

A principal leader of the Sierra Club from the beginning of the century until his death on November 9, Will Colby accumulated a wealth of Sierra experience which a well-known one-time packer had just begun to tap.

Some High Sierra Recollections by William E. Colby

By NORMAN B. LIVERMORE, JR.

WHAT CAN ONE say when a great leader is gone? Particularly such a leader as William E. Colby? The universal response has elements of too little and too late in it. We get to know too little of the man, his hopes, his dreams, and inspirations. Too late do we think of doing something about it, collecting, preserving and distilling for future generations the essence of the man's greatness and leadership.

Though I, like most of us, am guilty of the usual dereliction, I did have the good fortune of talking to Will Colby last July about some of his High Trip and High Sierra reminiscences. I had, of course, heard of him long before I was privileged to know him. In my very first summer in the high country, back in 1929, the names Colby Pass, Colby Meadow, Colby Lake, Colby Mountain connoted the very quintessence of the spirit of those high mountain fortresses that I as a young packer longed to know. Then in the years when I was a Sierra Club director and on the Outing Committee, my acquaintance with him made me want to know him better and to learn more of his recollections of John Muir and the High Sierra he knew and loved so well.

The talk I had with him was much too brief. I had promised myself to study old Sierra Club Bulletins so that I could ask specific questions about Sierra trips of long ago. I was too late as well; what I wanted to do is less than half done. But I did get the thrill of an inspirational interview and was amazed at the quick answers and vivid recollections he gave at the age of 89.

While it would take up far more space than we have to record the full interview, the following selected excerpts will, I hope, give some of its flavor.

Recollections of John Muir

LIVERMORE: First, Mr. Colby, I am interested in John Muir's relationship with people. We know about his writings and that he founded the Sierra Club, and so on; but I have heard that he wasn't interested in relations with people. I am thinking, for instance, of such things as talking at a campfire or conviviality in general. Would you care to say anything about this?

COLBY: John Muir was very fine in his relationship to people, especially people on the Outings. He was talking to them all the time and discussing his favorite subjects—glaciation in the Sierra, everything connected with the

out-of-doors. Instead of being distant, I would say that he was very friendly and easily approached.

He went on four outings. Three of them were our High Trips and one was the first outing in Tuolumne Meadows. On the three High Trips he camped with me. I picked out his campsite always, which was alongside of mine, so I was able to observe him and his relationship with the members of the party. I do not know of anybody who was more easily approached and who responded more easily to the talk and wishes of the members.

Q. About how long did you know him?

A. I first met John Muir in 1900 when I was elected Secretary of the Club and he came down as President to preside at the first meeting. I met him, of course, repeatedly on his trips to San Francisco as President. I, as Secretary, had a great many things in common with him, so he made my office his place of call. He would come to my office, hang his overcoat there, go out and do his business, which was mainly ordering groceries for his home in Alhambra Valley, and then he would come back to the office. We would usually get William Keith, who was a boon companion of John Muir's, and go out to lunch together.

Q. I am thinking specifically of the Hetch Hetchy fight. In the opinion of some the tragic loss of that fight and the sadness over it led to John Muir's death. Is that correct?

A. I am quite sure that it hastened his death. I think that if the Hetch Hetchy fight had not been lost that he might have lived longer.

Q. I have just read that Congressman Kent, who gave Muir Woods as a national monument, did not agree with John Muir; he was in favor of the Raker Act.

A. I think Congressman Kent early favored the Raker Act in spite of the fact that most of his tendencies were toward conservation. In that one respect the San Francisco water supply was paramount in his mind.

Q. One other question on Hetch Hetchy. I remember my father and others saying that in many ways they thought it was more spectacular, more beautiful, more of a jewel perhaps than Yosemite itself. Would you agree?

A. Hetch Hetchy had certain aspects which made it more impressive. It was very much smaller than Yosemite. The walls were not as high and of course it didn't have as many great falls, but the fact that it was more compact—much smaller—made it in many ways more impressive.

High Trips and "The Colby Mile"

Q. The first High Trip you led was *the* very first one?

A. Yes, it was in 1901, the year after I had become Secretary. John Muir was very anxious that the Sierra Club should run trips into the Sierra so that members of the club would appreciate what it was that he was trying to save and I cooperated with him—for all the years from 1900 to the time of his death, Christmas Eve, 1914.

