

# YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES



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# Yosemite Nature Notes

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## Origin of the Name "Yosemite"

(By JAMES E. COLE, Junior Park Naturalist)

"Hear ye! Hear ye! Hear ye! A word—a word with which the world vote will now be taken to decide is familiar, yet of which no one is what name shall be given to this positive what it means or of how it valley." With these words (Bun- came to be used to designate these nnell, 1911, p. 70) of John O'Neil's Indians.

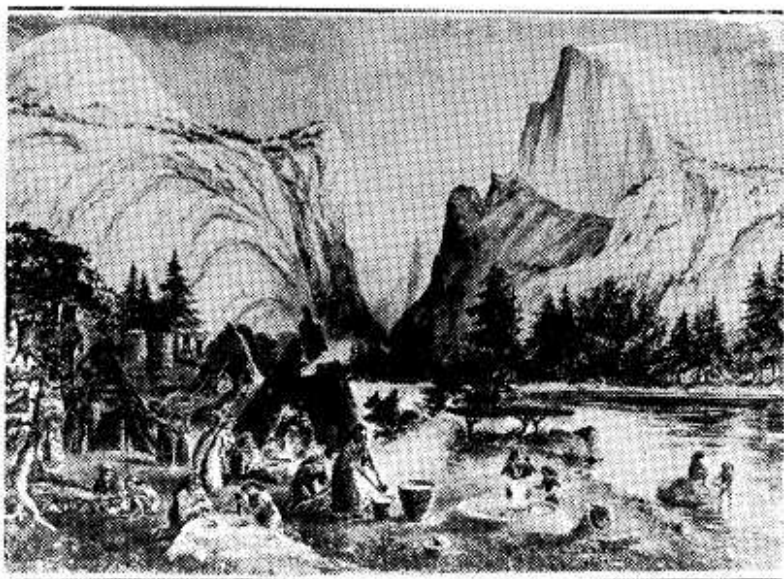
echoing across the vale of Ahwah- The significance and choice of nee, the members of the Mariposa the word Yosemite has evoked nu- Battalion unanimously adopted the merous explanations. Bunnell sug- name "Yosemity" for the valley gested the name, as perviously men- they had that day discovered. This tioned, because it represented to work was suggested by Dr. L. H. him the name of the group of ab- Bunnell (1911, p. 69) because he origines who inhabited this valley. He thought "that by so doing the name He thought the word signified of the tribe of Indians which.... "grizzly bear," and apparently all (they had that day) met, leaving other contemporary writers, with their homes in the valley perhaps one exception, concurred although never to return, would be perpetua- differing somewhat in the way the ted." Undoubtedly Dr. Bunnell, in word should be spelled. Later when sponsoring this name, meant well, the language of the Southern Mi- but whether or not he accomplished wok Indians, of which the Yo- his purpose is questionable, for it semites are thought to be a part, is extremely doubtful whether these was studied, it was found that Indians answered to any name other "oocomate" meant, as Bunnell had than Ahwahneechee. Neverthe- said, a full-grown grizzly. Although less, the battalion physician did give according to another student of Cal- the world a unique and euphonious ifornia Indians (Barrett, 1908, p.

343), this term could be applied to any bear—black as well as grizzly—but was used particularly for the latter species. In general, then, ethnologists agree with the miners and traders in the meaning of the word.

Granted that the word signified grizzly bear, the perplexing question is, how did the Indians probably answered to the name Ahwahneechee come to be designated Yosemite by the whites? Even before Tenaya, the old chief of these Indians, had been captured or had ... "proudly acknowledged it (Yosemite) as the designation of his band," (Bunnell, 1911, p. 63) the inhabitants of the deep gorges were called "grizzlies" by the miners and traders. Undoubtedly, the whites

learned the name from Indians other than the dwellers in Ahwahneechee. The trader, for instance, had a trading post by the Merced river, less than 20 miles from Yosemite Valley. Yet he did not know the name of the chief nor of the group that lived there, although he had taken wives from at least five bands in adjacent regions.

