

Romancing the Sierra: Part 1

The following articles originally appeared in the Yosemite Highway Herald newspaper as a regular column called "Romancing the Sierra".

All articles are by Sharon Giacomazzi.

Two books of Sharon's have been published by Bored Feet Press:

Tales and Tales of Yosemite and the Central Sierra and Exploring Eastern Sierra Canyons

These books can be purchased through www.BoredFeet.com or Amazon.com, or at Tuolumne County bookstores.

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Trails and Tales of Yosemite and the Central Sierra

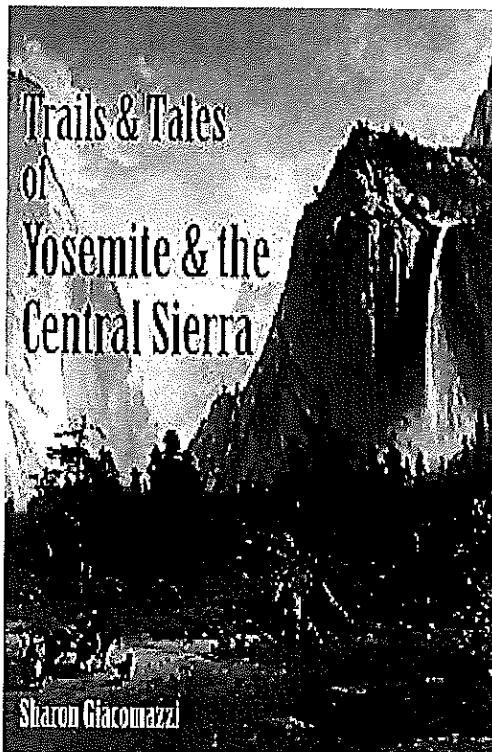
A Guide for Hikers and History Buffs

by Sharon Giacomazzi

Sharon Giacomazzi loves to tell history tales and she loves to hike. She combines these passions in an enthralling guide to the glorious Central Sierra, presenting more than 60 fun excursions. The book's five sections, Gold Country, Western Slope, Yosemite Valley, Other Yosemite Park, and Eastern Sierra, are made richer with their fascinating historical context, and Sharon is a born storyteller who makes history fun.

You'll find ghost towns, waterfalls, wildflowers, Sequoia groves, historic roads, hot springs, river canyons, lakes, mountain peaks, and railroads, both excursion trains and historic lines long gone.

While Sharon includes some of the popular hikes, she also leads you to destinations off the beaten path, hidden corners in Yosemite Valley and the surrounding popular region. She emphasizes easy day hikes, but you'll also find peaks to climb, places to backpack, and resorts where you can just relax amidst scenic grandeur.



304 pages, 6" x 9", full-color cover, 59 historic and scenic photographs, 38 maps by Marsha Mello, bibliography, index, 2001.

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Rediscovering Hetch Hetchy

By Sharon Giacomazzi

The victim of man's thirst for water, this Sierra valley, now flooded, still offers scenic vistas. Although the once-beautiful valley of Hetch Hetchy is a paradise lost, many of its spectacular features can still be appreciated. May and June are ideal months for an exploration of this scenic, uncrowded corner of the Sierra. Even though the elevation is nearly the same as Yosemite Valley, temperatures can be uncomfortably warm in midsummer. Located in the northwestern section of Yosemite National Park, it is a region markedly less visited primarily because there is nothing "to do" except enjoy the peaceful and sensational landscape without commercial distractions or hordes of people. Dammed and inundated in the early 1920s to create a water supply for San Francisco, the valley was the scene of one of the stormiest conservation fights in history.

Before the waters of the Tuolumne River were captured by O'Shaughnessy Dam in 1923 to supply water and power for San Francisco, the Hetch Hetchy Valley bore a remarkable resemblance to Yosemite Valley. Although smaller and more compact, it shared the same rugged splendor. As one writer put it, "It is still a phenomenon that Nature, with her magnificent carelessness, should have chosen two designs so nearly alike." Indeed, the similarities between Hetch Hetchy and Yosemite were striking: glacially sculptured cliffs; towering waterfalls; polished granite domes; a deep valley dominated by a meandering river; nearly the same elevation above sea level; a lush, meadow floor liberally sprinkled with oak, pine, cedar and wildflowers; and formed by the same geological forces.

There is ample evidence that for centuries Paiute and Ahwahneechee Indians made yearly visits here to gather acorns and grind them in bedrock mortars. But there is some debate over who was the first white man to see Hetch Hetchy Valley. It was either Nate or Joe Screech, on a bear hunting trip in the late 1840s, who first saw the valley from the cliffs above. Some time later, one of the brothers asked an elderly chief, who claimed the land in the area, about this wondrous place. The chief feigned ignorance of such a valley but said that if Screech could find one, it would be his. In 1850 Nate Screech managed to get down into the valley and found the same chief and his wives. Understandably surprised but true to his word, the chief packed and left the valley to Screech as promised.

Brother Joe Screech blazed the first trail into the valley from Big Oak Flat, some thirty-eight miles away. For many years shepherders and cattlemen grazed their stock in the fertile, flat-bottomed valley, and Indians continued to harvest acorns. The name Hetch Hetchy is a corruption of the Indian word hatchatchie, designating a variety of grass with edible seeds.

This gorgeous valley, which once rivaled Yosemite Valley, is gone forever, drowned under 400 feet of water. The complete story of how it came to be covered by water is long, fascinating and complicated with murky political shenanigans and not within the scope of this article. But, as early as 1870, the same year John Muir first explored the Hetch Hetchy Valley, San Francisco engineers were on the prowl in the Sierra for more reliable sources of drinking water to meet the needs of a rapidly expanding population. After studying fourteen possible Sierra water sources, the Tuolumne River was chosen in 1901.

