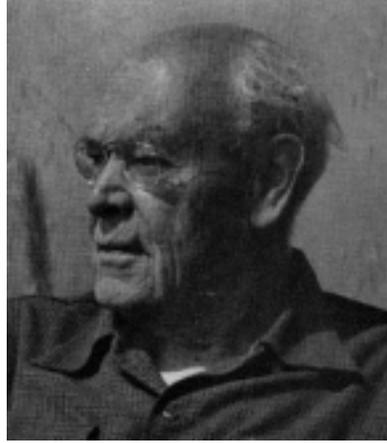


The Story of the Sierra Club

By William Colby

The earlier history of the Sierra Club is most fittingly told by William E. Colby, the man who with unfailing devotion served the club for more than half a century. Forty-nine years as a director, forty-four as secretary, thirty-six as chairman of the Outing Committee, nine on the California State Park Commission, Will Colby set a record of volunteer service which would be hard to equal. A portion of this history is his account, printed largely as the Sierra Club Handbook in 1947.



Club is most fittingly told by with unfailing devotion served the century. Forty-nine years as a as chairman of the Outing Park Commission, Will Colby set a be hard to equal. A portion of this he wrote it for the first edition of

The great Range of Light noted on the not only one of the most inspiring and world but has among its manifold

trees, the grandest forests in the world, and many incomparable Yosemite-like canyons. It was inevitable that some group of people who held scenes like these in high esteem would become associated in the common cause of protecting the irreplaceable values of the Sierra from ravages of the greed which unfortunately accompanies the advance of civilization. The Sierra Club, born of such a group, assumed this difficult task, and for more than half a century has been fighting the good fight to preserve a priceless heritage of scenic beauty in the Sierra and other American mountain regions as well.

It was a young Scotsman, John Muir, who grew up in the wilderness frontier of Wisconsin and came to California in 1868, who early recognized the importance of saving some of the primitive grandeur he found in California in such abundance. This is especially remarkable when we recall that he began preaching for the wilderness while the West was still in its pioneer days—while forests and rugged scenery were to the pioneers, little more than a formidable, sometimes hazardous barricade. He had vision.

Muir began to earn his living in California by tending sheep near Merced, and accompanied a large flock into the Tuolumne Meadows in 1869. Ardent lover of flowers and trees that he was, he noted the destructive effects of those "hoofed locusts" on the wild gardens and forests through which they passed. In 1889 he took Robert Underwood Johnson, one of the editors of *Century Magazine*, up into this High Sierra region, and around a campfire in the Tuolumne Meadows, they resolved to remedy this devastation. Muir wrote descriptive articles for the *Century Magazine*, calling attention to the necessity for protective legislation. Johnson, who had a wide congressional acquaintance, had a bill introduced in Congress which in 1890 created the Yosemite National Park. This embraced the headwaters of the Merced and Tuolumne Rivers and surrounded the Yosemite Valley, then a state park, which in 1864 had been turned over to California for safe keeping. This bill was passed so expeditiously that the park was created before many people in California realized what had been done. As soon as the full import of the Act was recognized and it was realized that sheep and cattle could no longer lawfully enter public land within its borders, the stockmen, who had been reaping a rich harvest at public expense without paying a cent for grazing their flocks and herds on these lands, rose up in indignation and used every effort and political device to have the park abolished, or at least materially reduced in area. It took strenuous work on the part of those responsible for the creation of the park successfully to resist these powerful and persistent assaults. Johnson wrote to John Muir suggesting that he form an association in California of like-minded men who would assume some of the burden of resisting these attacks, which Johnson recognized would be repeated as long as there was any chance of breaking down park boundaries.

