

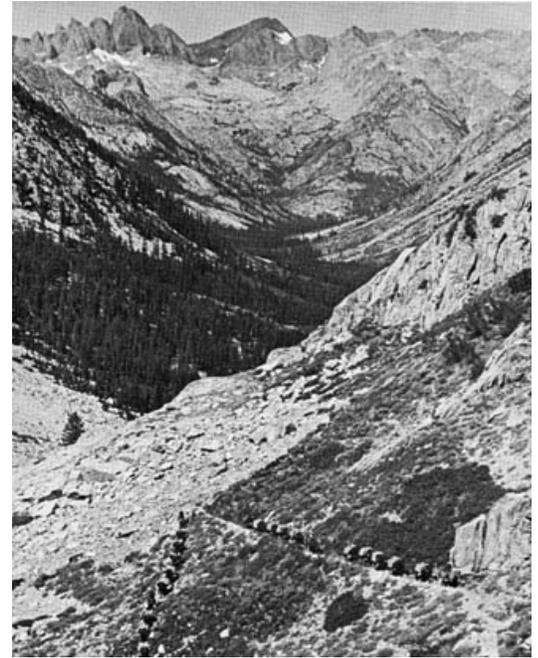
The Golden Staircase

Text and photo by Hal Roth

Before the trail was built up Palisade Creek and over Mather Pass, travelers had to detour a long distance west and south from the crest, going down the Middle Fork of the Kings River to Simpson Meadow, climbing over Granite Pass, dropping to the South Fork of the Kings, and ascending Paradise Valley back to the John Muir Trail, a detour of almost 50 miles from the highest peaks.

The first animal crossing of what is now known as Mather Pass, the direct route between the Middle and South Forks of the Kings, was made in 1897 by a sheepherder named Escallier who was caught by snow in November and somehow got his burro up the cliff at the head of Palisade Creek and over the divide.' Eleven years later the Le Conte party pronounced the pass feasible, but were entirely defeated when they tried to get their mules out of the canyon of Palisade Creek. "We again scouted about for a possible route," wrote J. S. Hutchinson. "There were several chutes leading down [the thousand foot wall], but they were choked with huge blocks fallen from the cliffs."

In 1921, Robert Barrett of Cornish, New Hampshire, approached the hazardous cliffs from above while leading a group of Boy Scouts with 20 burros. The resourceful Barrett, a large, tall man with a long flowing beard, in a demonstration perhaps not seen since the days when the Forty-Niners crossed Donner Pass, got his burros down the cliff by lowering each one on a block and tackle.'



Later the same month the Hamlin party crossed the divide, named it after Stephen Mather, the first director of the National Park Service, and managed to get down the terrible cliff. Francis Farquhar and a friend followed their tracks on foot. "As we went back over their route we admired their energy and persistence, as well as the skill of their packers . . ." wrote Farquhar, "they had actually built a trail over that pass with their own hands.'

In July, 1922, J. S. Hutchinson took another pack party across Mather Pass and down the great cliff. "Gravity is of great assistance," he noted, thrilled to get to the bottom. "No one as yet, so far as we know, has been up, Palisade Creek with a pack-train. Some day, however-soon, I hope there will be a good trail through.'"

Hutchinson's wish was not fulfilled until 1938, when the last link of the John Muir Trail was completed. Trail crews from Inyo, Sierra, and Sequoia National Forests blasted dozens of huge boulders from the cliff and patiently chinked and fitted together thousands of small rocks to make a first class route up the formidable cliff that has come to be known as the Golden Staircase.

Excerpt taken from *Pathway in the Sky*
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