

MT. STARR KING - Part I, The Early Climbs

Bill Oliver

"In the angle formed by the Merced and the South Fork Canyon (Illilouette Creek), and about two miles SSE of Mt. Broderick (Liberty Cap), is the high point, called the 'South Dome,' and also, of later years, 'Mount Starr King.' This is the most symmetrical and beautiful of all the dome-shaped masses around Yosemite; but it is not visible from the valley itself. It exhibits the concentric structure of the granite on a grand scale; although its surface is generally smooth and unbroken. Its summit is absolutely inaccessible." (Whitney Survey: *Geology*, 1865) [Found in "Place Names of the High Sierra" by Francis P. Farquhar, *Sierra Club Bulletin (SCB)*, 1925. Note: South Dome was also an early name for Half Dome.]

Josiah Whitney, as usual, was absolutely right - until proven absolutely wrong. Mt. Starr King, one of the last of the major Yosemite "inaccessibles" was accessed for the first time in 1875 (or '76). The triumph belonged to a certain thirty-five-year-old Bay Area accountant/entrepreneur, who would later be known as "Chicken" Bayley for his prosperous poultry business.

Short in stature but high on adventure, **George B. Bayley** led a life full of gnarly summits - and did little to seek public fame for his achievements. Following a family tradition, at 15 the Boston-born lad went to sea. For seven years he agilely mounted the lofty masts and deftly walked the narrow spars. In 1862 the twenty-two-year-old wanderer permanently grounded in San Francisco, where a married sister was living. Four years later, two ahead of John Muir's arrival, Bayley made the first of his annual summer outings to Yosemite Valley. His second summer, in 1867, found him and his young bride atop Sentinel Rock - an early climb for man and a first for woman.

All the climbing guides consistently give a date of August 1876 for the first ascent of Starr King. The original source for many of these is probably the Francis Farquhar article in the 1932 *SCB*: "A Revival of Interest in Mt. Starr King." Some of the "contradictory" records referred to by Farquhar may be resolved with the conclusion that Bayley, in fact, made two ascents, both by the NE: the first in 1875 and the second in 1877. James Hutchings' climbs, by the SE saddle in 1877, were then the third and fourth ascents, on consecutive days. It is quite reasonable that the latter climbs may have closely followed in time Bayley's second. Farquhar, who clearly is aware of only a single climb by Bayley, implies Hutchings greatly exaggerated in claiming a near sequence.

George Bayley's Climbs

The principal source for this research is "Mountain Climber, George B. Bayley, 1840-1894," by Evelyn Hyman Chase, 1981. There appears to be no published or private account of Bayley's 1875

ascent. His good friend and some-times-mountaineering-companion, John Muir, however, offered the following tribute within an article which appeared in the August 26, 1876 San Francisco *Daily Evening Bulletin* - "Summering in the Sierra": [Note: In acceding to Bayley's request for no public acclaim, Muir refers to our protagonist as "Mr. Short."]

A firm, condensed, muscular little man of my acquaintance comes a climbing in the mountains every year. His love of alpine exercise seems to suffer no abatement, notwithstanding he scrambles most of the year among the dangerous heights and hollows of the San Francisco stock market and among the arithmetical banks and braes of banking. He is a short man, or even shorter, who disdain the plush lawns and gravelly margins of Yosemite, pushes bravely out among the precipices of the loftiest Alps; scaling cliffs for the dear love of the danger, glissading adown glacier declivities and floundering through snow fountains with indomitable perseverance, yet without any of the distinctive characteristics of the cautious mountaineer.

Mounts Shasta, Whitney, Lyell, Dana and the Obelisk [now Mt. Clark], all have felt his foot; and years ago he made desperate efforts to ascend the South Dome [Half Dome], eager for the first honors, and certainly no one could be better qualified to succeed in a chance way; for with the grip and audacity of a squirrel, his tense muscular limb bundles ply with a pattering, twinkling motion, seemingly independent of ordinary holds.

The only kind of mountain climbing at which he appears at a disadvantage are flood and earthquake taluses. The various blocks and boulders of which they are composed are all placed by natural laws in exquisite rhythmical order, and the tuned mountaineer, bounding adown their curves, finds himself playing upon a grand instrument. But here Mr. Short finds difficulty and discord in pattering from key to key, like a lady with stumpy, abbreviated fingers, playing a piano. Upon plain flowing folds of granite, however, the case is different, and happily our hero has at length found what he long has sought - an accessible mountain, with name and fame deemed inaccessible, and that mountain is Starr King, the loftiest and most symmetrical of the Yosemite Domes.