Muir, the Sierra Club and many other preservationists across the country fought a desperate campaign to prevent Hetch Hetchy from being dammed and flooded. A raging, nationwide conservation battle ensued for the next twelve years. It is important to bear in mind that Yosemite was protected and designated a national park in 1906; dedicated people waged a pitched battle against the outrageous intrusion upon national park lands created by an act of Congress to be safeguarded from exploitation. Nonetheless, San Francisco's persistence was successful. The city was granted water rights on the Tuolumne River with the passage of the Raker Act and signed into law by President Woodrow Wilson on December 19, 1913.

According to President Wilson, "It seemed to serve the pressing public needs of the region concerned better than they could be served in any other way, and yet did not impair the usefulness or materially detract from the beauty of the public domain." Interesting thoughts from someone who had never seen the valley in question.

Like it or not, for better or worse, Hetch Hetchy Valley became history when the Tuolumne River was imprisoned by the O'Shaughnessy Dam. Whether it made sense to tame an untouched wilderness in order to supply water to a growing city 150 miles away or to violate a public domain, supposedly protected by federal law, is purely academic now. Hetch Hetchy is a done deal and has been for eighty years.

O'Shaughnessy Dam, named for the project's chief engineer, was built between 1919 and 1923 to create the eight-mile-long Hetch Hetchy Reservoir. It was designed to collect and store run-off from 459 square miles of watershed, translating to 420,000 acres.

In spite of the controversy surrounding its existence, the entire Hetch Hetchy Water Project was a thoroughly brilliant engineering masterpiece spanning nearly twenty years. The project brought Sierra water by gravity flow to San Francisco through an extraordinarily vast and complex system of reservoirs, canals, dams, flumes, tunnels, pipes, penstocks and aqueducts. Even a railroad was created to service its un-imaginable construction needs and workers' camps, and Lake Eleanor was dammed in 1917 to supply water for the Early Intake Powerhouse to provide a dependable source of electricity to run a staggering array of equipment.

This mammoth construction enterprise was the largest ever attempted in the West at that time. Just the surveying took many years, and building the O'Shaughnessy Dam alone required almost four years, twenty four hours a day in all seasons, to pour the concrete hauled in by the Hetch Hetchy Railroad. Between 1935-1938, the dam was raised 85 feet to its present height of 430 feet above bedrock, increasing the storage capacity to 306,000 acre feet of water. The original project cost, up until 1934 when water first reached San Francisco, was \$100 million. The design of the entire project was so fine-tuned and ingeniously planned that it could be altered as needed without a change in the original design.

Today, just driving to Hetch Hetchy is a wonderful experience. Once you leave Highway 120 you'll be more intimately surrounded by the beauty of the Sierra Nevada mountains.

Upon arrival, pause on the dam for a few minutes to absorb the feeling of this special place, still glorious in spite of the mountain of concrete you're standing on. Gaze up the canyon and try to visualize the wild grandeur of the valley before the Tuolumne River was dammed. You might also want to think about all the timber removed from the valley plus the additional 6+ million board feet of lumber cut from inside Yosemite National Park for the building of the dam.

The two prominent granite features are Kolana Rock to the right and tiered Hetch Hetchy Dome on the left. In spring, robust, 1,400 foot Wapama Falls will be thundering down, and Tueeeulala Falls is a lesser, but lovely, cataract. The chalet to the right is for the use of City of San Francisco Water and Power high muckamucks.

As you walk through the 600-foot tunnel you'll be on the old road to Lake Eleanor. Continue your walk alongside the reservoir; the path ultimately leads to Rancheria Falls in 6.5 miles, if you're up to it. Otherwise, a great stopping place for a trail lunch is Wapama Falls, two miles from the dam; in fact, the run-off may be so heavy that you can't get past it. Remember, there is no rule that says because you are on a trail you have to follow it to the very end. Proceed as far as you can or want to. The trail is in good condition and mostly level to the falls. Of course, it's always sensible to be prepared with water, snacks or lunch, appropriate clothing and sturdy walking shoes/boots.

At some point on your journey, you can decide for yourself whether you agree or not with the previously quoted thoughts of President Wilson when he sealed the fate of Hetch Hetchy in 1913 or the belief of the San Francisco Water and Power Department that, if their water project had failed, Hetch Hetchy very possibly could have become a twin of Yosemite Valley in yet another way < thousands of daily visitors, smog, noisy restaurants and bars, curio shops and hotels. Important lessons were learned from the lost battle over Hetch Hetchy; conservation forces united and grew stronger in spite of the defeat. It is unlikely that such an invasion of National Park lands will ever be repeated, especially with the raised consciousness of the American people to preserve the wild and beautiful places on this earth.

Getting There

If you are in no hurry, Highway 49 offers a pleasant journey through handsome foothill country and picturesque towns reminiscent of the Gold Rush era. The most direct route, via Highway 120 through Groveland, is 170 miles from Sacramento. One mile before Yosemite's Big Oak Flat entrance station turn left on Evergreen Road. In 7.5 miles at its junction with Hetch Hetchy Road at Camp Mather, turn right and proceed 9.0 miles to O'Shaughnessy Dam. The parking area and toilets are all you'll find here. The ranger at the Hetch Hetchy entrance gate will provide you with a park map and answer any questions.

Accommodations: There are no services of any kind at Hetch Hetchy. The nearest lodging and food services are at rustic Evergreen Lodge, ten miles before reaching the dam on Evergreen Road. Phone 209-379-2606. Other lodging and meals fairly nearby along Highway 120: Buck Meadows' Lodge, 1-800-626-YOSE and Sugar Pine Ranch, 1-800-626-7408. Lodging and restaurants are also available in the charming mountain hamlet of Groveland.

Camping: Carlon and Middle Fork Campgrounds (U.S. Forest Service) are along Evergreen Road. The only campground at Hetch Hetchy is exclusively for backpackers.

