

Sierra Trails

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The trail routes into and across the Sierra Nevada found by early American pioneers were those which had long been used by Indians. The mountains had not been explored or entered by the Californians living near the coast during the earlier period of Spanish and Mexican occupation. These Indian trails evidently afforded means for crossing the mountains for the purpose of trading between tribes living east and west of the range, and perhaps for the less peaceful purpose of raids by the more warlike Indians of the eastern side.

To cross the northern part of the High Sierra region, the Mono Trail ascended the western slope of the mountains from Mariposa via Wawona and Alder Creek to the meadows of Bridalveil Creek, where the trail forked. A branch descended to Yosemite Valley via Inspiration Point. The Mono Trail descended to Mono Meadow, crossed Illilouette Creek and ascended to Starr Ring Meadow, where it turned back at the rim of Little Yosemite to descend to the Merced River, which it crossed about one mile above Nevada Fall. From there to Tuolumne Meadows the trail followed the present route of the Sunrise and Soda Springs Trail (the John Muir Trail route from Yosemite to Tuolumne Meadows). The old Indian trail then ascended the Dana Fork of the Tuolumne River to cross over (northern) Mono Pass south of Mount Gibbs and descended Bloody Canyon to Mono Lake, in the land of the Mono Tribe of Indians.

Owens Valley was the home of Piute Indians. They used (southern) Mono Pass, Piute Pass and Kearsarge Pass to cross the range on the routes of the present trails.

While the early mining prospectors used and improved these trails, and built a few others, it was the sheep and cattle men who were responsible for much of the trail system of the Sierra Nevada, especially on its western slope. Excepting parts of the John Muir Trail, the High Sierra Trail, and some laterals which have been improved or relocated, most of the Sierra trails just happened—in moving livestock to and from summer ranges in high mountain meadows.

In Yosemite National Park, especially in the Tuolumne River watershed, United States Cavalry troops cleared and improved many of the cattle trails by use, and located some new trails, while on patrol duty in protecting Yosemite before the National Park Service came into being.

Soon after organization of the Sierra Club in 1892, Theodore S. Solomons conceived the idea of a trail along the backbone of the High Sierra, keeping as near to the crest as possible. As already noted, the existing trails crossed the range. Rugged canyons and passes rendered a trail along the range difficult. From 1892 to 1897 Solomons with other members of the Sierra Club made extended trips of exploration, principally in the upper branches of the San Joaquin River and the Merced.

In 1898 Joseph N. LeConte took up the quest for a High Sierra trail route. For many years thereafter, assisted by a few other members of the Sierra Club, he explored the canyons and the passes of the Kings and the Kern, and climbed many of the peaks along the crest.

In 1914 a committee of its members was appointed by the Sierra Club to enlist the help and cooperation of the State of California in the construction of a High Sierra Trail along the range. This committee was composed

of Meyer Lissner (chairman), Walter L. Huber, David P. Barrows, Vernon L. Kellogg, and Clair S. Tappaan. Soon thereafter the President of the Sierra Club, John Muir, died, and it was decided to name the proposed trail "The John Muir Trail" as a fitting memorial. As a result of the efforts of the committee the California state legislature appropriated \$10,000 to finance work on the trail in 1915.

The responsibility of selecting the route and spending the funds was given to the State Engineer, Wilbur F. McClure. Basing his decision on the information obtained by the many explorations of the past twenty years, principally by members of the Sierra Club, as well as on observations of his own made in the field, McClure selected the route now followed by the completed trail as the official route of the John Muir Trail from Yosemite Valley to Mount Whitney. To solve the problems of trail construction he wisely secured the cooperation of the Forest Service and arranged to have actual trail construction done under the management and supervision of its officers. This the men of the Forest Service accomplished through the years, faithfully and efficiently, with the meager funds at their disposal for such a large undertaking. Additional appropriations of \$10,000 were made by the legislature in each of the years 1917, 1925, 1927, and 1929 as the result of Sierra Club efforts. Here ended the era of state assistance in the building of the John Muir Trail.

To complete the trail on its official route there now remained two sections to be constructed over difficult passes. One of them, from the Kings to the Kern over Foresters Pass, was completed in 1932 by the National Park Service on the Kern River side of the divide and by the Forest Service on the Kings River side. The last section, up Palisade Creek et' the headwaters of Middle Fork of Kings River and over Mather Pass to the headwaters of the South Fork of Kings River, was completed in 1938 by the Forest Service as the result of an appeal made to Regional Forester S. B. Show by the High Sierra Trails committee of the Sierra Club, through its chairman. Forest Supervisors Booth, Benedict, and Elliott, of the Inyo, Sierra, and Sequoia national forests, cooperated to accomplish this work. Shortly thereafter the region containing this section of the trail was transferred to the jurisdiction of the National Park Service by the creation of Kings Canyon National Park. Thus the John Muir Trail finally came to be, some forty years after it was conceived.

Another important trail to render the high mountain regions of the Kern and the Kaweah accessible, was built in 1930-1931 by the National Park Service in Sequoia National Park under the supervision of Superintendent John R. White. Known as the High Sierra Trail, it starts at Crescent Meadow in Giant Forest, crosses the Kern-Kaweah divide to Kern River and meets the John Muir Trail on Wallace Creek tributary.

The trails of the High Sierra are now the responsibility of the National Park Service and the Forest Service. The work to be done each year on maintenance is most important. Both services have always lacked sufficient funds, earmarked in their budgets for trail maintenance, to do the job of keeping the trails decently passable. The Sierra Club wishes to cooperate with the services by making efforts to have the needed funds made available, and by reporting where it finds trail repairs to be most necessary. Individuals who travel on the trails can help in this effort by noting where trails are washed out, blocked by fallen trees, or otherwise badly in need of repair, while out on their summer trips, and on their return reporting the information to the Sierra Club. The club can then consolidate the reports received and convey the information gathered to the Forest Service and the National Park Service for their attention.

Naturally, the standards of trails in the Sierra trail system differ greatly and consideration must be given to their origin as described. On some of the main routes of travel, especially where trails have been made or relocated by the Park Service or Forest Service, standards are generally fairly good, but on many laterals and secondary trails such standards should not be expected. Parties traveling over the trails can help to maintain them by staying on the trail and not making short cuts, especially on switchbacks. Few realize the harm done

by this practice. Maintenance can also be greatly helped by removing obstacles, if possible, instead of going around them with animals.

One of the original purposes of the club was to render mountain regions accessible. The club feels that this purpose has now been accomplished; that no more roads should be constructed in the wilderness area of the High Sierra extending from Yosemite National Park to Walker Pass; and that, with very few possible exceptions, no more trails should be constructed. To future generations of mountaineers should be left the pleasure, thrill, and experience of pioneering and finding their own routes to the many high mountain basins, lakes, and peaks which abound in this great wilderness.

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