The formation of an organization of this sort had been in the minds of many who loved the out-of-doors, but it remained for someone to take the initiative. John Muir was unsurpassed in the role of a prophet preaching the gospel of wildness and urging its preservation, but he was not an organizer. Professor J. H. Senger, of the University of California, however, was an organizer. As early as 1886 he thought of establishing a mountaineering library in Yosemite Valley. In 1890 he discussed at the University a plan for forming an association of those interested in mountain travel; the name "Sierra Club" was suggested for such an organization. Early in 1892 Senger interested Warren Olney, an attorney prominent in Oakland and San Francisco, in his plan of forming a "Sierra Club." He evidently wrote to John Muir to enlist his support, for on May 10, Muir replied that he was "greatly interested in the formation of an Alpine Club and think with you and Mr. Olney that the time has come when such a club should be organized. You may count on me as a member and as willing to do all in my power to further the interests of such a club."

On May 22 he wrote Senger, "I will gladly attend the meeting on Saturday next at Mr. Olney's office (and hope) that we will be able to do something for wilderness." On Saturday, May 28, 1892, in Olney's law office in San Francisco, the club's name and purposes were agreed upon, and Olney drew up the Articles of Incorporation. One week later the Articles and Bylaws were signed and the officers of the club were elected. There were 182 charter members.

The first directors were John Muir, President; Warren Olney, Vice-President; William Dellam Armes, Secretary; J. H. Senger, David Starr Jordan (president of the new Stanford University), Robert M. Price, Mark Brickell Kerr, Willard D. Johnson, and John C. Branner (later president of Stanford). Muir remained president until his death on December 24, 1914. From the outset both universities, California and Stanford, were represented on the Board, and for many years thereafter much of the strength and initiative of the club came from their faculties and student bodies. Prominent names appear as signers of the Articles: among them William H. Beatty, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of California; George Perkins, United States Senator; W. L. Jepson, California's outstanding authority on its trees and flowers; and the late Will Denman, formerly a senior judge of the United States Court of Appeals.

Samuel Merrill, who was staying at the time at the Muir home in Alhambra Valley, writes that when John Muir returned from that organization meeting he had "never seen Mr. Muir so animated and happy."

As soon as the club was created it began its good work by vigorously and successfully opposing serious efforts to reduce by one half the area of the Yosemite National Park. The club also held public educational and scientific meetings; at one of these, in the fall of 1895, Muir, Professor Joseph LeConte, and Professor William R. Dudley spoke in favor of establishing national forest reservations, later called national forests. Because of forward-looking action on the part of the club, California was the first western state to welcome and have extensive national forests established within its borders. John Muir had much to do with this work and served on one of the early national forest commissions appointed by President Cleveland to make field investigations and recommendations on the subject.

Many of the Sierra Club members were pioneers in the exploration of the theretofore little-known and less accessible regions of the High Sierra. John Muir was pre-eminent in this. Professor J. N. LeConte and Theodore S. Solomons did much writing and pioneer mapping.

The club has at various times, especially during its earlier days when trails were poor and few, contributed funds toward trail building and improvement. It was the chief motivator of the John Muir Trail, constructed by the state as a memorial to John Muir. The club has also contributed toward the purchase of lands and property and has been instrumental in their donation to the federal government, notably the Tioga Road and Power's property at Lake Tenaya in Yosemite National Park, and Redwood Meadows and other important holdings in Sequoia National Park. Much of this was done during the regime of Stephen Mather, the first director of national parks, also a loyal and enthusiastic member of the club, who gave generously of his personal fortune and energy in advancing national park interests.

The club's first headquarters was in a cubbyhole in the Academy of Sciences building, on Market Street in San Francisco. Public educational and scientific meetings were held in the auditorium of this building. In 1898 the club moved to the Merchants Exchange Building, where, for several years, it shared offices with the Geographical Society of the Pacific. Colorful Professor George Davidson was president of the latter and also a director of the club. In 1903 the headquarters were moved to a large, well-lighted room in the Mills Building, where for the first time the club's maps, books, and photographs could be appropriately displayed. With the exception of the brief interlude occasioned by the San Francisco earthquake, the principal headquarters of the club continued to be in the Mills Building until they were moved to the adjacent Mills Tower.