Hiking: Your best bet for an easy, two-mile hike on nearly level terrain is to head across the dam and through a road tunnel to Wapama Falls. Stop along here for a trailside lunch with terrific views. The force and volume of Wapama may keep you from progressing farther. Other more strenuous hikes: Rancheria Falls, 6.5 miles; Laurel Lake, 8.0 miles; and Lake Vernon, 12.0 miles. No pets are allowed on any park trails.

The Wonders of Bower Cave

Last spring, while wandering a back road above the village of Coulterville en route to Bower Cave, I was visited by fond childhood memories of accompanying my parents on their Sunday drives. Most kids in my generation hated them more than lima beans but not me. I lived for Sundays and the opportunity to investigate offbeat and unfrequented places.

Those outings instilled a life-long pattern of discovery and exploration, a passion for nature (the wilder the better) and a longing to have experienced a pioneer lifestyle. Nearing the cave I thought how exciting it would have been to have arrived in a horse and buggy rather than a four-wheel-drive truck.

Bower Cave is remarkable for its peculiar structure resembling a roofless grotto and for its lakelet at the bottom. The majority of the cave is underwater and is thought to be one of the West's largest underground lakes. Besides the cavern's unusual geological features, the human history associated with it is ancient. Several thousand years of Native American tenancy bestow significant cultural and religious importance to the site.

Originally called Marble Springs Cave, Bower Cave is very near the North Fork of the Merced River, 13 miles northeast of Coulterville on the original Coulterville-Yosemite Road, completed in 1874. A plaque embedded in a stone monument briefly tells the story of this first road into Yosemite. Three hundred yards up-slope and directly behind the marker the distinctive, dove-gray rock formation in which the cave is situated looms into view.

A 1918 brochure describes the cave as follows: The cave is 1,000 feet in circumference. The fresh water lake is 85 feet wide and 130 feet long. Four large bigleaf maples, two of them 7 feet in diameter at the base, grow in the cave and protrude from the mouth of the cave. The trees are heavily covered with sheets of thick moss from their base to their topmost branches, 280 feet from the ground. The entire south wall of the cave covering 400 feet from end to end is a mass of moss a foot thick. The other walls of the cave are covered with crystal and onyx formations in thousands of hues and shapes, including figures of animals, lions, bears, monkeys, as well as human forms and faces. Huge rugs of solid moss, fringed with onyx and crystal, hang from the walls and ceilings of numerous small tunnel-like caves off the walls of the main cave.²

Long before the first automobile wheezed through the mountains in 1915, the cave was a well-known, bustling stage stop and tour destination for thousands of travelers en route to Yosemite. For local residents it became a popular rendezvous for picnics and dances.

Initially, the cave attracted scant attention from miners more interested in nuggets than natural beauty. Within a few years, however, glowing accounts were written about it by various men, including James Hutchings, John Muir and geological survey scientists Josiah Whitney and William Brewer.

The landscaping surrounding the cavern is characteristic foothill scenery: pines and hardwoods with a chaparral understory, squadrons of jays and woodpeckers, herds of squirrels, the river's pleasant monologue, hillsides starred with flowers and an air of gentle wildness. The cave is not the dark, sinister, bat-infested hole you may envision it to be. Rather, it is sunshine-filled because it is open at the top. Swallows and hummingbirds dart in and out and columbines, bleeding hearts, ferns, and moss grow on the cave floor.

Bower Cave is part of a lengthy limestone belt running as far north as El Dorado County. When the Sierra Nevada was birthing, molten matter rose to the surface, heating and recrystallizing the limestone to form marble. As acidic water trickled through the cracks and corroded it, the ceiling eventually collapsed, forming a large grotto. Several tall, big-leafed maples once grew from the floor creating a canopy of sun-dappled light over the lakelet. Presently, maples can be found growing around the rim of the opening.

Miwok legend tells us that the cave, Oo¹-tin, was home to the First People and a sacred site of wonder and awe. For at least 3,500 years before it was "discovered" by white immigrants, Miwoks believed it to be the center for the creation of the world and its inhabitants. Before taking his place in the heavens, Evening Star lived here with the many animals that later claimed the earth and sky. Miwoks today still believe the cavern is a sacred passageway, and after death their spirit returns to Mother Earth through the cave.

Unknown is the year that the name of the site changed to Bower Cave, but it was in use years before the property was owned by Henry Becker, who received credit for it. Catherine C. Phillips states in her Coulterville Chronicle that on May 24, 1858, the socially elite wedding party of William Ralston, San Francisco banker, and Lizzie Fry were on their merry way to a "honeymoon frolic" in Yosemite. One of the party kept a diary of the trip, including a description of a beautiful cave with steps leading to the bottom and a clear, cold lake with a boat on it. While up a flight of steps to the left, one could enter a spacious shanty which bore the name of the ballroom. Because of the arching maple limbs over the top, another of the entourage dubbed it Bower Cave.

Exactly who the first white man was to have seen it is not verified. Mariposa County Records reveal that by 1856 miners Nicholas Arni and Frederick Schoebel had claimed the land surrounding a "strange and charming" cave where they established a ranch and quarried limestone. Of greater significance, they were the first to develop and promote the cave as a tourist attraction. At first, a windlass lowered people into the cave in a bathtub-size bucket. Later a steep stairway was constructed to the cave bottom where lively dances were held on the timber dance floor. In October 1856 the San Francisco Herald touted its potential as a fashionable resort.

Arni bought out Schoebel in 1858, but debt forced him to sell the 200-acre property to Henry Becker and James Torney in 1861. Soon after the deal closed, Becker bought out Torney and became the sole proprietor. Becker, with his much younger wife and young daughters, lived at this idyllic spot and provided simple lodging, meals and cave tours for tourists. Starting in the 1860s, thanks to James Hutchings' California Magazine and Whitney's guidebooks, Bower Cave became a renowned attraction on the way to Yosemite.