Q. What was the last High Trip that you were actively engaged in?

A. I think it was around 1930.

Q. Could you tell us a little bit about the origin of the phrase "The Colby Mile"?

A. The members of the parties we headed in the Sierra were always worried about the distance they had to walk to get from one camp to another. Usually I tried to minimize this. So it got to be common repute that my miles were very much longer than the ordinary mile. That is the way the "Colby Mile" was always supposed to be a great deal longer than the regular mile.

Q. About the size of the trips, Mr. Colby, could you briefly recall the pattern of the size?

A. The first trip was around 50 people. The second trip was into the Kings River Canyon and Joe LeConte helped run that trip. It was attended by over 200 people and the trips averaged after that a little over 200 . . . there'd be 200 regular members of the party and sometimes it would run up to 250 . . . and one year to 275, including the packers and all the commissary and extra help. But the members themselves averaged around 200.

Q. Would you care to name four or five of your favorite, more beautiful High Sierra wilderness camps, or is this an impossible question?

A. Well, I would have difficulty in differentiating, but one of my favorite camps was in the middle fork of the Kings River where you would look up the canyon at the mountains on the crest of the Sierra, very impressive from that standpoint.

Q. You are thinking of the upper Middle Fork, perhaps around Grouse Meadow or Simpson Meadow?

A. From Simpson Meadow up to the head of the canyon.

Q. From Simpson Meadow on up past the Punch Bowl, Little Pete, and Grouse Meadow?

A. Exactly.

Q. Is that completely superlative in your mind or would you care to name two or three or four other favorite areas of yours in the high country?

A. I feel that the Middle Fork of the Kings, with Mount Woodworth and the high peaks at the head of the canyon there, was the acme of campsites. Of course, Tuolumne Meadows was always a favorite place because the club owned the property at the Soda Springs and

many short trips could be taken from there. The Kern River Canyon was also quite a favorite spot. That canyon was so spectacular, with its waterfalls and the scenery surrounding it, with Mount Whitney at the headwaters, that it was also a favorite campsite.

After World War I—A Packers' Strike

Q. Do you recall any packing incidents which you might say might border on insurrection?

A. We had one one year, the year following the first World War, when the packers practically went on a strike and we had to draw on anybody who was familiar with packing to help out. A number of members of the party who had more or less experience with packing pitched in and did the packing. For a while there I remember we ran the pack train without any regular packers.

Q. Would that mean the packers just got on their horses and left the party and quit?

A. Yes, that was it. They just quit entirely and we didn't have any with us.

Q. Whose stock was left? Was that Charlie or Allie Robinson's?

A. The pack stock belonged to the Robinsons and, of course, they didn't participate in the strike.

Q. Every single one of their packers walked off?

A. Yes, practically all of the packers went on a strike.

Q. What was their main complaint? Was it wages, food, or was the weather bad, or were they just a bum batch of packers?

A. They were just restless, the way most of the world was after the war, and just took it out in this manner.

Construction of the John Muir Trail

Q. How about the history of the John Muir Trail? You were Chairman of the State Park Commission at the time that it was named and the \$50,000 was voted for it by the State Legislature?

A. No, I don't think I was Chairman at that time. The John Muir Trail came about through a fellow who was a member of the outing party. He went on several trips, as I remember it, and came from Los Angeles. He had a very considerable political standing and he suggested that we spend more money on trail work in the High Sierra. It was his standing as a politician that brought this about. He had great influence with Hiram Johnson. Johnson was Governor at the time and so he persuaded Johnson to sign the bill which appropriated a certain amount of money for the construction of the trail, which later on I suggested be called the John Muir Trail. After we had adopted resolutions in the Sierra Club favoring the spending of this money, John Muir died. When I drew the bill—it was introduced in the Legislature for the spending of this money—it seemed

to me that nothing could be more appropriate than to call it the John Muir Trail.