Chief Tenaya's explanation, according to Bunnell (1911, p. 72), was ... "this name had been selected because they occupied the mountains and valleys which were the favorite resort of the Grizzly Bears, and because his people were expert in killing them. That his tribe had adopted the name because those who had bestowed it were afraid of the grizzlies and feared by



Original oil painting by Lady C. F. Gordon Cumming - 1878

band." This statement, even though quoted as having come from the lips of Tenaya, is incompatible with known facts regarding the naming of California Indian groups. Ordinarily, the name of the most prominent village in a region became also the group name for the inhabitants. Thus the Ahwahneechees derived their name from Ahwahnee, the most prosperous encampment in the valley. Any other name given to these aborigines by the adjacent Indians would, as was usually the custom, be a directional one, such as a northerner, southerner or easterner. In addition, investigation does not bear out Chief Tenaya's contention that the Valley of Ahwahnee was the favorite resort of the grizzly bear. Early documents of travelers in California seldom fail to mention the abundance of grizzlies in the lower foothills, whereas little notice is given to the presence of these animals in the mountains until, presumably, driven there by the colonization of their native haunts. Quite probably, these bears ranged, at times, if not constantly, through the Yosemite region, but their breeding belt, and thus the area of densest population, was in the foothill country. Since no Indians resided permanently between Yosemite Valley and the crest of the Sierra Nevada mountains, (Krober 1925, p. 443) or as high up on the western slope, it seems probable that all neighboring tribes had become more accustomed to grizzly

bears than were the dwellers in Ahwahnee. Apparently then, this explanation, although sounding plausible to the miners, does not stand the test of research and, consequently, necessitates of further search for the truth.



The last sentence of Chief Tenaya's speech (quoted above) may contain a clue. From various sources, in addition to those quoted by Bunnell, it is evident that the Yosemitees seemed to have had, at that time, quite a reputation as warriors. All evidence points to the fact that the Indians of Yosemite Valley consisted of an admixture from various tribes, outlaws and renegades who had been welded into a unit by the leadership of Tenaya. If this

is true, it is not difficult to understand why the word "grizzly" or "lawless one" might be applied to these Indians. Barrett (1919 p. 28) makes an interesting contribution, when he breaks the word Yosemite or Yoheemite up into "Yo-he," to kill, and miuteya, "people." An old Indian from Tuolumne was asked last summer how she would say "killer of man." Her answer was "Yos-hemite." Chief Le-me, a local Indian, pronounces this "Yo-hem-atic." If this meaning was known to the adjacent Indians, and it seems logical to assume that it was, and if the Yosemite group was actually a pugnacious tribe, then there may be some evidence for the much printed and quoted statement that the Yosemite were killers.

On the other hand there are numerous reasons for believing that Tenaya and his band were not so greatly feared by the neighboring Indians. The Mono Paiutes, a transsierran group, from the vicinity of Mono Lake, carried on considerable commerce with their western neighbors. On such trading excursions these Paiutes "often wintered in Yosemite, especially when pine nuts were scarce, frequently marrying M'wok." (Steward, 1933, pp. 257-258). Toward the west there is evidence to prove that groups which wintered on the lower parts of the Merced River moved into Yosemite Valley each spring. In fact several ethnologists insist that no Indians lived permanently in Yosemite, but

migrated down the river each fall and up in the spring. Pon-watchee, Chief of the Nootchii band, which occupied the territory near the present town of Wawona, is quoted as saying (Bunnell, 1911, p. 61) that "they met together to 'cache' their acorns in the valley, or for a grand annual hunt and drive of game." Such information points to the fact that amiable relations probably existed between the dwellers in Ahwahnee and their western neighbors. On the other hand nowhere in the literature is any evidence presented which indicates that these Indians were considered hostile by the adjacent bands before the coming of the whites. Naturally, since the whites were asking for state and federal troops, the miners and traders painted a very black picture of the lawless and warlike character of the so-called Yosemite, but knowing their motives, little faith can be credited their statements. Unless definite proof to the contrary is uncovered there is no reason for not believing that the dwellers in Ahwahnee, like all California Indians, were a peaceful group.

