

SIERRA CLUB BULLETIN

*October
1952*



SMOG COMES TO YOSEMITE—from thousands of campfires

Martin Litton

Yosemite versus Mass Man

Story and pictures on Yosemite's fatal beauty

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Miscellany

Save the Redwoods.—San Francisco voters who are Sierra Club members have an added election day chore: Get out the vote, cast your own ballot and do all you can to assure passage of Proposition C for purchase of Butano Forest. Vote YES.

From the American Alpine Club News for September we have gleaned reports of various climbs made this summer which may interest our members.

Alaska. Mount McKinley: Two parties reached the summit, both by the Muldrow Glacier route. Captain W. D. Hackett and three others made the eighth ascent of the mountain on July 12. A Mexican party of six, sponsored by the Mexican Red Cross, also reached the top. Another Mexican party, sponsored by the Club de Exploraciones de Mexico, was forced to turn back.

A party including Sierra Club members Phil Bettler, Chet and Evelyn Errett, Dick and Mary Houston, Dick Irvin, Fritz Lippmann, and two other mountaineers from Alaska, climbed to 12,000 feet on the West Buttress of Mount McKinley. Unusually bad weather turned them back.

King Peak: Four University of Alaska students made the first ascent in June, and a Seattle party made the second ascent, and also the first ascent of Mount Augusta.

Mount Brooks, Mount Mather: First ascents were made by a Harvard Mountaineering Club party, which also climbed two peaks east of Muldrow Glacier.

Peru. The first ascent of Nevado Salcantay was made on August 5 by a joint Franco-American party. A Dutch expedition succeeded in making first ascents of Nevado Pongos and Huantsan.

Himalaya. Everest: The Swiss party made an extraordinary showing, reaching approximately 28,200 feet on May 28; and now, according to news reports, a new Swiss expedition is making another attempt.

The Annual issue of the *SCB* is in production. You may soon expect to receive it.

To Librarians:

It may be a bit confusing to find this issue numbered 8 when the September issue carries the same number instead of 7. We thought this might be the best solution to explain the error.

THE SIERRA CLUB,* founded in 1892, has devoted itself to the study and protection of national scenic resources, particularly those of the mountain regions of the Pacific Coast. Since these resources receive best protection from those who know them well, the club has long conducted educational activities, under the committees listed below, to make them known. Participation is invited in the program to enjoy and to preserve wilderness, wildlife, forests, and streams.

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Sierra Club Bulletin

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...TO EXPLORE, ENJOY, AND PROTECT THE NATURAL MOUNTAIN SCENE...

For the October Record

Yosemite versus Mass Man

[Yosemite's granite cliffs can continue to take it, but the remaining beauty of the forested and grassy living space of the valley floor cannot long endure the impact of the increasing crowds thronging to view Yosemite's spectacle. The *Los Angeles Times* performed a service in drawing Yosemite's dire plight to the southern California public in publishing last Labor Day an illustrated article by Martin Litton, a Sierra Club member. The *Times* has kindly permitted the reprinting of the article which follows almost in full; a few new photographs and legends have been added.

The problem is by no means a new one; it has perplexed Park Service officials, Yosemite Advisory Board members, and Sierra Club directors and members for decades. Nor is the problem unique to Yosemite; Yosemite is only the most pressing example in the national park system.

Other problems have been solved before. Even with the huge crowds there is vast improvement over the situation which existed decades ago when a visitor, once the dust of his stagecoach had cleared enough for him to see the view, beheld fenced pastures, grazing cattle, and other examples of private holdings, not excluding a race track. The upland reaches of the park were once overgrazed by thousands upon thousands of sheep. Sheep are gone now, and recovery is under way.

But the present problem's age does not lessen the acuteness of the need for solution. It has been suggested that the time has come when we can no longer apply a bandaid here and there—when the public must take a full

dose of a bitter antibiotic. Otherwise Yosemite's beauty, which should be shared by all the ages, will have been fatal to itself.

It avails us little to struggle to set aside primeval areas if we do not also protect those we have. The need is real. Every conservationist who has been to Yosemite—or to other places which are as irreplaceable—is urged to search his own mind for an answer, and to send it in. ED.]

PRESIDENT Theodore Roosevelt called Yosemite Valley the most beautiful place in the world. John Muir summoned the world to the mountains to "get their tidings" and founded the Sierra Club "to explore, enjoy and render accessible" the scenic gems of the Sierra Nevada.