Q. Do you recall this man's name? You stated he was a great help with Governor Hiram Johnson.

A. Meyer Lissner.

Paying a Packer with Gold

Q. Getting back to packers. Your son Henry reminded me that there was one trip when the packers insisted that you pay them in gold coin.

A. That was in 1904. The head packer and the man who furnished the animals came from Tuolumne, at the end of a little railroad logging road that went up from the valley into the Sierra. We arranged with the logging company to make up a special train and haul in Pullmans, which were occupied by the party on the return to San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Q. And you had trouble in relation to pay?

A. The packer knew that he owed considerable money around Tuolumne and that his money would be attached if he were paid by check. He insisted that he be paid in gold and I had the gold shipped up from San Francisco. It arrived at the express office in Tuolumne and I got it out after the party came back from the High Trip. We had our dinner there before the Pullman train started out. I had this gold in a bag and had difficulty finding the packer who was entitled to it.

Q. He vanished or was in a bar or something?

A. He was in a bar. When I got over to the bar he was having a fight with his uncle. They were finally separated and calmed down. The man who was following him up—the man who really put up the money and arranged for the pack train—he was about as worried as anybody. He managed to get this packer off by himself and calmed down. We went over to the livery stable and I had the gold piled up on the desk. The head packer, who was drunk, lurched over and hit the gold and it fell all over the place. The train was blowing the whistle to get me to come down. They were very anxious to get started off on the way home. So I left him there with the gold all over the floor while I took refuge in the train.

Q. Were these \$5 gold pieces mainly or \$2.50 or \$20?

A. All \$20 gold pieces.

Q. Did you get him to sign a chit or something so that you were not involved in the fighting over the gold?

A. No, I would be able to testify that I delivered that amount of gold and I was willing to let it go at that.

Muir Hut and Mountain Supply Points

Q. I have a rather distinct recollection that in about 1941, when I first became a Sierra Club director, we used to have friendly debates in and out of Sierra Club Board meetings on what might be called the degree of purity of use of the high mountains. I believe you stated at that

time that though you had had 30 years of High Tripping and liked the unspoiled wilderness as much as the next man, you were not necessarily against some form of crude shelter—you might even prefer such a thing, with the stipulation that there be no mechanical improvements.

A. Well, I don't know about that . . . I don't remember that part of it; but I do remember that I advocated the building of the John Muir Hut on Muir Pass. Was that Muir Pass?

Q. Yes, it was on Muir Pass, right on the very summit.

A. I got the idea before John Muir's death, while we were planning to have the trail built and named for John Muir. George Frederick Schwartz was a member of the club and very devoted to John Muir and he wanted to do something for John Muir and for the John Muir Trail. His idea was to give some money to be used in building the trail. I told him that would be a very poor memorial because the money would just be lost with the rest of the funds used for the building of the trail and there would be nothing definite to show for it. So I suggested to him that a hut be built on Muir Pass where people might take refuge in case of a storm or stay overnight and make it easier for them to climb the mountains around there. He readily accepted the idea. He told me to go ahead with it, so I drew plans from a *National Geographic Magazine* which contained illustrations of the stone huts that were built down at the toe of Italy, where the only building material was stone. I copied one of them, drew a general design for a stone hut, and submitted it to Walter Huber, I think it was. No, it was Mark Whiting, who was in the office of Maybeck; and I drew a design for a stone building and submitted it to them and they put in the architectural details, and it was from that that the Muir Hut was constructed.

Q. Was the financing partly by this man Schwartz, partly by the Sierra Club, or did the Forest Service put up the funds? Do you recall?

A. The financing was done entirely by George Frederick Schwartz—and his estate, because he died before the hut was completed and his estate went on and put up the necessary money to complete it. But the Forest Service, because this was in the National Forest at the time, contributed help in supervising the construction [1930].

Q. Was there any talk at that time or after in your experience over the possible placement of other huts along the John Muir Trail?

A. No, not that I recall. There was considerable discussion of this in the late thirties by club directors, particularly by Walter Starr. The general feeling was that the Sierra, being gentler than the Cascades, Rockies, or Appalachians, could probably accommodate travelers well enough without such aids. Their function in extending the season was not fully explored.—Ed.]