In 1905, the by-laws were amended to provide for the organization of sections, or chapters, thus giving local groups more autonomy and opportunity to act in matters of local importance. The Southern California (now Angeles) Chapter—the first such section—was formed on a permanent basis in 1911.

The outstanding work of the club has been in aiding the creation of national parks and wilderness areas and in the educational work in preserving them when once created. The successful efforts to keep Yosemite boundaries intact have been mentioned. That was but the first of many Yosemite problems. The second came soon. John Muir, who had spent many years in the Yosemite Valley, became convinced that the valley was poorly managed by state authorities, both because the state appropriated too little for its upkeep and because the State Commissioners, were, except at the outset, selected for purely political reasons and seldom had any adequate concept of what the park was for. In 1903, when Muir accompanied President Theodore Roosevelt on a pack trip in the region, he broached the possibility of having the valley returned to the United States and included in the surrounding national park. The President at once recognized the logic of such a transfer and George C. Pardee, then Governor of California, who was also consulted, agreed that it would be a wise move. As a result of state and federal legislation, the recession was accomplished. It is quite certain that without the work that the Sierra Club did, the local and even national political prejudices could not have been overcome. Whereas the state had been spending a paltry sum each year and the valley was in consequence poorly administered, the federal government has appropriated far more adequately and has done a splendid job of administration.

Another great battle involving Yosemite arose shortly after; in 1906, the City of San Francisco renewed its application, previously denied, for permission to dam Hetch Hetchy Valley, one of the outstanding scenic features of the park, in order to use the stored water for its municipal water supply. In this fight the club was torn internally, for many of its members favored the plan, and among them were important city officials. However, on a test, the club members voted overwhelmingly to oppose this unnecessary invasion of the park. The club took the position that, since it was admitted that good water could be obtained elsewhere, even though at increased cost, the destruction of such an outstanding asset of the park as Hetch Hetchy Valley and the establish-

ment of such a precedent, so dangerous to the whole national park idea, was not justified. For a time, particularly because of the close friendship which existed between Muir and President Theodore Roosevelt and later President Taft, the club was able to stave off the attack on Hetch Hetchy Valley and divert any concession to the much less important Lake Eleanor and Cherry River region. But political affairs in Washington took a sudden turn and, over the vigorous opposition of the club and its friends, the destructive grant was authorized. Subsequent events have proved the club to have been thoroughly right in its attempt to save the park from this violation of its integrity. It has been shown that ample water was obtainable elsewhere, and the charge made by the club that what San Francisco really wanted was not so much the water as the free water power which was then available—free only because the foresight of Muir and others in creating the Yosemite National Park had preserved Hetch Hetchy from earlier appropriation. It had been thought well protected by its inclusion in a national park. While this particular battle was lost, the vigorous opposition of the club aroused the entire country to the real dangers menacing our parks and it has deterred others from attempting similar inroads. The prestige of the club was enhanced immeasurably.