But put nearly 1,000,000 people to work every summer trampling and littering any area of four or five square miles and the scenery is sure to suffer.

"Unless something is done to stop present trends," says Dr. Carl P. Russell, superintendent of Yosemite National Park, "much of the natural appeal of the valley as we have known it will be gone in another 50 years."

In fall and winter, when travel in the park is light, natural processes go to work repairing the damage done by summer's crowds, but every year the crowds are bigger and their impact is greater. Nature, though aided by the National Park Service and many conscientious citizens, is losing out. Yosemite can't take it any more.

Not only are the Park Service and conservation-minded groups and individuals worried; the Yosemite Park and Curry Co.,

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Yosemite's Fatal Beauty

The illustrations, clockwise from upper left

THE RUSH IS ON—With North Dome as backdrop, autos crowd into Yosemite. Means are sought to discourage repeated visits. A camping-period limit helps, but cannot be enforced with inadequate staff. Charging an entrance fee per visit would help, but would be an undemocratic barrier based on price and would diminish winter use, when crowding is not critical. The biggest surges in travel came with the completion of the All-Year Highway and the realignment of the Wawona Road from the South Entrance.

BOTTLENECK—Park ranger tries to keep traffic moving through Old Village. Federal appropriations allow less protection than in 1942; travel has doubled since. Buildings here have been slated for demolition for years, are to be replaced by modern structures nearer most heavily used areas.

BUSINESS IS GOOD—Three large service stations in heart of Yosemite Valley try to keep up with demand for gasoline as autos crowd park roads. This is station in Camp Curry area. Publicized penalty price on Yosemite gasoline could force purchases elsewhere and free critical area in valley.

NOT LIKE THE POSTCARDS—Meadow in front of Yosemite Falls, once favorite of artists, has been paved for parking by people using Old Village chapel, store, grill, restaurant, barber shop, warehouse, and theater.

FRONT ROW FOR FIREFALL—As sun sets, cars start lining up for the best view of renowned firefall. Conservationists claim that this artificial attraction violates avowed national-





park standards and should be eliminated, but it bears more relation to scenery than other artificial attractions.

SLUM IN THE CEDARS—Visitors from all parts of nation, some with trailers, others sleeping in cars, on cots, or on the ground, crowd together in every available space under the incense cedars and yellow pines. Some urge opening of other areas on valley floor to camping; others, who feel this would only increase the total overcrowding and impair new areas, urge that the camping accommodations be reduced.

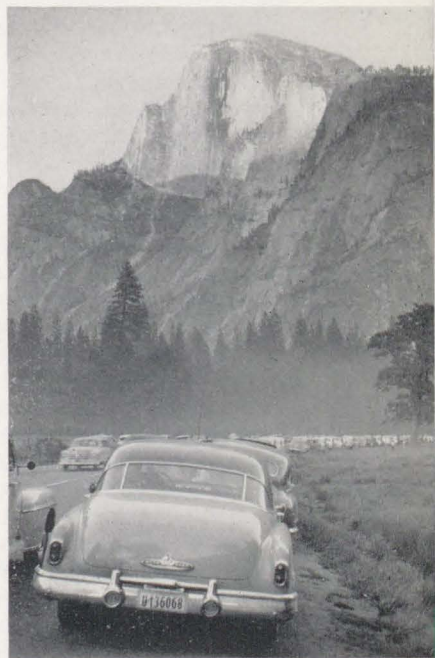
URBAN ENTERTAINMENT—Every summer night but Sundays some 1500 guests and campers assemble at this outgrowth of the original Curry campfire circle (all but lost in front of studio) to see entertainment like that which TV brings them at home and to dance afterward in pavilion.

OUT OF PLACE—Unsightly government service areas in Yosemite Valley occupy picturesque locations that could otherwise be used for recreational purposes. Current proposal would move such facilities farther west in valley.

YOSEMITE'S DIRTY LINEN—Public laundry, being removed from valley this year, will vacate old buildings slated for demolition. One proposal would remove all of valley's maintenance facilities to Big Meadows area.

LOST HORIZON—The vast background of nature's glory is lost on little boy, who stares only at a dump truck. Some feel that no matter how artificial the attractions, some of the beauty of the place rubs off on each participant. How much beauty can rub off without itself being rubbed out?