Returning the other day [Upon this phrase, very likely, Farquhar derives his first ascent date of August, 1876.] from an extended excursion into the high Sierra, he determined an attempt upon it from the north, and now the silk handkerchief of a brave young lawyer who accompanied him, floats above it on the breeze, proclaiming the small fact, that with the exception of a few branches of spirey needles, the last of Yosemite inaccessible has been conquered. To [George] Anderson [on 10/12/75] belongs the honor of first standing in the blue ether above Tissiack [on Half Dome]; and to the dauntless San

Francisco Short belongs the first footprint on the crown of Starr King.

George Bayley again stood at the base of Starr King two years later. Details of this ascent are available thanks to the fact that his climbing companion, James Schuyler, happened to be an editor of the *Stockton Daily Independent*. The latter wrote several articles following his Yosemite trip. What follows appeared in the July 12, 1877 edition - "The Ascent of Mt. Starr King." [It appears that Farquhar may have been unaware of this account.]

Two years ago the mountain was first ascended by George B. Bayley, Esq., of San Francisco, who took with him his Mexican guide and a Mr. Smith of San Francisco. Mr. Bayley having made arrangements to make a second ascent with his wife and a lady friend, I was invited to become one of the party. ...

We were not long in reaching a point where we were obliged to leave our horses and proceed the remaining distance on foot. A climb of perhaps half a mile over broken debris brought us to the "saddle" [at the base of the NE face], a point which even the ladies had no difficulty in reaching by a slow but sure process of putting one foot before the other. But here began the serious part of the work. ... The ladies openly avowed that they would not budge an inch beyond where they were, a resolve for which I cannot too warmly commend their judgment.

We had brought with us a stout rope about fifty feet in length, and taking one end of this in his teeth Mr. Bayley started up the slope. His boots were provided with hobnails and by their aid and the exercise of that remarkable agility with which he is peculiarly gifted, he scrambled up the length of the rope until he stood on a narrow ledge some three inches wide running across the face of the mountain. Here he took a turn of the rope around his wrist and bracing himself back against the rock called to me to follow. I protested that I could not, that it was useless to imperil our lives in attempting to go on. He answered reassuringly and begged me to try it. I therefore thought I would go as high as he was standing and then persuade him to return. Putting my weight [250 lbs] on the rope to test his power to hold me, I found it pretty firm and started up. He is a small man but very muscular, and I trusted in him implicitly. I found I got up easier than I expected, and as he started off for another ascent I could not demur too strongly, especially as he assured me that the hard climbing would be over after the next 100 feet. Leaving me standing on the ledge, he walked along it to the face of a low wall, in the corner of which he scrambled up to another good footing point about fifty feet further. The rope had slipped from my grasp, and when he threw the end out toward me it would not reach. Fortunately he had a small piece of baling rope in his pocket with which he spliced out the longer one so that I could grab it. As I had not dared to follow along the narrow, contracting ledge to a point directly beneath him, my next climb was necessarily in a diagonal direction. This was not

pleasant, as after the first step or two my feet slipped from under me and I rolled and slide over to the wall, clinging to the rope for dear life. If it had broken I should have quickly met a terrible fate. My companion laughed heartily at my mishap to give me assurance, but my knees were barked and I was considerably bruised. I got up all right, however, and my companion started on. Going about twenty feet he braced himself again and told me he had a firm footing, so I again walked up the rope to where he was. I was at a loss to find the footing, however, and it was with the greatest difficulty I managed to twist one foot into a crevice and cling to a half inch ledge with my fingernails. How he had managed to hold himself in position against the strain of my weight, which is not light, I could not conceive.

"We are in for it now, Schuyler," said he. "Stick here and be ready to catch me if I should fall."

"In for it! I should say we were," I replied. "If you come down, do it as easy as you can. I can't hold on here very long."

Up he went again, but as he had anticipated, he had not gone more than ten feet before he came sliding down, bringing up on my shoulders, his boot heels cutting furrows in my hands and starting the blood. Three times this was repeated.

At last I exclaimed, "See here, Bayley, this is getting monotonous. We'll go to the bottom in short order if you do that again. For God's sake give me your knife!"

Taking the strong, curved back of the knife used for relieving dirt from horses' hooves, I applied it as a lever to a thin slab of rock which I succeeded in breaking out. This left a nice little ledge nearly two inches deep into which I threw my knee and breathed a sigh of relief. Mr. Bayley then took the knife and pried out a loose slab about ten feet long and an inch thick, lying on edge in the angle of the wall. The footing of the slab was not disturbed, but the top being pulled out four or five inches it served as a ladder for Mr. Bayley to climb over the slippery place that had given him several falls, and gave me something to cling to.

