A BRIEF HISTORY OF YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK

Yosemite National Park, located in the central Sierra Nevada of California, the mountains John Muir called the “Range of Light,” is 150 miles east of San Francisco. The 750,000 acre, 1,200 square mile park, contains thousands of lakes and ponds, 1600 miles of streams, 800 miles of hiking trails, and 350 miles of roads. Ranging in elevation from 2,000 to over 13,000 feet, the park represents five vegetation zones, that are home to 1400 plant species and more than 300 species of vertebrate animals that include fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals. Yosemite Valley, at an elevation of 4,000 feet, represents 7 square miles of Yosemite National Park, but is the destination for most park visitors.

GEOLOGY

In 1865, Josiah Whitney, Director of the Geological Survey of California, announced that the origin of Yosemite Valley resulted from a “grand cataclysm,” the bottom had dropped out of the Valley. John Muir, the Scottish-American poet-naturalist, who arrived in the Valley in 1868, studied Yosemite Valley and the High Sierra and noted that the bottom had not fallen out of anything God had made. He concluded that ice was the answer—glaciers carved Yosemite Valley into its present day form. In 1913, Francois E. Matthes and Frank C. Calkins, members of the U.S. Geological Survey, undertook a study of the geology of the Yosemite region. Matthes concluded that rivers and glaciers sculptured the landscape. Muir had been correct, at least in part! In 1989, King Huber of the U.S. Geological Survey completed a definitive work on the geology of YNP, The Geologic Story of Yosemite National Park.

Yosemite National Park is made up of igneous rocks that formed deep underground when molten rock cooled and solidified slowly. Granite (granitic rock) is a form of igneous rock found in Yosemite. By the end of the Cretaceous Period, about 65 million years ago, the granitic core was exposed due to deep erosion that removed the overlying sedimentary rock and formed a landscape of gentle rolling hills. About 25 million years ago, this lowland area began to uplift and tilt toward the southwest. As the Sierra rose, the streams following into California’s Central Valley flowed faster and cut deep V-shaped canyons into the mountains.

The first Ice Age began about two million years ago. Glaciers that formed in the High Sierra moved through Yosemite Valley. During the early glacial period the ice filled the Valley and covered surrounding highlands. Widening the canyon, and steepening the walls, the glacier created a U-shaped valley. A glacier that began 20,000 years ago, entered Yosemite Valley, and passed beyond El Capitan and Bridalveil Fall. Rock gathered at the western end of the Valley and created a natural dam that formed Lake Yosemite—typical of the lake that would have formed at the end of each glaciation. The deep excavation created by earlier glaciers, as much as 2,000 feet into bedrock beneath the present floor of Yosemite Valley, was already filled with glacial till and sediment. Approximately 10,000 years ago, Lake Yosemite filled with silt, creating today’s level
Valley floor. The granite rock, erosion, weathering, and glaciers, collectively created the features seen in the walls, domes, and hanging valleys of Yosemite Valley.

HOME OF THE MIWOK

Yosemite Valley was home to the Miwok Indians who for 8,000 years migrated from the Sierra foothills to the Valley and to the alpine meadows in the summer months. They called themselves the “Ahwahneechee,” the people who lived in “Ahwahnee.”

In 1833, Joseph R. Walker, led a party of 60 hunters and trappers in the first east-to-west crossing of the Sierra. Though the expedition’s route remains an enigma, they followed a portion of the Old Mono Indian Trial running along the crest between the Merced and Tuolumne Rivers directly through Yosemite National Park. Following weeks of freezing weather, without sufficient supplies, the expedition party finally crossed over the mountains and saw the San Joaquin Valley in the distance.

On March 27, 1851, Major James Savage and the Mariposa Battalion of militia entered the Valley in search of the Miwok who had (reportedly) attached a trading post in the Merced River Canyon because miners had been trespassing on Indian Territory. Major Savage and the Battalion were the first Euro-Americans to explore the Valley. In 1855, the first tourists arrived; and, between 1855 and 1864 eight hundred and fifty visited Yosemite Valley. A description of “Yo-hem-i-ty Valley,” published in 1856, noted that several parties visited in 1855, many more will go this year, and ultimately it will become a place of great resort.

President Abraham Lincoln, on June 30, 1864, signed a bill that granted Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Big Tree Grove to the State of California. The Yosemite Grant, precedent-setting legislation, stipulated that “the premises shall be held for public use, report, and recreation; shall be inalienable for all time.” The Yosemite Grant established the national park concept. Frederick Law Olmsted, landscape architect and chairman of the first Yosemite Commission, prepared *Yosemite and the Mariposa Grove: A Preliminary Report, 1865*. A groundbreaking document, it provided an explanation for the United States government reserving land of scenic value for its citizens. Olmsted noted that it is a scientific fact that the occasional contemplation of natural scenes of an impressive character is favorable to health, vigor, and intellect.

In 1889, John Muir and Robert Underwood Johnson, editor of *Century Magazine*, shared their concerns about grazing interests destroying the mountain meadows that bordered the Yosemite Grant. Muir called the sheep “hoofed locusts.” The campaign by Johnson and Muir for the creation of a national park that would surround Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove and protect the alpine meadows and the head-waters, resulted in legislation that established Yosemite National Park in October, 1890. In 1906 boundaries were adjusted and Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove were receded to the Federal Government by the State of California to create a unified Yosemite National Park.

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