

## Women in the Mountains

The Sierra Club, launched in the Victorian age, showed no hesitancy to the participation of women in its outdoor life. The first outing in 1901 was definitely mixed company. Whether that situation was automatic from the beginning of the club in 1892 was not stated in the bulletins. (Many club records were lost in the 1906 earthquake.) That departure from the norm by a major organization, as well as the motives of its founding, must have been a historic "first." In retrospect, it seems clear that that liberal approach went far in giving the club the broad, strong base which led to its successes.

Inasmuch as women have played a meaningful role in the club's outing

programs from their beginning, we look back to Edward Parsons' comments of 1902.

"The climb of Dana was a tedious one [Yosemite, 1901] There was but little snow on its crest, and the way over the large loose, broken rocks was wearisome, but the thrill of conquest and the fascinating features of mountain scenery amply repaid the trampers. Nearly all of the women in this party were Berkeley or Stanford girls, and their vigor and endurance were a revelation to all of us, demonstrating as they did that health and vigor go with college life. At no time during the outing did the college women give out or find fault, nor did they delay or prove a drag on the progress of the excursion. One confirmed mountaineer said that it was the first time he had ever been camping with women, and that he had started in with serious misgivings, but after this experience he would never go to the mountains again without the added pleasure of the companionship of women."

And to give a further sense of the showing of women in the Sierra in those early days, here is an account by Marion Randall Parsons (1878-1953) of the 1903 Sierra Club outing, as taken from *The Californians* magazine, January/February 1988 edition.

"Skirts were short! Some a good fifteen inches from the ground. Others made up in width what they lacked in proper 1903 length—"divided skirts" these, ancestors of the culotte, made of stiff denim and weighing a good five pounds. Gertrude Boyle wore one, atop of it a flapping, pin-striped Chinaman's coat and a wide Mexican hat. When she breezed past one on the trail with her long stride she suggested a ship in full sail. Shirtwaists, however, were the usual wear, checked gingham or blue chambray on the trail, at the campfire, men's blue flannel shirts. Lena Redington's was the glaring exception. Hers was fireman's red. Sweaters already, in two preceding outings, had learned the trick of entwining themselves about waists. Tin cups hung from belts. The cult of the bandana, though still in the initial blue-or-red cotton stage, was going strong. The most startling costume was also the most practical. Adelaide Hanscom appeared booted to the knee, and skirtless, if you please! Her brown corduroy bloomers, neatly tucked into boot tops, coyly, an



*Dressed for the mountains in Mineral King, 1903 Marion Parsons, center and friends framed in branches of white fir with their heavy skirts and bandanas. This was the costume for Mount Whitney but, in later outings, knickerbockers came into vogue—but skirts were still the proper attire in camp. (COURTESY BANCROFT LIBRARY OLLIN BLUE)*

inch or two higher, disappeared under the hem of an elongated Russian blouse. In exculpation the whisper passed that she, like Gertrude, was “very artistic.”

In 1931, Marion Parsons again looked back at the 1903 outing in the pages of the Sierra Club Bulletin. Marion’s keen insight and literary skill are apparent.

“I find the story of the twenty-eighth outing coming to mind most readily in terms of comparison. Considering the fact that my first outing, the club’s third, was so very far from perfect that perhaps only Mr Colby’s determination not to ‘quit on a failure’ saved it from being the last, it is especially pleasant to record that this year mountaineering hazard, the crowd, the packers, the commissary boys and girls, the cook, and the weather all conspired to make the month a perfect one in every way. It is pleasant, too, to reflect that while in 1903 a score of dunnageless Saint Laurences, grilling night-long beside a camp-fire, was no unusual sight, in 1929 not once did even a recreant member of the ‘aviation corps’ miss the luxury of his six-cylinder bed (air mattress). Further to recall a certain, far in the past, luncheon of dried apples and drier crackers for the purpose of contrasting it with the salad and chocolate cake with which Dan Tachet regaled us when we took a day off and lunched in camp

“And the clothes! Compare my first costume and its heavy denim skirt ‘not many inches from the knees’—below that member of course understood—with the ‘shorties’ and the ‘sun-backs’ of that more progressive element amongst us belligerently christened by certain conservatives the ‘nudes’! Over the costume question, indeed, schism almost rent the camp. To wear’em or to bare’em became the subject of a hotter contention than [Alfred E.] Smith versus [Herbert] Hoover or Wet versus Dry [prohibition]. And even to the conciliatory observation overheard among the veterans when the ferment had begun to subside: ‘After all, when you remember what was said of us barely twenty years ago when we wore knickerbockers to knapsack down the Tuolumne’ was appended acrid foreboding regarding the costume of twenty years hence.”