Another solution of this problem is frequently heard in the form of a legend. As briefly narrated by Hutchings (1877, p. 44) "... one of the chiefs had distinguished himself in valorous combat with an enormous grizzly bear, in which (after) he had proven the victor he was called Yo Semite in honor

of his powers; by degrees the people of his tribe, and eventually their valley home was known by it among the Indians far and near." A more elaborate account goes on to say that after hearing about the slaying the Indians brought the bear to camp whereupon a great feast of bear meat was prepared and at which time the brave Chief was given the name of the powerful beast he had killed. Kroeber (1921, p. 59), in discussing this story feels that "somehow this legend gives the impression of white man's imagination; it does not have the true ring of Indian tradition." Likewise Barrett classifies it as doubtful. That part of the story, at least, which includes the eating of bear meat, is unquestionably imaginative, because these Indians, like many others in California did not eat bear flesh. The skinned carcass, according to Chief Le-me, looked too human, as did also the hind foot. Finally, this so-called legend is false, beyond doubt, because the valley we now call Yosemite was never so called by the Miwoks. It was known as Ahwahnee. Good confirmation of this was obtained last summer from Ta-buce, an old Paiute woman born near Mono Lake, who said that when she was a girl she came to Ahwahnee to get acorns.

There is, finally another possible origin for the name Yosemite. Probably it was C. Hart Merriam (1916, p. 203) who first pointed out that

the Indians in the Yosemite region were segregated into two groups. He found that "The villages and camps were sharply divided into two categories—those north of the Merced River and those south of it. This division has a far deeper and more ancient significance than that indicated by the mere position of the villages with respect to the river, for it goes back to the underlying totemic beliefs that form an important part of the religion of this primitive people." The totems, which interest us especially, were named after two animals, grizzly bears and coyotes. Members of the grizzly bear moiety lived on the north side of the valley, while the coyote moiety occupied the southern section. "It seems," to Kroeber (1921, p. 61) "more than probable that this local name of one of the two sides or divisions came to be applied through some misgiving on the part of the whites, to all the Indians of the valley, and then to the valley itself."

Of all the explanations suggested, there appears to be more merit in this one than in any of the others. Here is the first evidence that the word Yosemite was ever used to designate a group of Indians in what is now called Yosemite Valley. It alone has the distinguishing characteristic of not conflicting with Indian customs or with data as found in the literature. Whether or not this is the correct solution is even yet debatable for the In-



dians who formerly lived here and the whites who named them are now gone. Although unable to stem the advance of our civilization, the Indians were able to take with them the answer to this perplexing question. But even though there can never be a satisfactory explanation for the significance of the choice of the word Yosemite or why the whites applied it to the inhabitants of Ahwahnee, the singular fact may give added uniqueness to one of the most unique valleys in the world.

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Entrance to lower Indian Cave

**NATURALIST STAFF FOR 1936**

(M. E. Beatty, Park Naturalist)

As another summer rolls around, the Yosemite naturalist staff is making preparations for a busy season of guided trips, lectures and other public contact work. During the three summer months the regular staff consisting of C. A. Harwell, Park Naturalist; M. E. Beatty, assistant Park Naturalist, and J. E. Cole, Museum Preparator, will be augmented by 11 temporary ranger naturalists in order to carry on the extensive naturalist program.

Ranger-naturalist Enid Michael will again be in charge of the museum wildflower garden and will conduct daily flower walks through the garden as in past years.

Ranger-naturalist Clifford Shirley will be on hand to greet visitors at the Mariposa Grove branch museum. Short nature walks and evening campfire programs will also be offered in the Grove.

