Notes* 28(5):34-41, May 1949. For an excellent expression of an opposing approach to these discussions the reader is urged to see also Harry C. Parker's "Has Protection Worked Destruction?" *Yosemite Nature Notes* 28(7): 93-96, July 1949.—Ed.



Fiske



Ralph Anderson

Comparative photographs of a portion of the floor of Yosemite Valley (Half Dome in the distance) taken from the same spot near Columbia Point, above in the 1890's, below in 1943. The increased amount of forest cover in the later photograph is evident.

more important to try to remedy it now. Some "vista clearing" is contemplated, but more attention should be directed toward keeping the dwindling meadow area free of new trees.

In the summer of 1895, a year after my first visit to the valley, George Kent Radford, a civil and landscape engineer who had been employed by California's "Board of Commissioners to Manage the Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Big Tree Grove" to make a detailed survey of the floor of the valley, accompanied his map with the following statement:

I have located and shown on the map, all the large conifers, oaks and other deciduous trees, which are situated within range of the roads, and constitute an important part of the landscape effect of the floor of the Valley.

A large area of the ground between and around these trees is now covered with an undergrowth of small shrubs and conifers, which are useless for present and future purposes, obstruct the view of the finer trees, cover up what should be open stretches of meadows and serve as conductors of fires, when such unfortunately occur.

All this undergrowth should be removed, care being taken to preserve any fine and promising specimens of shrubs or trees for future development, and the cleared spaces properly treated to form meadows; all dead and fallen trees should be removed.

After careful consideration of the subject, I would advise that the first undertakings towards the improvement of the Valley should be this clearing work . . .

Even as great a lover of trees as John Muir, who lived in Yosemite Valley for several years in the early days, recognized the necessity for control of this threatening situation. I have in his own handwriting, written in 1907, the following draft of his and the Sierra Club's recommendations to the Secretary of the Interior following the recession of Yosemite Valley to the Federal Government in 1906, which recession was brought about largely through his indefatigable work and that of the Sierra Club of which he was president:

THE HONORABLE SECRETARY
OF THE INTERIOR

SIR:

The Sierra Club begs to submit the following suggestions as to road building and other needed improvements in Yosemite National Park.

1. That a general plan for the treatment of the floor of Yosemite Valley be made by a competent landscape artist & carried out under his supervision at a cost of about one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. This would include the thinning & clearing of undergrowth jungles; the building of a permanent system of roads located with reference to scenery aesthetic effects, etc., instead of the present haphazard dust sand & mud free called roads; & the restoration of the over-trodden herbaceous vegetation to something like the beauty of wildness, etc.

The profound contrast in forest growth between past and present is even more noticeable in Little Yosemite Valley, where we camped on our way up Clouds Rest. At that time the floor of Little Yosemite had many extensive open meadow areas from which views of the surrounding scenic features could be obtained. Probably because the Little Yosemite has not for many years been used to any great extent for camping, the forest reproduction there has become even more concentrated than in Yosemite Valley, and from one end to the other it is overgrown with thickets of young trees, so that the striking vistas we had in 1894 have now almost ceased to exist.

In that year we saw very few deer and no bear in Yosemite Valley. Apparently the overgrazing of the natural grasses and the presence of such large numbers of pack and saddle stock in the meadows discouraged the deer, and neither they nor the bear had at that time recovered from the former intensive hunting by the Indians. With continued protection the deer are now a common and enjoyable sight on the unfenced meadows, and the bear have become a great nuisance to the

camper with frequent raiding of his provisions. It is rather startling for a camper to be awakened during the night by a bear peering into his tent. However, the danger is not great, and the National Park Service has means of removing those bears which create too much trouble.

Instead of the "hit-or-miss" network of uncontrolled roads of dust and mud, we now have a well-thought-out paved road system which admirably serves the traveling public. Unimportant and unnecessary roads have been eliminated, and the total road mileage on the floor of Yosemite Valley is now far less than it was in 1894.