And Mrs. Parsons’ recollections continue:

“The lovely lake that lay closest under the divide was the goal of Daisy Huber’s side-trip. Unfortunately for us knapsackers without a pack, who had

anticipated sunset and moonrise in a high alpine camp, the mule authorities quite justifiably decided not to risk the life or limb of mules on the steep slope leading out of the Second Recess. Most of us bowed to the inevitable and marched down the slope again, to seek sleeping-bags in the Second Recess, all of two miles from the main camp. But a small rebel element, declining to be deprived of their alpine adventure, remained on the heights, bedless, and reduced to the ardent pursuit of bullfrogs to eke out the remnants of lunch. I'd as soon have eaten angleworms, myself! said one of the climbers later, who had been a witness to but not a partaker of the frogs'-legs feast. But not one of the moonlight enthusiasts could be brought to admit that anything had been lacking in either bed or board.

"We in the lower camp, meanwhile, had been honored by a visit from the sheep-herder whose great flock we had seen—and deplored!—earlier in the day, in the upper reaches of Mills Creek. He was a Basque, he told us, and he had been in this country for some eleven years. A good part of this period, one may assume, had been spent after the manner of sheepmen in mountain solitudes. At least, he had never seen the likes of us before—so his lively curiosity about our food and equipment betrayed. Not at all an offensive curiosity; on the contrary, his manner had the courtesy and gentle naivete that the European peasant so quickly loses, ordinarily, when he comes to America. This young fellow, too, differed so far from most Sierra Nevada sheepmen that he was willing and even anxious to talk.

"The encounter with this friendly herder moved me to somewhat regretful consideration of the human contacts, so frequent in Europe's mountain regions, which the Sierra, in these days, so signally lacks. For since Indian and trapper and miner, and even derelict old hermits like Lembert and his kind, have passed into history, there remains no group of men indigenous, so to speak, to the Sierra soil. Rangers and trailmen, engineers, construction gangs, agents of power companies these, indeed, one meets with increasingly. But they mark the encroachments of civilization on the wilderness, while the men of old Lembert's type and day, were wilderness men, seeking refuge from cities among the last sanctuaries of the pioneers. Marking especially the sordid

## **Edward and Marion Parsons Parsons Timetable**

1900 Photographer Edward Parsons visited Yosemite Valley and joined the Sierra Club

1901 He was photographer for the first outing and served on the outing committee.

1902. Marion Randall made the acquaintance of Wanda Muir, elder daughter of John Muir She joined the Sierra Club

1903 Edward met Marion on her first club outing.

1907 They were married

1911 Marion was appointed to the editorial board Edward assisted Muir and Colby in the Hetch Hetchy battle.

1914 Edward died and Marion replaced him on the board of directors

1931 Marion reviewed club activities from a woman's viewpoint. She edited the papers of Muir's nine excursions to Alaska.

changes that the last eight years have brought about in the then virgin country around Shadow Lake, one may be forgiven, perhaps, a faint nostalgic reaction toward that earlier menace to the mountains, the always picturesque Sierra sheepman and his flocks."

Finally, Mrs. Parsons pays tribute to Will Colby

"We did not know our destination until the very moment of our start. Two hundred strong, largest perhaps of all the side-trip parties that ever have set forth under his leadership, we left our camp in Cold Canyon early on the morning of August 4th to follow him through hemlock aisles, across yellowing meadows, along languid streams, up rocky slopes aromatic with pennyroyal, along lake shores, up mountain crags—a peerless day of swimming in Virginia and Mattie lakes and basking on sun-warmed rocks and nooning in nests of heather—a peerless day, and yet for many of us rather a melancholy day, too

"For we cannot bear to think that the old days may be passing! Rebelliously we told each other so over and over again that day, we, the old-timers, who have followed Mr Colby for a quarter of a century or more. Yet—what are we going to do about it? Time has not stood still with any of us, alas!"