Q. One thought that has been expressed fairly recently

is that in certain areas, if there were huts of this or a similar type, it might make possible wider use of the high country by allowing trips say in May and June and in October. Do you have any particular thoughts on this?

A. I should say that a hut strategically placed and concealed from the general view would not be objectionable under such circumstances. I imagine some method will have to be adopted of getting supplies into the high country and distributing them around among those who want to visit the High Sierra.

Q. By supplies, are you thinking perhaps of depots or a crude type of hut where people might obtain provisions?

A. Something on that order, where the country would be least cluttered up with the places where provisions could be obtained.

Grazing and Meadows

Q. On grazing, in recent years there has been an increasing problem. Would you care to make any remarks through your recollections of those 30 years as to the condition of the meadows in the High Country?

A. The grazing always presented a great problem because it affected other people who came into the mountains and who charged the Sierra Club with depleting the meadows and making it difficult to find feed for those who came after them. The Sierra Club was looked upon as a band of locusts that would go through the country and get rid of the feed and make it difficult for others to come in. I always tried to offset this by arguing that the number of people that enjoyed the mountains through the Sierra Club was so large that it more than made up for the fact that the Sierra Club pack trains did eat up a great deal of the grass and other materials the stock lived on. It was always a problem and always will be. [It still is, years after the impact of the club's large trips has been impressively curtailed (three times as many people served per mule/day of grass) and the threat to untraveled wilderness drastically increased (2 per cent of the remaining big national forest wilderness was being lost per year in 1926, and more than 6 per cent in 1960).—Ed.]

Q. Can you think of major changes in specific meadows, say Funston Meadow on the Kern or Simpson Meadow on the Middle Fork of the Kings, or Colby Meadow? Would you say that in your own observation you could note specific declines in the quality of these meadows?

A. No, I don't recall that there was any such decline. You could always observe, of course, after a big party had been through that the feed for the animals was less available, and I have noted that there is a tendency for tree growth to come up in some of the meadows and obliterate the meadows.

Q. But you can't in your experience think of major invasions like this in any of the better known meadows?

A. No, it always has varied, I think, with the place.

High Trip Rain and Snow

Q. I have been particularly fortunate in having relatively few rainy nights in the High Sierra on the good many hundreds I have camped out. Did you notice any particular trend during your thirty years of High Trips?

A. I remember that in the earlier days I always predicted that if we had rain that it would not come at night, and it would not usually last more than a three-day period. But then I found to my great regret that I had to change my mind because on the Middle Fork of the Kings River one year we had eleven days of rain.

Q. Eleven consecutive days?

A. Consecutive days and some nights. Not always at night but during that eleven-day period we had many nights when it rained.

Q. You must have had a pretty bedraggled bunch.

A. It was a very tough experience for all of us. And I always felt under the greatest obligation to Clair S. Tappaan because he had the greatest faculty for reviving spirits and keeping people jollied so that they more or less overlooked these hardships.

Q. To overcome eleven days of downpour it certainly takes a genius. How about snow, Mr. Colby? We have all experienced serious snow troubles occasionally, even changing itineraries of trips. Do you recall any particular snow problems during your thirty High Trips?

A. No, I cannot recall any heavy snowstorms on any of the trips. Sometimes it would snow a little, but it would be one of those fugitive storms you meet occasionally.

Q. I was thinking less of snowstorms than snow on passes—snow banks or snow drifts.

A. Snow on the passes did give us a great deal of trouble and I usually organized a group of hardy individuals—in fact, almost everybody participated—and I remember in one case where we went over a pass and a trail was cut largely with tin cups.

* * *

There have been and there will be other leaders and trips, other songs and campfires, other billycan tea parties and club-cup sherbets, other happy memories of pass and trail. But there will never be another Will Colby. As long as there are mountain trips to be led, wild streams to travel and cross, mountain lakes and meadows to beckon, trails to tread and unspoiled nature to explore, Sierra Club members and the many other thousands his leadership has touched and inspired will revere his name. May "something lost beyond the ranges" still be a clarion call for future wilderness leaders; may the rest of us remember well what he stood for; and may the mountain trails be trod by future generations in essentially the same way they were on that memorable first High Trip he started us on sixty-four years ago!