

A TALK BY JOHN MUIR

AFTER A DINNER GIVEN TO HIM AND CERTAIN MEMBERS OF THE
AMERICAN ALPINE CLUB BY JUDGE HARRINGTON PUTNAM AT
THE MANHATTAN HOTEL, NEW YORK, JUNE 17, 1911*

FROM NOTES BY ALDEN SAMPSON
(The introductory remarks were not recorded)

THE Calaveras Grove of Big Trees has the tallest sequoia, which is 325 feet in height. This grove is almost the most northerly of them all. The oldest sequoia is thirty-five feet and eight inches in diameter, not counting the bark, which is two feet thick, a total of four feet more to be added to the diameter. This tree was twenty-seven feet in diameter in the year 1, A.D. The oldest tree is four thousand years old. A clean plank could be cut from this tree two hundred feet long and ten feet wide, which would not a little excite the admiration of a Wisconsin or New England farmer.

When growing on a hillside sequoias always brace themselves a little, so that they lean toward the hill. When cut down they always fall uphill. The *Abies magnifica* grows to a height of 240 feet; I measured one of that height.

When I came to America I was eleven years old. I had by that time acquired some slight knowledge of Latin, French, and English. I soon made the acquaintance of the taws† of leather. The teacher took particular pains, whether we learned anything else or not, to make us familiar with this source of stimulation—and the pains were not all on one side either. In the first few Latin and French lessons the new teacher blandly smiled at our comical blunders, but pedagogical weather of the severest kind quickly set in, when for every mistake, everything short of perfection, the taws were promptly applied. We had to get three lessons every day in Latin, three in French, and as many in English, besides spelling, history, arithmetic, and geography.”‡ Between the age of ten and eleven I

* There were sixteen present at the dinner, viz., in the order of seating, Judge Putnam, John Muir, Professor Halleck, Alden Sampson, Mr. Vaux, B. F. Seaver, Mr. Freeborn, Mr. Delafield, H. G. Bryant, Arthur L. Rotch, Professor Ernest Brown, Mr. Bridgman, Mr. Adams, Mr. Curtis, Mr. Nichols, Professor Fay.

† A “taw” was a leather strap.

‡ *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*, p. 26.

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knew the New Testament by heart from the beginning of *Matthew* to the end of *Revelation*. I knew it right straight through, and lots of the *Old Testament* as well; all about the Hittites and the Jiggerites.*

My father read the Bible to us every day, prayed for us, and preached hell-fire early and late. Our home in Scotland was near Dunbar Castle. As a lad I used to climb its craggy ruins, and so learned to be a mountaineer.

Our home in Wisconsin was situated in the "oak openings" where there was a scattered growth of four or five trees to the acre, mainly burr oaks.

I went into the Yosemite forty-three years ago last April [1868]. I had just arrived in California from Florida and Cuba by the way of New York and Panama, and went directly to the Yosemite Valley.

In going into the Sierra we went by the Coulterville Road. In places the snow was still ten feet deep; so deep that the blazes on the trees were often covered up, and we had sometimes to guess as to our route. A young Englishman who had been on the ship with me from Panama was my companion.† The trip lasted a month and cost us three dollars each. I had a long time been determined to see the Sierra. I wanted this so badly that the first thing I knew I was there. If a man wants a thing, it comes to him. After this trip, which my book describes,‡ I went back to the Yosemite for five years. When I had been there two years, Emerson came in, with his son and Prof. Thayer. I saw a good deal of Emerson; he came to see me every day.

I made a thousand dollars by working in a saw-mill while I was in the Yosemite during these years. When I was in college, at the University of Wisconsin, I never spent more than a dollar a week for my board, and out of that sum I had also to buy chemicals and apparatus. Many a month I had only fifty cents a week left for my support, and lived largely on crackers. My vacations I spent in the wheat fields, cradling wheat.§

* "About three-fourths of the Old Testament," he says in *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*.