Photographs by Martin Litton



from page 3]

enfranchised to furnish commercial services to the visiting public, is also concerned with problems aggravated by the annual rush.

"We try to spread them out," says a company official, "by encouraging the use of facilities outside the valley itself, such as those at Wawona, Glacier Point, and Tuolumne Meadows. But most of the people who apply for reservations insist on going 'where all the people are.'"

"Our advertising is aimed at leveling off the load in time also. We stress the off-season periods—spring and fall—when Yosemite is at its very best. But school vacation is still the factor that determines the time of heaviest use."

While the Yosemite Park and Curry Co. can accommodate only about 4,000 customers, there are frequently as many as 12,000 persons occupying the free public campgrounds in the valley.

"If we are going to talk about preserving natural conditions here," says Dr. Russell, "we are about 100 years too late. The valley floor, which had comparatively few trees at the time of its discovery because the Indians regularly burned them down to make hunting easier, was extensively farmed for many years by pioneer hotel owners. Some of the native flora has been replaced by introduced weeds, and the native animals have adopted new behavior in keeping with a habitat modified by crowds of people.

"It would be possible, though, to restore most of the charm—the romantic, idyllic atmosphere that made Yosemite famous—but the process would be prohibitively expensive and probably opposed by those who prefer to think of Yosemite Valley as a resort, not a primeval sanctuary.

"Some observers blame the concessioner for the commercialization of Yosemite. That's unfair, of course, because every enterprise that's initiated here has the prior sanction of the National Park Service. The service has always had full coöperation from the company and is in complete command of policy.

"Whatever you see here that you don't like—the roads crossing the meadows, the meadows that are blacktopped to provide

extra parking space, the business establishments, the truck shops and warehouses—blame us for it.

"Or blame it on changing administrative views and the continuing revision of park plans and policy, due to national emergencies, that have kept the service from knowing just where it is heading."

The dagger that struck the hardest blow at the heart of Yosemite National Park was the Wawona Road. Its reconstruction as a fast modern highway made the valley more accessible—perhaps too accessible—from Fresno and Los Angeles and brought the hordes that have accelerated the deterioration of the natural scene.

Yosemite not only draws crowds; it holds them. Almost every kind of urban amusement is offered to forestall homesickness and boredom. When waterfalls and trees and rocks and river fall, there are movies, dancing, golf, tennis, swimming and stage entertainment to take their place. Nobody wants to leave the valley and make room for the next fellow.

The Park Service made efforts to cope with this situation by establishing first a 30-day camping limit and then reducing it still further to a 15-day maximum. But this rule can be broken—with little danger of detection—by the camper who moves from one campground to another when his time is up.

The rules are enforced by a too-small staff of overworked rangers who, carefully selected and highly trained as they are, receive salaries lower than the wages paid some of the laborers in the park.

Yet Yosemite is not a "poor" park. Far from it. Royalties from the profits of the Yosemite Park and Curry Co., together with automobile permit fees, taxes and the government's take from Best's studio and Deggan's store and restaurant, put more than \$1,000,000 annually into the U. S. Treasury. The money does not go to the National Park Service, which is entirely dependent on an annual Congressional appropriation. Although travel to the park has increased 100 per cent since 1942, funds appropriated for that wartime year were \$16,000 ahead of the 1953 grant in "protection power," and

the park's protective force was inadequate even then.

Difficult as caring for the visitors themselves may be, it is easy compared with the job of providing space for their cars. The picturesque old Camp Curry apple orchard is now an asphalt parking lot, as is part of the meadow along the river just west of the Old Village, once a favorite spot for viewing Yosemite Falls.

Looking at the Yosemite hodgepodge, it is hard to believe that there is actually a master plan for the valley's development. But the government has one, calling for the razing of the Old Village and the erection of a so-called New Village to occupy what is now a meadow to the east, on the north side of the river.

At an estimated cost of \$2,500,000, the rustic, somewhat dilapidated Yosemite Lodge is being replaced by government-approved modern structures that stand out like a sore thumb.

The summertime crowding brings not only inconvenience and unsightliness; it brings danger as well. Every year has its tally of drownings, traffic accidents, and injuries to visitors who molest the wild animals. At the season's peak, disposal of refuse is a serious problem, with the overtaxed sewage-treatment plant sometimes on the verge of pouring raw sewage into the Merced River. The U.S. Public Health Service may quarantine the valley and close it up entirely, unless funds are provided for meeting the sanitation problem.