Friends of Carl Sharsmith will be glad to hear that he will again handle the Tuolumne Meadows district, offering half-day and all-day hikes to the various peaks, lakes and glaciers of the high Sierra region.

Ranger-naturalists Ashcraft, Godwin and Perry will again be assigned to the Yosemite Valley museum where they will assist in conducting the heavy schedule of guided trips and lectures.

Five new men will join the staff this year to replace former natur-

alists who are unable to return. Dr. E. L. Lucas will be stationed at Glacier Point replacing Herbert Anderson, who is attending a university summer session. Walter Heil will be in charge of the Junior Nature School in the position formerly held by Reynold E. Carlson. Mr. Carlson is also attending summer session to complete his requirements for a Master's Degree. Other new staff members include Robert Johnston, Ernest Payne and M. D. Bryant, who will be assigned to Valley floor stations.

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**ADDITIONAL NOTES ON THE STABLE TREE**

(By GRANVILLE ASHCRAFT,  
Ranger-Naturalist)

Although the official death of the famous Stable Tree of the Mariposa Grove of Big Trees occurred when it fell on August 28, 1934, in a strict sense life has not as yet completely left this old tree. Many years ago before the discovery of the grove this tree had been badly burned on its south side. The fire ate into the heart, forming a semi-circular cavern. In the early days of stage travel in the Sierra, managers were built in this space and thus afforded a shelter for the horses.

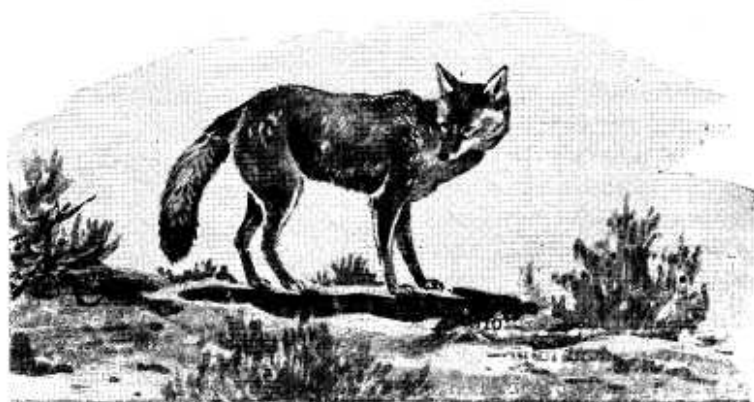
On the morning of the crash there was no wind, however three days previous a severe blow occurred generally throughout the district. Undoubtedly the tree was rocked and weakened at this time. In the



fall the trunk separated into three sections, all the major limbs were snapped off and the roots were completely severed from the ground. Regardless of this condition new foliage continues to be produced along the upper extremities of the trunk. During the summer of 1935, just one year after the fall, one of the largest of the severed branches

produced a surprising amount of new growth. On inspection of the tree about May 20, 1936, only a slight decrease was evident in this continued output of foliage.

In the future it will be interesting to follow the destiny of this lingering spark of life that so reflects the hardy vitality of our *Sequoia gigantea*.



#### COYOTES SPEND WINTER IN HIGH COUNTRY

That coyotes somehow manage to exist in areas of deep snowfall is evidenced by the presence of at least one full-grown individual at Tuolumne Meadows during the winter of 1935-36. This coyote was observed from the porch of the Tuolumne Meadows Ranger Station by Cal Willette, Arthur Holmes and the writer on the afternoons of March 28 and 29. The calls of at least one coyote were heard early in the

morning of March 30 in the same vicinity.

Snow measurements taken in the Meadows at that time showed an average depth of 63 inches of well packed snow. The coyote was seen in the snow in the mornings and evenings when the snow had a crust strong enough to support its weight. It showed considerable curiosity when observing the men, but always kept a respectful distance away.—Emil Ernst, Assistant Forester.



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Dan Anderson