On a winter's day in 1863 the peaceful atmosphere at Bower Cave was disrupted by three gunshots. According to neighbors, Becker was prone to drunkenness and severe spousal abuse. As a result of one of these whiskey-fueled rages, a terrified Marie shot her husband. An investigation concluded that she, fearing for her life, had killed Becker in self-defense. After Becker was buried on the property, Marie continued to accommodate tourists. A few months later she married Louis Pechart and managed the inn and cave business for the next 30 years. Sightseers were given a cave tour on the lakelet in a small rowboat by Marie and, later, by her eldest daughter Caroline. After she divorced Pechart in 1893, Marie sold the property to her husband for \$800 and moved to Oakland.

Bower Cave remained in the family for many decades. Caroline, married Frederick Wenger in 1878, and when Pechart died in 1898 she inherited 300 acres of land, including Bower Cave, from her stepfather. Until the Wengers and their nine children moved to the cave in 1900, Pechart's son, Emile, worked the ranch and maintained the cave enterprise. Florence Wenger, last of their ten children, was born at Bower Cave.

Over the years, improvements and additions at the cave site were implemented. A large dance floor, encircled by a railing, was built on the bottom of the grotto. The orchestra perched on another platform attached to a side wall above the lake. Steep, sturdy wooden stairs were installed to the floor 50 feet below and seats were fashioned on the mossy banks under the maple trees.

A new ranch house inn built in 1898 carried on the tradition of lodging and meals for travelers. Trout were planted in the lakelet but needed to be hand-fed due to the inability of the water to sustain life. As Yosemite's popularity increased, travelers by the thousands came to see its fabled sights, with many of them stopping overnight at Bower Cave to add to their adventure. Locals also frequented the cavern to enjoy the magical spot for family outings, birthday parties, camp-outs, and dancing in the moonlight on soft, summer nights.

Even after Bower Cave dwindled in popularity as newer and quicker travel routes opened to Yosemite, there were brief sparks of rekindled interest. In February 1945, two years after Caroline's death at age 85, the Wenger heirs sold the property for \$17,000 to J.L. Rice of Modesto. Rice's dream was to develop the area into a rehabilitation center for disabled veterans, giving them an opportunity and a place "to get well and enjoy themselves" free of charge. However, he was never able to raise sufficient funds to make his worthwhile dream a reality. A tragic circumstance forced Mr. Rice into the decision to close the cave to the public; in the early 1950s a person plunged down the rotting staircase and was killed.

During Rice's ownership and at his request, a young Stanford marine biology student named Jon Lindbergh (son of the famous aviator) in 1953 became the first diver to explore the underwater environment. In the mid-1960s state officials were sufficiently impressed to examine Bower Cave as a possible state park. They were highly enthusiastic about the site's potential as a scenic tourist attraction of important historical significance. Unfortunately, the bond issue, which included the \$1.35 million Bower Cave project, failed to pass the approval of California voters. Finally, in 1981, Rice's widow sold the property to the Linkletter family corporation.

Research also uncovered an interesting anecdote in 1940 regarding J.N. Cavanaugh and Tom Satariano, Modesto movie-makers. Six short films were to be produced by the company, the first of which was to be shot at Bower Cave. Mr. Cavanaugh, obviously enchanted, stated that "In my ten years' experience in and about Hollywood...I have never found any stage construction to fit a fairy story as do the natural formations of Bower Cave...approaching the place one enters a rocky gateway and stands amazed looking downward through a green grove of trees...a small lake alive with trout...one stares amazed by the colorful rock formations arching overhead and expecting to see brownies, giants, elves scampering about or hiding in the natural balconies..." In August 1940 audition information was advertised locally; however, whether the film was actually produced is not known.

Resting quietly out of the public's eye or interest for many decades, Bower Cave is now back in the limelight. The cave and 835 acres of private land owned by the Linkletter family have recently been acquired by the Stanislaus National Forest. The Trust for Public Lands coordinated a complex land exchange to make this possible. Once again the Bower Cave area will be open for public use. Plans are underway for a visitor center, hiking and equestrian trails and camping/picnicking areas. At present, access is only allowed to the rim of the entrance because of the potential hazard of the cave site. A permit, issued by the Groveland Ranger District Office, must be obtained (in person or by mail) before entering the area.

The Bower Cave environs today are much the same as they were 140 years ago before discovery by white men. An old foundation or two and a few ancient apple trees are virtually the only clues to a long history of habitation. It still drowns peacefully in its near natural state. Perhaps you might enjoy taking a Sunday Drive to see it.

Getting There

From Coulterville: in Mariposa County (Highway 49): Southbound motorists turn left on County Road J132 (Main Street). A few blocks later, on the outskirts of town, the paved road is signed Greeley Hill Road. Proceed 6.5 miles to the village of Greeley Hill, pass through it and continue for 1.7 miles to where the road forks.

At the fork bear right on Greeley Hill Road and drive 4.2 miles to the unsigned North Fork of the Merced River bridge. Park on the left before crossing it. The stone historical monument is just across the bridge on your left, and the short walk to Bower cave begins behind it. Do not attempt to descend into the cave: the access is very dangerous until such time as the stairway is installed.

To obtain an access permit (in person or in writing): Groveland Ranger District Office, 24525 Highway 120, Groveland, CA 95321, (209) 962-7825.

Suggested Option: After examining the cavern area, take an easy walk downstream along the river as far as you like. Access to the pleasant, alder-lined trail is near the bridge behind a metal gate just off the road. Beautiful pools carved in granite are encountered 1/2 mile from the gate. Indian rhubarb and water grasses dot the shoreline, and there are many inviting places to linger and have a picnic lunch. Further downstream, about one mile from the gate, a lovely cascade glissades over smooth rock into Diana Pool, as locals call it.

