

ECV Jim Savage Mariposa Battalion 1852
Humbug: Ben Holschlag
Historian: Dan "Professor Firetruck" Carrion
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John Muir and Yosemite

Hundreds of thousands of acres of snowy peaks, mountain stream, glaciers, and beautiful giant trees which lay to the north and east of Madera are now called Yosemite National Park. But a debt is owed to one man who tirelessly worked to bring this thought of nationalized park care into existence.

Yosemite Valley was first seen by a white man in 1833 when famous Captain Joseph Walker might have spied the beautiful green valley from the high northeast walls of the valley. But he didn't descend down into valley, he only saw it from above and behind, not truly comprehending what lay before him.

That would be left, of course, to Jim Savage and the Mariposa Battalion, the first white men to set foot in the valley. They were chasing Chief Tenaya whose followers had been raising Hell along the Fresno River, and in March of 1851 the troops entered the valley proper.

It took two trips, but eventually Tenaya and his people would become somewhat peaceful. They were placed on the Fresno River Reservation. Ultimately they would be allowed to leave the reservation and return to their valley. During the winter of 1851 and 1852, many horses were stolen from the area. Soldiers from Fort Miller, lead by Lt Moore followed the miscreants into the valley, apprehended them, and then executed them as they had admitted to murdering some nearby miners. There was little Indian trouble after that in the valley. In fact, most of Tenaya's tribe was wiped out by the Mono Indians a bit later.

The Mariposa Battalion had told many people about the beauty of the valley, but no one seemed to believe them. Newspapermen felt they were exaggerating. But when Lt. Moore began praising the Valley's awesome beauty, the newspapers began to take notice. Soon various white men began storming into Yosemite in the guise of lumbermen, homesteaders, and miners. The first actual tourists arrived in 1855, led by San Francisco magazine publisher James Hutchings.

Hutchings loved the valley, and by use of his magazine, he told the entire world of the natural beauty that awaited them in Yosemite. Soon, more tourists arrived. The roads were rough and crude to say the least, and the accommodations were worse. But it was an adventure!! At this time no one actually "owned" the valley (besides the federal government) so it was "up for grabs" so to speak.

More and more people became interested in the beautiful valley, and in 1864 President Lincoln signed documents that would give the valley and the Mariposa Big Trees to the State of California. Called the Yosemite Grant, it set up a commission of eight men to oversee its operation, government, and care. The state didn't do a good with this charge, and soon damage was being done to the valley and the area around it.

John Muir, the famous naturalist, was attracted to the valley in 1868. He immediately fell in love with it. He lived amongst its spectacular views, gorgeous waterfalls, and magnificent beauty for several years, eventually writing a book called The Yosemite.

But Muir was troubled. He saw the beginning of many desecrations of his beautiful parklike home. Lumber interests, cattlemen, sheepherders, and miners all had their eyes on the area. Thousand year old giant trees were being toppled and sawed up merely for lumber. Cattle and sheep were

destroying the meadows by eating up all the plant life that kept the soil intact and free from erosion.

Muir called the sheep “hooved locusts” and spent much time writing stinging articles in newspapers and magazines, decrying the presence of these “wooly quadrupeds.” He began a very strong campaign to have the entire area declared a national park. His writings helped to arouse the attention of the nation.

On October 1, 1890, Congress created Yosemite National Park, the nation’s third national park, only six days after creating Sequoia National Park on September 25, 1890. Lumbering and grazing would now be prohibited within its confines, which included not just the valley and the Big Trees, but the areas surrounding them.

Muir had lots of help in his quest to create the park. But he was the most eloquent, articulate, and compelling advocate for the park, and parks in general. On May 15, 1903, he would help guide President Teddy Roosevelt on a four day tour of Yosemite. Along with only two other men, they hiked through waist deep snow and ate under the trees. No Secret Service, no reporters, just Muir and Roosevelt. Teddy was so captivated with the entire experience that upon his return to Washington DC he created 18 new national monuments, 150 National Forests, and expanded Yosemite National park and the Sierra and Sequoia National Forests.

Sadly for John Muir, in a few years, he would be embroiled in one of the worse desecrations of the Yosemite, the damming of Hetch Hetchy Valley. But that is a story for another day.