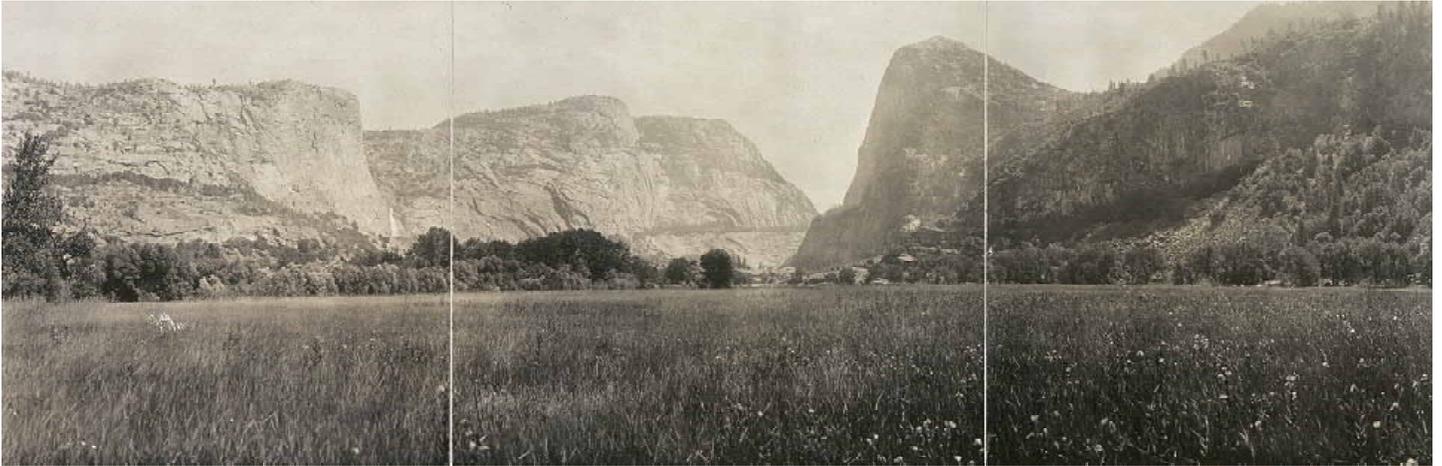
Still another outstanding accomplishment was the creation of the Kings Canyon National Park in 1940. John Muir had recommended setting aside this area long before the turn of the century. Efforts had been made on various occasions to bring this about, but they had all failed except one which was partly successful in that it added the upper Kern River region, including Mount Whitney, to the Sequoia National Park. This was sponsored by the Sierra Club, and it was on the club's recommendation that Stephen Mather, director of National Parks, decided to add the Kern region to the existing Sequoia Park and to abandon temporarily the effort to include the High Sierra region of the Kings until a more propitious day. This time arrived when Secretary of the Interior Ickes made a special trip to the west coast to enlist the support of the Sierra Club in urging the creation of the Kings Canyon National Park. The proposed park boundaries were carefully drawn, mainly as the club had suggested. Powerful opposition arose and it was largely because of the convincing illustrated literature that was sent out by the club and like organizations that the area was saved as a national park. Secretary Ickes wrote that it was very doubtful whether the park could have been created without the club's help.

A milestone in the life of the Sierra Club was the inauguration of its annual outings, which began in 1901. At the outset many of the directors were dubious about the advisability of such a radical move, largely because it might involve the club in financial difficulties. However, John Muir was heartily in favor of the plan because it would accomplish what he had devoted his life to preaching—getting people to go out and enjoy these incomparable wilderness areas—and his advocacy prevailed. The club had two interrelated objectives in view—to increase its membership (these outings were limited to members and their immediate kin) and to educate its members and convince them of the importance and necessity of preserving for all time these irreplaceable values. The outings proved a success from the very start, and were amply justified by the results. It is doubtful whether the Sierra Club would have become such a potent force in accomplishing much that it later advocated with such success, without the effective backing of its large, enthusiastic, well-informed membership.

Through much of its early history, the Sierra Club was essentially a western, even a California, organization. Its very name, its membership, the locale of all but five of its summer outings in the forty years before World War II, and its primary conservation interests were in California. Even the club's original statement of purpose limited its interest to the mountains of the Pacific Coast.

Yet the last twenty years have seen the Sierra Club develop a national program of outing and conservation action and expand its membership to tens of thousands with chapters and offices all across the land.

Its earlier history portended such a change in the Sierra Club's bearing, however. John Muir was already prominent through the pages of national magazines when he became the Sierra Club's first president. Its conservation efforts—to preserve Hetch Hetchy Valley and to extend national park status to Kings Canyon—gained the club some national support and recognition.



Hetch Hetchy Valley before it was dammed.
(Photo by Matt Ashby Wolfskill - 1911)

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