Lodging and Services: Coulterville: Hotel Jeffery, (209) 878-3471; Groveland: Charlotte Hotel, (209) 962-6455; Buck Meadows: Buck Meadows Lodge, (800) 253-YOSE.

The Mossy Boulder

By Sharon Giacomazzi

About two millennia ago a Roman philosopher observed that chance makes a plaything of one's life. Fortunately for us, by chance John Muir was unable to find a ship to take him from Cuba to explore South American wilderness in 1867. Otherwise, he might have spent his life studying that continent instead of coming to California.

As soon as 29-year-old John Muir stepped off the steamer in San Francisco on March 27, 1868, he asked a tool-carrying carpenter for the quickest way out of town. "Where do you want to go?" the man inquired. "To any place that is wild," answered Muir. Startled by the odd reply and eager to get away from this intense young man, the carpenter promptly directed him to the Oakland ferry.

Thus began Muir's legendary journeys in California wilderness, and, yet unknown even to him, the birth of the western conservation movement to preserve wild beauty. Muir came to California when it was still wild. Not quite yet had sheep/cattle grazing, farming and lumbering blighted the virgin landscape. It was still pristine, "one sweet bee pasture" throughout its entire length and breadth.

Accompanied by a shipboard acquaintance named Chilwell, Muir started for Yosemite on April 1, carrying only his signature equipment: a blanket, tea, bread, and a notebook. Walking south to Gilroy and then east to Pacheco Pass, they trekked through a "landscape so covered with flowers they seemed to be painted." But from the summit Muir was even more stunned by the astonishing panorama below. Many years later he reminisced that of all he had seen in his explorations, the image of the flower-filled great Central Valley before him with the white-walled Sierra Nevada

shining on the far horizon was the most memorable, the most overwhelming. As pictured by Muir, it was an enormous "lake of pure sunshine, 40-50 miles-wide and 500 miles-long a vast flower garden level like a lake of gold." By compass, the two men waded through this glorious sea of wildflowers to the Merced River, crossed it and followed it to Yosemite Valley. After eight days of exploring, sketching, collecting specimens, and observing animal life, Muir was spellbound by Yosemite's Olympian grandeur and its rich biological and geological diversity. Unaware that he soon would be known as the "prophet of wilderness," Muir recognized his sense of place; by going to the mountains he had come home.

Determined to return to Yosemite for extensive field studies as soon as he earned enough money for provisions, Muir descended to the San Joaquin Valley and found work harvesting, shearing sheep, and breaking mustangs. Chilwell drifted away, but Muir stayed on as a shepherd, which allowed him ample time to study the flora and fauna of the area. Still wondering how he would be able to pack enough food for a summer excursion, rancher Pat Delaney solved the problem in May 1869. Delaney wanted a trustworthy man to supervise the movement of his 2500 sheep to the alpine meadows of high country. He promised Muir that a herder and his dog would do all the work, assuring him plenty of leisure to study rocks, plants and scenery.

By mid-June the "wooly bundles" had nibbled their way to a lovely meadow near the North Fork Merced River above Bower Cave. While encamped for a few days, Muir went roaming and had one of his numerous "mini" adventures that reveals his passion and reverence for wild things and wild places. His acquaintance with a mossy boulder teaches us that absolutely nothing escaped his laser-like vision; nothing was too insignificant or too commonplace for observation, study and notation. We glimpse his awareness of the perfect harmony and interrelationship of everything in the natural world. Through this encounter with a large chunk of granite, we can almost feel the fire that burned within Muir by understanding that for him everything in nature was simultaneously a research laboratory and a temple for worship. Walking along the North Fork, Muir was fascinated by the way ordinary spring flood waters pile small boulders into dams, creating cascades and flower-rimmed pool basins. Trees growing on flood deposits testified that more than a century had passed since a torrent of extraordinary proportions had swept downstream. Further evidence of some ancient deluge was provided by a roughly eight-foot cubical mass of granite firmly lodged in mid-channel. He concluded only a "master flood" could possibly have transported it.

As he rested on its nearly level, altar-like top, he was enchanted by the cascade's refreshing spray, the green pool outlined by lilies and foam bells and dappled sunlight sifting through a canopy of alder and flowering dogwood.

Comforted by the sylvan nook's gentle beauty and the "water music" of the fall and river slip-sliding past the altar rock he remarked, "the place seemed holy where one might hope to see God." After dark he returned to spend the night atop this woodland shrine and found it even more magical than by day. Deeply moved by the experience, he gave "thanks to God for this immortal gift."

Bushwhacking in rough, trailless terrain last spring, I clambered over gigantic downed conifers, juked through a maze of poison oak, and tip-toed among acres of nodding, pink bleeding hearts hoping I'd be able to find Muir's mossy boulder. Suddenly, unmistakably, there it was, standing firm and square and solitary as Muir described. Looking at the detritus of January 97's watery rampage in the Sierra, I marveled at the force of the "master flood" that carried it here. I knew that I had to get on top of it and connect with Muir's appreciation of this special place. And I, too, gave myself up to the same serene wildness that had soothed and nourished his soul 128 years ago.

Reluctantly, I left, thankful for this great man's lifelong battle to preserve our priceless natural heritage and for his advice to "climb the mountains and get their good tidings."

Cherry Lake

By Sharon Giacomazzi

Spring in the Sierra is a vibrant, joyful season. Beginning in the foothills in late February, Mother Nature orchestrates a glorious pageant of sights and sounds on her leisurely, six-month journey up the mountain slopes to the Sierra crest. The world of nature shrugs off winter dormancy according to elevation, not the calendar. How blessed we are to find springtime somewhere in the Sierra Nevada until August.