Nowadays one drives over fine paved roads (one great advance of modern progress), so that the atmosphere and the surrounding landscape are free of the choking and unsightly dust of former days, a blessing which adds immeasurably to one's comfort and enjoyment. Also, scientific control of the mosquito myriads has rendered life on the floor of the valley practically free of this torment and nerve-racking experience of earlier years. Now there is a studied effort to conceal as far as possible all manmade structures behind screens of trees, both natural and planted, while the conspicuous and unsightly buildings of early days have almost disappeared, so that few persons are alive today who can even tell where they once existed. Even such a conspicuous and extensive establishment as Camp Ahwahnee, built by William Sell in 1908 along the lines of Camp Curry and situated near the foot of the Four-Mile Trail, has long since vanished, leaving no observable trace.

Another striking example of how serious scars on the natural landscape are erased by the healing

process of time is that of the old Big Oak Flat Road, down whose sinuous and seemingly endless windings we reached the valley floor on that memorable day in June. With the building of the new road that enters the Merced Canyon floor some distance downstream from the valley proper, the original road on which we descended has been closed and abandoned. Talus slides and vegetation have in these few succeeding years so concealed its position that from across the valley it takes an observer with keen eyes to recognize that it ever was there.

It should be heartening to all those who are interested in the welfare of Yosemite Valley that, in spite of the increasing number of visitors, the valley floor has in recent years improved in appearance and shows little of the wear and tear of additional visitation. We must not overlook, however, those vital and critical problems which have arisen because of the congestion that takes place at peak periods, such as the Memorial Day, Fourth of July, and Labor Day week ends. Problems of sanitation, overtaxing of housing and camping facilities, road bottlenecks, the lack of sufficient parking areas—these are not easily solved. They are, however, receiving most careful study.

Visitors to Yosemite today will see a much more pleasing scene as far as the valley floor is concerned and be able to enjoy it even more than I and my companions did in 1894. I have little patience with those who say that Yosemite is overcrowded and that they can enjoy it no longer. A 5-minute walk will take them into many wild, unfrequented, and beautiful portions of Yosemite Valley, where they can enjoy peace and solitude in those magnificent surroundings to the utmost.

BOARD OF TRUSTEES HOLD ANNUAL MEETING

By Donald Edward McHenry, Director

The board of trustees of the Yosemite Natural History Association, Inc., held its annual meeting in the Yosemite Museum on the evening of February 24. At this time the report of the director and the financial statement for 1952 were approved and certain plans for 1953 were drawn up.

The director's report pointed to some of the more significant accomplishments of the association during the past year. Among these were the paying of half of the expenses to send then Associate Park Naturalist Harry C. Parker to the National Park Service's month-long Museum Training Course in Washington, D.C., in January 1952. The association also provided 17,000 handout announcements of the naturalist public programs per week for visitors during June, July, and August, paid for the binding of 18 books and periodical volumes for the Yosemite Museum Library, and purchased 41 new books for this library. It purchased a 25-watt power speaker for the new 16 mm. sound movie projector in order to enable the museum to get the particular model of this projector which makes possible the recording of our own sound track on museum films. The projector itself was purchased by the National Park Service for use at the newly established campfire program at Camp 7. A badly needed card-index file cabinet for the Yosemite Museum Library was bought, as were also two specially designed cases for our summer reptile display on the museum porch. A small amplifying unit for use at the Indian demonstration programs in the museum wildflower garden was purchased, and the old Contax II camera owned by the association was exchanged for the

more efficient Exakta V camera for naturalist work. The association has employed Mrs. Judith M. Williams of Yosemite to take charge of the subscription records and mailing of *Yosemite Nature Notes*.

The board of trustees extended its sponsorship of the Yosemite Field School for another year. It also gave approval for the printing of revisions of *Broad-leaved Trees, Famous Waterfalls of the World*, and *101 Wildflowers of Yosemite*, all special issues of *Yosemite Nature Notes* dealing wholly or in part with the natural history of the Yosemite area.