After that we got along without further trouble, by a repetition of our experience below, and a couple of hundred feet brought us to easy walking, when we mounted to the top. ... We planted our flag in a conspicuous place, and after I had recovered my equanimity, started on the descent. The ladies, who had been nervously watching our climb from below, hearing every word of our conversation and expecting every moment to see us dashed to the bottom, gave us an encouraging cheer to which we heartily responded.

We came down easily, without mishap, until we reached the diagonal descent, which I was obliged to make, when I slipped again, sliding down the full length of the rope, and fetching up with my toes in a friendly ledge. This fall was more serious than the one received when we went up, as I came very near pulling my companion out of his position. As it was he afterwards exhibited a black and blue mark encircling his arm where the rope had cut into his flesh. ...

At four o'clock we reached our animals, and before dark had got back to the Glacier Point House, where we enjoyed a good supper, eaten with uproarious hilarity. ... We did not sleep much, as Mr. Bayley was haunted with a remarkable and contagious fund of animal spirits and kept the house in an uproar until 2 o'clock in the morning.

James Hutchings' Climbs

Within a month or so we find a new party with eyes cautiously straining upward at the smooth, sheer face of Starr King - this time from the SE saddle. Farquhar assumes that James Hutchings was initially unaware of Bayley's prior ascent(s), hoping that his, Hutchings', would be the first. James M. Hutchings, who entered the region in 1855, operated an early Yosemite Valley hotel. He probably did more than anyone else, with the possible exception of John Muir, to advertise the wonders of the Valley. He mentions the earliest Starr King climbs in his classic travel book "In the Heart of the Sierras," 1886:

Less than a dozen persons have been able to ascend it. The first to do so was Mr. George B. Bayley and Mr. E. S. [sic] Schuyler; followed by George Anderson and this writer, J. M. Hutchings, a few days afterwards, who having attached ropes over difficult places, enabled Mrs. Hutchings and our daughter Florence to ascend it, who were the first and only ladies, at this writing, that have accomplished the difficult task.

There is disagreement in Hutchings' own writings as to what number of and which ladies participated in his climbs. Certainly there was no confusion regarding the choice of George Anderson to lead the Hutchings party. Less than two years earlier the carpenter and trail builder succeeded in climbing, solo, another Yosemite inaccessible - Half Dome. Employing a novel technique - artificial aid - that would someday become the standard on "hard" Yosemite routes, he also pioneered the use of "sticky" shoes. [But this is another story!] The following narrative is taken from Hutchings' journal:

August 23 and 24, 1877 - Our camping ground encircled by forest trees and about a mile from the goal of our ambitions was left about 10 AM, under the guidance of Geo. G. Anderson, the first to climb the South [Half] Dome. We threaded our way among silver firs, tamaracks, and pinus monticola to the edge of the debris lying just under this lofty landmark, then picking our way among blocks of granite and stunted live-oak shrubbery, we sought the saddle at the south-eastern side of the peak. Well supplied with ropes.

"Oh, that isn't much of a climb," exclaimed our leader, as we looked together up the smooth granite slope before us, standing at an angle of about 43°, and with here and there a block, or shingle, formed by the concentric and con-choidal cleavage of the rock - to climb over.

Taking off his boots and putting on some home-made moccasins, the soles of which he had

previously covered with turpentine, thick in consistency, then winding the coil of rope over his shoulder and under his arm, he picked up a hammer (which he fastened in his belt) and some eye-bolts; said "Well, here goes!"

Walking up the smooth granite as if it were a gravel hill, he arrived at the first shingle. "Now," he said, "I'll put an eye-bolt here." So an eye-bolt was driven in and the rope fastened to it, allowing the lower end to reach the starting point. Here a huge block of shingle was encountered. Fastening about twelve feet to his belt, so that if he slipped he could not fall more than that distance, he proceeded, taking hold of the edge of the shingle, and advancing inch by inch. But he had made the rope too short to allow him to reach the next point of safety. He said composedly, "Now Mr. H., can you come up as far as this?"

I tried, but the rope was small and my fingers long and I couldn't get a good grip. "If you cannot get up I shall have to fall." "Then I'll come." Catching the small rope over-handed, I knelt upon the rock and crept along aided by the rope, until I reached the eyebolt and could just reach to his foot. This I held until he got a grip that enabled him to move his other foot. In a couple of minutes he was in a place of safety. Obstacle after obstacle was overcome, and finally we were standing firmly on the summit of "Mount Starr King," 9230 [9092] feet above sea-level.

It is impossible to describe the glorious panorama! Mountain ridges and hollows, pine covered, like waves of the sea - with here and there white knolls, relieving the dark hollows! While away to the eastward lay the grand chain of the Sierras - lofty peaks in sunlight and deep canons in shadow, passing clouds casting shadows on the peaks.