April and May are delightful months to join in the celebration of spring's annual reappearance in the mid-elevations of the central Sierra. The Cherry Lake environs, elevation 4,780 feet, offer the visitor a variety of recreational opportunities. Whether you choose to explore the area for a day or a week, Cherry Lake has something to suit most everyone's tempo and interests. Miles of forest byways to investigate, fishing, camping, hiking, boating and horseback riding in this peaceful setting will make it a favorite destination to revisit each year.

As paved Stanislaus National Forest Road 1N07 drops into Cherry Valley, the huge lake (268,000 acre-feet) created by damming its voluminous inlet stream looms into view. A dense forest surrounds the reservoir, and a herd of granite domes lining Cherry Creek Canyon draws the eye northward to snow-capped peaks of high country. The origin of the name is unknown, but Cherry Valley appeared on the 1878-79 Wheeler Survey map and was probably named for bitter cherry growing in the vicinity.

Most visitors are unaware that there is an important connection between Cherry Lake and Lake Don Pedro in Tuolumne County, or that both lakes owe their existence to San Francisco's vast Hetch Hetchy project. After O'Shaughnessy Dam was raised an additional 85 feet in 1938, Hetch Hetchy engineers headed to Cherry Creek (River) Canyon, about 17 miles northwest. Along with nearby Lake Eleanor and Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, Cherry Lake completed the trinity of high mountain lakes deemed necessary to ensure an adequate supply of water and power for San Francisco.

Although the valley had been tagged for use as a reservoir from the very beginning of the colossal project in the early 1900s, it wasn't until 1939 that the City began an eight-year-long series of studies and surveys. Frustrated and irritated by San Francisco's long-standing monopoly of the immense Tuolumne River watershed, Modesto and Turlock Irrigation Districts complained loudly at yet another plan to divert water for the City's exclusive use. A lengthy and often bitter water fight ensued, later joined by the federal government interested in flood control on the lower Tuolumne and San Joaquin Rivers.

Referred to as "those Hetch Hetchy sons of bitches" by valley irrigationists and skeptical residents, it ultimately took ten years for the four interested factions to hammer out a cooperative, mutually satisfactory agreement. A complicated, long-range deal was finalized in 1949, which involved San Francisco constructing a reservoir in Cherry Valley, and Modesto and Turlock Irrigation Districts, at a later date, developing a newer and larger dam at Don Pedro 1-1/2 miles downstream from the old dam built in 1923. With a storage capacity of 200 million acre-feet of water, Don Pedro became the fourth largest man-made lake in California. The town of Jacksonville, established in 1849 and once competing with Sonora as the largest town in the county, was fated to a watery grave by the tremendous expansion of Lake Don Pedro in 1969.

For flood control benefits, the federal government would contribute a total of \$14.5 million to the Cherry and Don Pedro projects. For the right to use 740,000 acre-feet of water storage in New Don Pedro Dam, the City agreed to pay \$45 million toward its \$100 million construction costs. In the final analysis, San Francisco cleverly "arranged for future water storage at one-fourth the costs of building several City-owned reservoirs at high mountain locations."

Originally named Lake Lloyd in honor of Harry Lloyd, Hetch Hetchy General Manager and Chief Engineer between 1953-1961, the \$13 million Cherry Valley project got underway in 1950 after timber had been cleared and shipped out on the Westside Lumber Company's logging trains. Because heavy equipment was necessary at the dam site, 26 miles of road were punched through steep canyons and over rugged mountain ridges. The old Early Intake Powerhouse on the Tuolumne supplied electricity, via a ten-mile-long wood pole line. A diversion tunnel, 17 feet in diameter and a 1/4-milelong, was drilled around the dam site.

Five years later, in 1956, the enormous, half-mile-long Cherry Dam was finished. The composite earth and rock embankment with an impervious core of compacted decomposed granite is 330 feet above bedrock and 1,320' thick at the base. A six-mile-long tunnel, 12 feet wide and 12-1/2 feet high, was drilled through granite to Dion Holm Powerhouse on the Cherry River near its confluence with the Tuolumne. The Lake Eleanor watershed supplements storage in the Cherry system by a mile-long tunnel bored through the ridge between the two lakes; it diverts Eleanor water into Cherry Lake, as needed.

History aside, Cherry Lake is an excellent destination to participate in spring's return to the mountains. The 25-mile drive itself, over hill and dale on paved Cherry Lake Road, is an eye-pleasing excursion. Although you do not need one to find your way, it's always a good idea to have a map. Stop at Groveland Ranger Station on Highway 120 and pick up a Stanislaus National Forest map to help acquaint you with the area.

Virtually the only evidence of civilization is the tiny San Francisco Water and Power Community at Early Intake on the Tuolumne River, about eight miles from Highway 120. As you get closer to the lake, you'll notice thousands and thousands of young pines spreading across the rolling landscape. In 1973 a monstrous conflagration, the "Granite Fire," devastated 18,000 acres of forest land. Within two years the Forest Service completed a "fire salvage harvest" and in 1975 implemented a massive reforestation program. The shiny, healthy pines you see are about 20 years old; a lush understory of lacy bracken fern provides an appealing contrast. This is a superb example of successful forest rehabilitation, something most people never witness.

Once you reach Cherry Lake, depending on your time and interests, a number of exploring options are available. About 1-1/2 miles before the lake, a sign points the way to Cherry Borrow Site camping area located on a flat along Cherry Creek. This is one of the many good spots for a picnic lunch or to try your luck at fishing. On a forested knoll about 1/2 mile past the turn-off to the dam is Cherry Valley Campground. A few of its 47 sites overlook the lake, and some are along a seasonal creek. If you have a boat or canoe, the lake's small island is an idyllic place to pitch your tent.