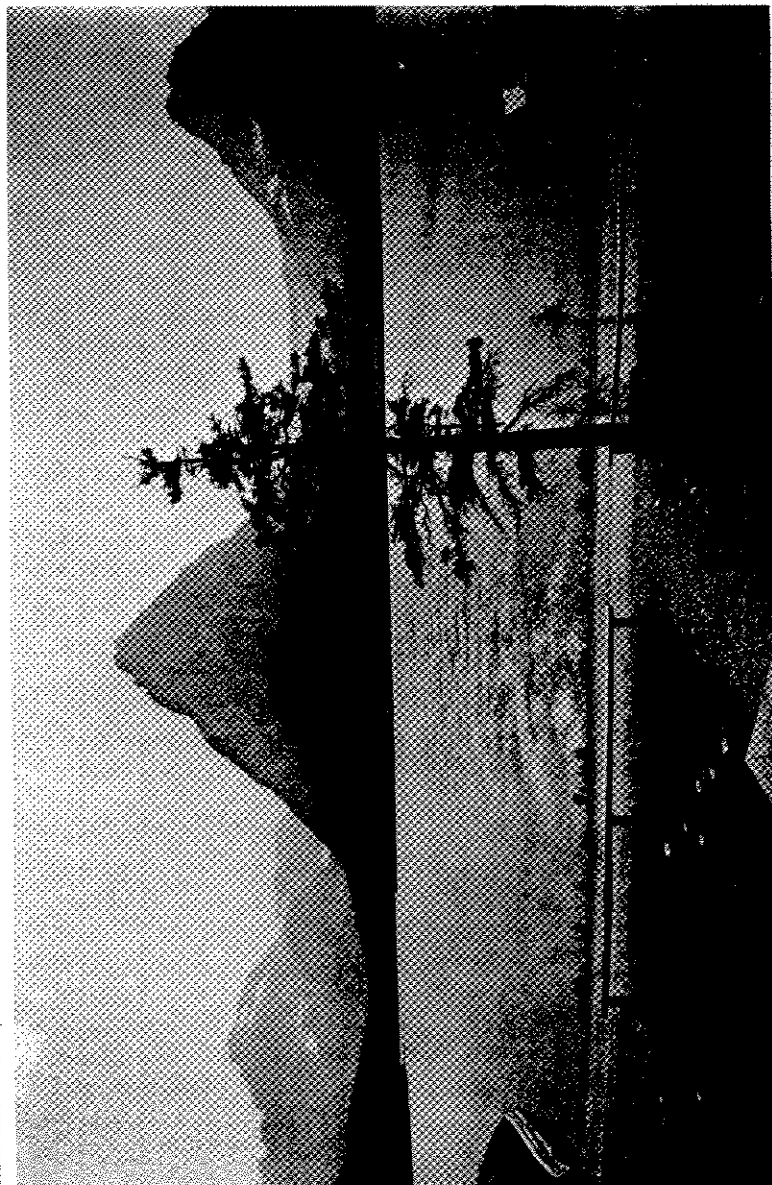
† A Mr. Chilwell, who had been in the steerage with him on his sea voyage from Panama.

‡ *My First Summer in the Sierra*, then just published—1911.

§ "During the four years that I was in the University, I earned enough in the harvest fields during the summer vacations to carry me through the balance of the year, working very hard, often cradling four acres of wheat a day, and helping to put it in the shock. But, having to buy books and paying, I think, thirty-two dollars a year for instruction, and occasionally buying acids and retorts, glass tubing, bell-glasses, flasks, etc., I had to cut down expenses for board now and then to half a dollar a week."—*The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*, p. 220.

UPPER ST. MARY LAKE FROM GOING-TO-THE-SUN CHALET, GLACIER NATIONAL PARK
Photograph by Walter I. Huber





McDERMOTT LAKE, GLACIER NATIONAL PARK
 Photograph by Walter L. Huber

Among the sequoias is shown the record of a big wind storm which occurred 300 years ago,—between three and four hundred years ago. Many trees were then blown down, and the fallen trunks lie there prostrate now in fairly good preservation. The time of this fall can be determined with reasonable accuracy.

The coast redwood is the tallest tree in the world. One of these on Eel River is nine feet in diameter and 340 feet long. Some are even longer than that. Whitney, the state geologist of California,* printed in a guide book the statement that one of these trees measured 480 feet in length. Baron Müller had heard some one say so, and Thayer put this statement in his book without verification. A tree in Rob Roy Gulch was "160 feet in circumference," and "the Hugh Miller tree was 97 feet in diameter, four feet from the ground." *The National Geographic Magazine* repeated this story. That is all fudge.

In the whole Sierra there isn't a sneeze, but I was quite unable to convince Emerson that this was so. Although I tried my best, I could not persuade him to sleep out of doors the night that we visited the Wawona grove of big trees. He and those with him had formed the house habit beyond all possibility of change. He feared some mysterious influence of the night air. My father had the same idea. To think of that being a Scotch habit! I long had the idea of writing a book to be called: "Keep your nose out of doors." I was seventeen hours on Mt. Shasta once, in a snow storm, in my shirt sleeves, and took no harm from it. There was something very queer about that storm; it was accompanied by awful thunder, ("the most tremendously loud and appalling ever heard").†

To me timber-line and bread-line were synonymous. On my tramps in the Sierra, I carried a bag of bread; this when descending I always rolled down hill ahead of me, so it soon became a bag of bread crumbs. This lasted me three weeks. I first dried it out thoroughly, and it would then, with care, keep for any length of time without getting mouldy.

To my father who was solicitous lest the devil should misguide my steps I once wrote, "Father don't trouble yourself about the devil so far as I am concerned. The devil never gets above timber-line."

In my camps at timber-line I would keep a fire going all night,

* Josiah D. Whitney, afterward professor at Harvard College.

† *Steep Trails*, p. 72.

made from the pitchy roots of the *Albicaulis* pine. I would seek shelter under the lee of these dwarf pines, which grow so solidly matted and packed together, like the top of a spruce or hemlock hedge, that one could walk on their tops without sinking through. The wind always draws down hill at night on the mountains, so one could seek shelter with entire assurance as to which way it was going to blow. Having no blanket I could sleep only twenty minutes to a half hour at a time before I would be awakened by the cold. I would start up the fire and get a little warmed, and then try it again, and so wear the night out. When I was asleep one side of me roasted, while the other froze. In the morning I was naturally stiff and cold, but soon from the effect of tea and sunshine I felt "lifted up." It was physiological radium, Scotch radium. My impulse then was to run and shout.

You can't take cold if you keep your nose out of doors. In Alaska once I spent nine days on the ice. It was all a delight to me. It was a wonder how a creature with so slight sustenance could be so glad. I caught cold once after such a trip. To cure it I plunged into a pool of ice water and then into a bearskin bag. It was a complete cure. No microbe could stand that.