Deep in the gorge below slept Yosemite. The panorama - to the north and east - the top of El Capitan, Eagle Point, Yosemite Fall, North Dome, South [Half] Dome, Mts Hoffmann and Tuolumne, Clouds Rest. Between Clouds Rest and Mt Hoffmann stood grandly up in the far distance a group of sharp peaks that must be among the highest of the Sierras in that direction. From Clouds Rest, Mt Wonderful, Mt. Dana (far away on the crest of the range), Monastery Peak, Cathedral Peak, Temple and Echo Peaks. Thence numerous unnamed mountains filled the space until the Lyell group. Near and high in appearance rose the bold sharp outline of Gothic Peak [another early name for Mount Clark] thence Gray Peaks and Red Mountain. ...

Forest fires are on every hand making the landscape hazy and dull. I execrate the vandalism of the sheep-herders!

Aug. 23rd G. G. Anderson, J. G. Lambert, and J. M.

Hutchings made the ascent.

Aug. 24th G. G. Anderson, Mrs. A. L. Sweetland,

S. A. Walker, and J. M. H.

The entire area of the summit is only about 100 ft by 75 ft. Two monuments erected gave evidence of someone having ascended this peak before us. We erected a flag pole, put up a flag, painted by J. G. Lambert - for our party.

[Found in Farquhar's 1932 *SCB* article, "A Revival of Interest in Mt. Starr King."]

Surprisingly, according to Farquhar, the summit was apparently not visited again for 54 years. [However, Richard Leonard's 1937 "Mountain Records of the Sierra Nevada" notes climbs in 1918 and 1922.] Then, suddenly, 1931 witnessed eight successful ascents, some solo: seven from the NE and one from the SE.

To be concluded in **Part II** - current climbing routes.

George B. Bayley, 1840 - 1894

In 1883 Bayley (then 43) made the third ascent of Mt. Rainier, accompanied by P. B. Van Trump (45) and James Longmire (63). Notwithstanding Van Trump's premier climb in 1870, the account of this arduous approach and perilous ascent clearly revealed the Sierran's masterful leadership. As was then often the case, the trio endured an alternately freezing/scalding bivouac at steam vents near the summit.

Frustrated at not having had time to go on to the north summit (now Liberty Cap), Bayley returned with Van Trump in 1892. This time, after another extreme bivouac, they made what they thought was the first ascent of the north peak. Actually, they missed this distinction by about three weeks. Recall, mountaineers then carried alpenstocks and wore hobnailed boots, but had neither ice axe nor crampons. While descending a steep, icy slope Bayley slipped and fell, 2,000 feet later, into a crevasse. Somehow, in spite of his broken ribs and Van Trump's subsequent snow blindness, the pair finally made it safely off the mountain.

Just two months prior to this high adventure, George Bayley was among twenty-seven prominent businessmen, educators and mountaineers enlisted

by John Muir in the incorporation of the Sierra Club. Less than two years later, on April 30, 1894, Bayley was killed instantly when his skull was fractured in a freight elevator accident on his property. He left his spouse and a son and daughter - and he left an impressive record of mountaineering boldness and modesty.

James M. Hutchings, 1820 - 1902

Born in England, Hutchings came west to America in 1848 and then farther west during the Gold Rush of '49. Initial success in the California gold fields did not pan out in the long run, and his career eventually turned to publishing the monthly *Hutchings' California Magazine*. In 1855, only four years after its "discovery," he led the first tourist party into Yosemite Valley.

It was while remodeling his Hutchings House hotel in the Valley that he hired "a shabby, nature-loving Scotsman" - John Muir - to operate his nearby sawmill. [From *Yosemite and Its Innkeepers*, Shirley Sargent, 1975.] SPS-listed Mt. Florence (12,561') was named for Hutchings' daughter while she was on a family outing in the vicinity of this peak. Mt. Hutchings (10,785'), overlooking Kings Canyon about 5 mi. NE of Cedar Grove, was named for the Valley publicist, most likely during a trans-Sierra trip he made in 1875. Hutchings briefly succeeded Galen Clark in 1880 as the state Guardian of the Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Grove Grant.

"Late in his life he took up hotelkeeping again, this time at the Calaveras Grove of Big Trees. He visited Yosemite often, and it was while entering the Valley with his wife for a camping trip on October 31, 1902, that he was thrown from the buggy when his horse reared, and was killed almost instantly." [From Peter Browning's Editor's Introduction to the 1990 republication of James Hutchings' *In the Heart of the Sierras*.]