The Cherry Dam parking area is just beyond the ranger station and a few City of San Francisco houses. You can either drive or walk across the 2,600-foot-long dam to access other areas in the vicinity. Once you cross the dam, the road to the left continues for three miles around the lake and ends at a trailhead parking sign. The road to the right will take you to a locked gate at the boundary of Yosemite National Park. With map in hand, follow this good dirt road for about four miles and park your car. Beyond the gate, a ten-minute walk brings you to the shore of lovely Lake Eleanor. This is an easy, short trek to a serene body of Sierra water, complete with a rustic ranger station. You'll have the opportunity to see the graceful, arched dam which began the first phase of the highly controversial Hetch Hetchy project in 1917.

For the trip home, you can return the way you came back Highway 120. If you're still in an adventurous mode, an equally scenic but longer route follows Cottonwood Road (1N04) to Tuolumne City and on to Sonora. If you opt the latter byway, you'll get a chance to cross the Clavey River, recently saved from the clutches of Turlock Irrigation District's \$707 million hydro-electric venture which would have tamed one of the four completely wild rivers left in the entire Sierra Nevada range.

Bennettville

On the Road to Broken Dreams

By Sharon Giacomazzi

Bennettville: The Road to Broken Dreams. That's what someone once called the Great Sierra Wagon Road, now the portion of Highway 120 over Tioga Pass in Yosemite's high country. And what a sweet dream it was. But like most dreams of men hell-bent in pursuit of precious metals, it was short-lived.

Piercing like a dagger through the heart of this untouched wilderness, the road's western terminus was at Crocker's Station east of Buck Meadows extending to Bennettville near Tioga Pass. The Great Sierra Wagon Road, an epic example of road construction in the West, was built for the sole purpose of reaching the mining camps in the alpine region of Tioga Hill. It had nothing to do with opening the high country for the convenience of travelers or promoting its unrivaled scenic beauty. Sheer economics prompted the Great Sierra Consolidated Silver Company to punch a road through incredibly rugged terrain to service its mining operations and transport ore to market.

The Great Sierra Wagon Road was built in the phenomenally short time of 130 days without accidents or loss of life. Between April 17 and September 4, 1883, 160 Chinese and white laborers, using only hand tools and dynamite, completed the 56-1/2-mile project. Elevations ranged between 4,200 feet at Crocker's Station and nearly 10,000 feet at the summit of Tioga Pass. If you have driven Highway 120 to the crest, surely you will be impressed that such a feat could have been accomplished so rapidly, especially 100 years ago without modern equipment.

Just ten months after the road's completion, the Great Sierra Consolidated Silver Company ran out of cash, and the stockholders were unwilling to lend them more money. The amount of \$300,000, then a king's ransom, had been invested for road construction and mine development, but not one ounce of silver was ever milled. On July 3, 1884, orders were sent to the mine superintendent to shut down all operations at Bennettville and nearby Dana City.

Unemployed miners wandered off to other strikes, and stockholders became disillusioned. In 1888 all properties, including the road, were sold at public auction.

What happened to these men with such great expectations and staunch belief in the mother lode of silver at Tioga? How did they happen to find this remote and unexplored location on the Sierra crest? And why did their dreams melt away like spring snow?

By no means does the tale of Tioga Pass begin with the miners. Centuries before white men arrived in this wilderness, Native Americans on the eastern and western sides of the summit exchanged trade goods. For 9,600 years the Mono and Yosemite Indians used a transmontane route stretching between the Mono Lake environs and the Yosemite Valley area. The present-day Tioga Road, formerly the Great Sierra Wagon Road, approximately follows the course of the ancient Indian pathway known as the Mono Trail. In 1833 the first white man to travel the Mono Trail was explorer Joseph Walker. Not until nineteen years later do we have accounts of other white men in the region.

In 1852 Lieutenant Tredwell Moore of the Mariposa Battalion used the trail in pursuit of a band of Indians who supposedly killed two prospectors in Yosemite Valley. Moore was unable to find them, but he did return to Mariposa with some rich-looking ore samples. Although much interest was kindled by his specimens, no immediate rush followed. But, in the late 1850s when the easy pickings in the western foothills petered out, miners began to prospect in the higher and more isolated places.

In 1860 a group of five men set out to poke around for gold in the Tioga Pass area before heading east to the latest boomtown, Aurora. They found no gold, but one of the characters, Doc Chase, had a feeling that there was a "thundering big ledge of silver" on Tioga Hill. In a lather to get to the hot strikes at Aurora, he scratched out a claim on a tin can, stuffed it between two rocks and lit out for their planned destination. Why he never returned is a mystery. Fifteen years later a young shepherd, William Brusky, found the rusty tin can. Believing he had found the "lost" mine, he took some ore samples to his father who told him to forget the worthless rocks and stick to herding sheep. However, Brusky persevered, and the following year had the samples assayed. The results proved that the ore was indeed thundering rich in silver. Not surprisingly, the work spread like greased lightning, and miners stampeded to the scene. By 1878 the Tioga Mining District was humming with the activity of over 300 claims on record.

On the other side of Tioga Hill, parallel to Brusky's Shepherder Claim, another ledge of silver called the Great Sierra was discovered. Financed by \$8 million worth of shares in 1878, the Shepherder, Great Sierra and many smaller claims were purchased and combined by the Great Sierra Consolidated Silver Company. Mining experts agreed that a tunnel had to be drilled into Tioga Hill from the Shepherder lode at Bennettville. Simultaneously, men over the hill at Dana City were to sink a vertical shaft which was to meet the tunnel. The theory was that the tunnel would hit the two lodes at right angles, thus enlarging the layers of greatest richness.

Two rough-and-ready settlements sprouted at the mining sites. A post office at the "city" of Dana was established in 1880 and at Bennettville in 1882. Bennettville was company headquarters and connected to civilization by the world's highest telephone line, as it was touted, to the town of Lundy ten miles to the east.