The toll that would be taken in the event of a forest fire is a prospect that makes the park rangers shudder. And fire is a constant threat, especially in the heavily-wooded camping areas.

"If we still had Hetch Hetchy Valley," Dr. Russell points out, "many of our problems would be solved, because it was another Yosemite in every respect.

"It was part of Yosemite National Park when the city of San Francisco took it away from the American people and needlessly made a reservoir out of it." . . .

By far the biggest single factor in the overcrowding of Yosemite Valley is the renowned firefall. Even some of the buildings

—the Ahwahnee Hotel is an example—are geographically orientated for the best view of this famous sight.

Every day in summer a crew scours the rim forests for the ever-scarcer red fir bark of which the bonfire is made, and every night hundreds of cars jam the roads and meadows as their occupants strive for vantage points from which to see the glowing coals pushed off the brink of Glacier Point. . . .

Students of national park administration consider the firefall an artificial intrusion which is as out of place as a display of fireworks.

Several possible cures for Yosemite's headaches have been advanced. There are persons in the National Park Service who advocate throwing open the entire valley floor to camping. Such a move, they claim, would spread out the campers and make their stays more enjoyable.

But stronger sentiment favors the opposite extreme: Removal of all overnight and recreational facilities to Big Meadows, a spacious area just outside the northwest corner of the valley, on the Big Oak Flat road.

Under this program, some of the Valley roads might remain, possibly changed to one-way routes, and a few of the present campgrounds would be utilized as inconspicuous parking areas. Use of the valley would be on a day-by-day basis.

Another proposal would keep private cars out of the valley altogether, with low fare or free open-air busses shuttling between the points of interest.

The one big obstacle is cost. The Yosemite Park and Curry Co. would have to be reimbursed for moving its \$7,000,000 plant, to say nothing of the expense of relocating the government's facilities.

Moreover, the Big Meadows tract, though within the park's boundaries, is privately owned, and would have to be bought with public funds.

"We want more people, not fewer, to see Yosemite," says Dr. Russell, "but 90% of the traffic is what we call local—from within California—and most of the visitors are 'repeaters.'

"I'm afraid that many of them don't ap-

preciate the valley. It's just some place to go where they can do all the things they do at home, but in different surroundings. Rather incomprehensible in a way, because a family seeking escape from the lowland heat can find many spots that are higher, cooler, closer to home, and less congested than Yosemite.

"Some people have proposed closing the park entrances after a certain level of occupancy is reached, but who'd stand at the gate and tell a Pennsylvania vacationer to keep out of his own park? Limiting the number of visitors should not be attempted until the government has spent some money to distribute the present load."

The tourist from Massachusetts or Mis-

*Again, Hector the Garbage Collector—
in the portrait by
Harold Bradley which first appeared
in June. The scene—Yosemite Valley.
Adequate appropriations (or more for
protection, less for roads) could
preclude such scenes.*



issippi, who may have only a few days to spend in Yosemite after looking forward to the visit for years, buys the same annual automobile permit as the Fresno or Merced family that may enter the park 20 or 30 times in a season. The out-of-state visitor, just as much an owner of this national park as anyone else, frequently finds it packed full of local people, to whom Yosemite is "old stuff."

It would be possible to eliminate this inequity and reduce traffic at the same time by changing the car permit to an entrance fee to be charged every time a pleasure vehicle enters the park instead of only once a year. This appears to be the fairest quick solution to the overcrowding, as it would not handicap the family that goes to Yosemite only occasionally but it would discourage those week-end-after-week-end visits. The fee is "for use of the park roads," according to the Park Service, and it may be argued that those who use the roads most should pay the most.

Meanwhile, even as the concessionaire's investment grows with the erection of new hotel buildings, this year's elimination of one service—the public laundry—seems to portend the future of Yosemite.

"Getting 'back to nature' will not be possible here," warns Dr. Russell. "There have already been too many changes.

"You don't have to pitch camp in an art museum to enjoy it and the same reasoning can be applied to any place as rare and precious as Yosemite Valley. Some of the original atmosphere can still be salvaged."

No camps, no swimming pools, no dance halls, no cocktail bars—Yosemite would no longer "have everything."

But it might become once again the most beautiful place in the world.