The director's report also noted that with the transfer of former Associate Park Naturalist Harry C. Parker to the chief naturalist position at Crater Lake National Park, his successor, Douglass H. Hubbard, assumed the responsibilities of business manager of the association.

All the business of the association is supported through the sales of special issues of *Yosemite Nature Notes* such as those cited above and other publications pertinent to the human and natural history of this region. Sales for 1952 were \$10,482.83, which was \$449.96 less than the 1951 sales. A total of 33,676 sales units were added to our inventory during the year as compared to 32,006 in 1951, while 37,107 units were sold as against 46,223 a year ago. The regular monthly issues of *Yosemite Nature Notes* still operated at a loss which was only partially offset by several generous donations made for this purpose.

It was clear from the reports and from the discussions held at the board meeting that the Yosemite Natural History Association continues to perform a very substantial

service to the interpretive work of Yosemite National Park. This is done by making available much necessary equipment and services to the naturalist program which are not provided for through regular federal appropriations, and by making pos-

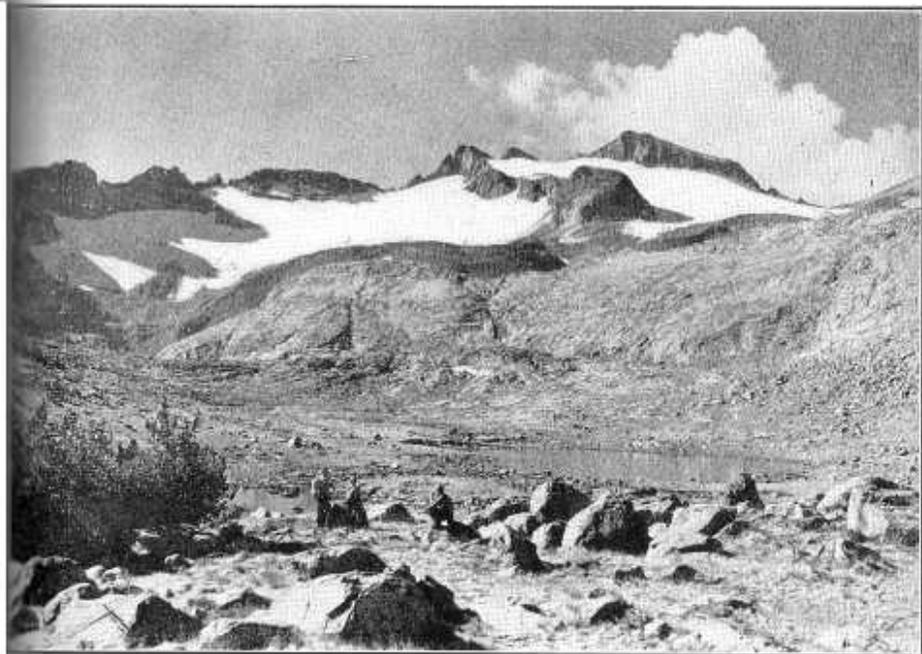
sible the publication in *Yosemite Nature Notes* of the accounts of observation and research in the natural and human history of this park. This is the 32nd year for this publication which constitutes a record of ever-increasing value.

BUTTERFLIES ON MOUNT LYELL

By Joseph E. Wright, Field School, 1951

Mount Lyell and adjacent peaks were bathed in a glistening white against the bluest of skies on the morning of our ascent of the Lyell snowfield and glacier. Perhaps half-way up the steep incline of snow we became aware of an ever-increasing flight of California tortoiseshell butterflies (*Nymphalis californica*), upward and across our path, from the direction of the saddle joining Mounts Lyell and Maclure on our right and extending to a shoulder of

Mount Lyell above on our left. The flight continued at length, even after we had largely risen above it, and we were certain that it had begun before our arrival. With thousands of butterflies involved, the flight assumed the proportions of a migration. Looking down upon the dark specks seen against the snow, we felt something of the inevitableness of a flight comparable, perhaps, with the slow movement of the huge glacial mass itself.



Mount Lyell and its glacier.

Ralph Anderson



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Dan Anderson