

The Environmental Movement

If the Mineral King decision could have been made in Tulare County, the process would have been quite simple, but it appears that Tulare County collectively had only peripheral influence. The hard choices were debated in San Francisco and Washington, and in editorials in the *New York Times*. The national environmental movement in which the issue was debated was, in effect, a national plebiscite which amounted to a confrontation between the “light-headed” bird watchers and the “hard-headed” business orientation of this country. In order for reorientation to happen, a large segment of the population needed to be instructed in a new concept. A shift in public policy needed strong grass roots support. The formerly elitist conservation groups had to gain money and strength and come out and fight in the street.

The first historic step in the new direction was the National Wilderness Act of 1964. That was followed in April 1970 by National Earth Day and the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency. These were giant steps forward, but they hadn't happened in a vacuum. In January 1969, one of the offshore oil wells near Santa Barbara exploded and gradually covered the channel between there and Santa Cruz Island with oil. In no place could an environmental disaster have been more highly visible. Santa Barbara, more than any other American city, held environmental concerns sacred—a tradition which had continued for a century.

Soon a Senate sub-committee held hearings in the courthouse with many people giving testimony. Those hearings, which I attended, were a major event and very instructive in political procedure. The people of Santa Barbara made a strong protest against the drilling, which they had opposed in the first place. They made scarcely a dent against the oil industry but, following Earth Day, the television networks took up the cause and made daily presentations on environmental issues. The *cause celebre* was the oil spill, but the most tangible results to follow were in the formation of wilderness areas and the Mineral King decision. Then and now the decision at Mineral King appears as an event of national historical significance. Horace Albright's concerns of 1920 were attended to fifty-eight years later.

Bill Diesman was the resident forest ranger at Mineral King during the turbulent 1970s. He described the second "rush" at Mineral King, which began in the late sixties with an invasion of environmentally conscious backpackers. He also saw a concurrent decline in the number of horse groups.

About 1970 both Disney and the forest service were eliminating the old cabins. Those that had been damaged in the winter of 1968-69, and other abandoned shacks, were hazardous and were inviting to the hippies who were then present.

That spring, 1970, the forest service offered the butcher shop to the historical society to be moved to make room for a needed parking lot. When no response was received, the building was demolished. Too late, the historical society expressed interest.

The loss of the butcher shop was cause for sadness in Mineral King. In spite of a small protest group, the building was eliminated. It was the oldest and most historic building there and the most soundly constructed, with double floor and walls.

In 1978, when the dust had settled, Mineral King Valley was removed from the domain of the forest service and transferred to Sequoia National Park. That ended a protracted effort to establish skiing, but it fulfilled a park commitment that had existed since the park was founded in 1890. The resort plan, which had inspired many people, was finally determined to be adverse to greater goals.