Actual work began in February 1882 with three shifts of miners working around the clock. Very soon it became obvious that hand-drilling methods were impotent against the unusual hardness of rock they encountered; heavy drilling machinery and air compressors would be required to penetrate. At this time the mines were only accessible by trails from Lundy and Mono Pass. As you can imagine, hauling tons of supplies and equipment on the backs of men and animals at elevations of 10,000 feet and higher was punishing and grueling labor. Avalanches, 100 miles per hour winds, months of brutally cold weather and precipitous trails caused great suffering and loss of life. A road had to be built immediately to get supplies and equipment in and to get ore out. The task was headed by an eastern engineer, Charles Barney, and assisted by William Priest, engineer of the famous Priest's Grade on the Old Big Oak Flat Road. And what an amazing job they did: 56-1/2 miles in 130 days.

By the summer of 1884 almost 1,800 feet of tunnel had been bored into the mountain at Bennettville and 100 feet driven vertically from Dana City, but not a speck of silver was brought out. And the stockholders were getting very jittery. Drilling progressed at a snail's pace. Only 23 feet per week could be achieved in this ultra-dense rock. Highly competent mining experts were convinced that in another 200 feet they would strike the lodes. Time, just a little more time, was all they needed. But it was over. For Thomas Bennett, Joseph Parker and the Swift brothers, who were the prime movers of this monumental venture, the project had become a nightmare. The company went belly-up and suspended work on July 3, 1884.

Within three months Bennettville and Dana City joined the ranks of mining camp ghost towns. As a consequence, the Great Sierra Wagon Road was abandoned and fell into serious disrepair until its purchase in 1915 by Stephen Mather (first director of the National Park Service) for \$15,000 and deeded to Yosemite National Park. With the additional 11 miles completed to Lee Vining on the shore of Mono Lake, an unimaginably scenic, trans-Sierran route was available to travelers. Over the years the Tioga Road was extensively rehabilitated, realigned and paved to its current course and condition.

Many motorists have driven the Tioga Road unaware of the human drama involved in its construction. Still more are unaware that you can actually walk on a segment of the original track, "the road to broken dreams,"² to see for yourself the mine and the town that started it all. It's a short and easy walk. Here's how: .9 mile east of the Tioga Pass entrance station you'll spot a dirt road blocked by boulders; a piece of mining equipment and a wooden sign point the way. Park your car by the boulders, and continue on foot on the obvious dirt road to Bennettville, about one mile. Of the dozen or so buildings, only the assay office and two-story barn/stable remain. The wood has weathered to a lovely cinnamon-brown color. While you're wandering around, a little imagination will reveal where other buildings once stood. Sparkling Mine Creek lends a special charm as it chatters and rushes by.

The Shepherder Mine area above the ghost town is worth exploring, but you should NOT enter the tunnel because of unhealthful gas and other lurking dangers. As you overlook the ruins of Bennettville, thank your Higher Power that it never reached its projected population of 50,000! Had silver been discovered, the requirements for firewood and lumber for mine shafts and buildings would have been the death knell for the virgin forest you see spreading before you and as far away as Tuolumne Meadows. At this lofty elevation, Mother Nature's healing occurs slowly; 110 years later tracks of the Great Sierra Wagon Road are still visible through the meadow. However, except for the tunnel site, the landscape is very much the same as it was before the miners came. The abundance of wildflowers and other living things owe their lives to the absence of those multitudes.

Bennett, Parker and Swift went to their graves bitter and disappointed, believing to their last breath in the vast fortune locked away in Tioga. Although never fully utilized for its intended purpose, the Great Sierra Wagon Road amounted to an extraordinary and priceless legacy for future generations. Financially, the "road to broken dreams" was a disaster. But, if wealth can be measured in terms of exquisite alpine scenery, solitude and sweeping panoramas, then the road was a success by making it possible for all of us to share in the treasures of Tioga Pass.

The Tioga Road provides access to some of the most stunning vistas in the western United States. Whether you drive through it or, better yet, get your feet on its trails, spending some time in Yosemite's high country will satisfy a deep longing most of us have for contact with wild places. After a day in this timberline atmosphere perhaps you'll relate to the sentiments of Thoreau: "There's something in the mountain air that feeds the spirit and inspires."

Getting There

Head for Tioga Pass in Yosemite National Park via the eastern approach from Highway 395 or from the west on Highway 120. The Bennettville area is just outside the park boundary .9 mile east of the Tioga Pass entrance station. The signed trailhead can also be identified by a rusty piece of mining equipment. Park near the boulder-blocked old road, and walk on the obvious dirt track about one mile to the ruins of Bennettville and the Great Sierra Mine. Bring your camera the region is remarkably photogenic.

The closest services are at Tioga Pass Resort, two miles east of the entrance station on Highway 120. Housekeeping cabins, a store, a good restaurant and gas are available. Phone 209-372-4471 or write Post Office Box 7, Lee Vining, CA 93541.

The town of Lee Vining, twelve miles east of the entrance station, on the shore of Mono Lake, offers a variety of motels and restaurants. Many forest service campgrounds are located in Lee Vining Canyon and at Saddlebag, Ellery and Tioga lakes. Be prepared to be overwhelmed by the awesome and incomparable scenery in the high country. The 12-mile drive through dramatic Lee Vining Canyon is stunning. During autumn the quaking aspens sport dazzling shades of lemon yellow, orange and fiery red, providing a startling contrast to the muted tones of the metamorphic rock of this near vertical eastern escarpment. For information, books and maps, a stop at the Lee Vining Ranger Station near the base of the canyon is recommended.

ning to stay overnight, make reservations well in advance. An alternative is to secure lodging in Lee Vining.

For Information Call Or Write: June Lake Chamber of Commerce, June Lake, CA 93529, 619-648-7584; June Lake Properties, Reservations: 800-648-JUNE; Silver Lake Resort, 619-648-7525; Lee Vining Chamber of Commerce, 619-647-6629.