



John Muir Writings

Yosemite in Spring

by John Muir (1872)

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The Reign of the Earthquake — The Beauties of the Falls — The Time for Tourists

YOSEMITE VALLEY, May 7th, 1872. The salons of our State Capitol have disbanded—disintegrated from the awful majesty of Senate and House to common men, who have betaken themselves to their taverns and ranches without giving us one Yosemite law, save our paltry one-thousand dollar appropriation for salary of Guardian. A great deal of chatter took place at different times during the Session, about smooth mountain highways and solid appropriations for the settlement of “claims”, but the several Bills, after being tossed from House to Senate, from Senate to committees, were nibbled to death, and we are left to providence for another year, roadless and moneyless, with only a thousand dollar drop of legislation for the burning thirst of our rights and wrongs. There be some who would shed the salt tear for unmitigated soreness of our Sierra Eden woes, not for the distracting uncertainties of private claimants, which are deplorable enough, but for our rugged unapproachableness and improvement discouragements. To such mourners these earthquake storms may seem sympathetic—Yosemite sighing through all her works, giving signs of woe that all is lost. But the billed laws of Sacramento, and paper compulsions and prohibitions of our managing commissioners, do us little harm or good. Human sparrows of improvement will not ruffle El Capitan, and he needs no legal props; he can stand alone. The Falls will manage their harmonies well enough and the birds will sing, and meadows grow green notwithstanding any quantity of the hush or buzz of Sacramento flies. Xerxes made laws for the sea; we make laws for the mountains—make “Commissioners to manage Yosemite Valley,” as we’ll make Commissioners for the management of the moon.

This Yosemite portion of the Sierra Nevada mountains still yields supple compliance to the time and rhyme of earthquakes, and most of our one-score-and-ten inhabitants are over-satisfied with their uncountable abundance, and

at every new burst of shock-waves, and subterranean thunders, declare that it is “full time them goings on down there were lettin’ up,” for though founded on a rock, some of us consider our houses insecure, and fear they sink fast by our native shore. Since the severe opening shocks of March 26th, the valley has not been calm for a single day. About the middle of April the earthquakes and rumblings became so gentle that they were found only by those who sought for them, and it was general believed among us that our rocking domes were about to return to trustworthy solidity and fixedness, but a few days ago they were all atremble again.

THE MANNERS OF THE EARTHQUAKE

Since March 26th, we have enjoyed, on the average, about a dozen shocks per day; most of those consisted of a few moderate horizontal thrusts or jars, kept up for fifteen or twenty seconds, with rarely a mingling of twisting motions and blows from underneath. They have occurred at all hours of the night and day, and in all kinds of weather, snow, rain, or sun. There was no preceding murkiness of sky observable, nor extraordinary quietude, and however bird and beast may read foretelling signs of upper storms, they seem ignorant as man of those below. While the varied stream of life flows confidingly on, and our mountains repose in blue sky or storm smooth, rumbling sounds are heard from below, which are followed by gentle or swift shattering oscillations, mostly from north to south, or parallel with the range. The regularity of these initial oscillations is disturbed by similar less intense oscillations, from east to west, perhaps finishing up by a sudden twisting or upjolting. As soon as the mountains are let alone, they undulate gently back to rest with smooth, slow motion, like the calming waters of a lake. Earthquakes have provoked lively discussions concerning the formation of the valley, and most believe beyond, or rather behind, the regions of doubt that Yosemite is an earthquake crack produced by a hard crack of an earthquake. A severe earthquake storm occurred in Yosemite Valley two or three hundred years ago. Unmistakable history of this storm is written in huge avalanche slopes a thousand-fold greater than those of the present storm, but corresponding with them in minutest particulars of structure. There is evidence of the simultaneous formation of the different portions of the same slopes, and also the simultaneous occurrence of all the principal slopes on both sides of the valley. A fair approximation to the period of the formation of these slopes may be possible by ascertaining the age of the oldest trees grown upon them because their first generation of forest has not yet passed away. But the severity of the earthquake, which made these slopes cannot be correctly measured by the size of the slopes. We have all become philosophers, deep thinkers. Instead of wasting breath when we meet on the green of meadows or brightness of the sky, we salute by great shakes, solemnly comparing numbers and intensities. What care we for the surface of things. Our thoughts go far below to the underground country where roll the strange thunders, and the waves to which our mountains are a liquid ocean and a sky. Half believing, we paint hypothetic landscapes of the earth beneath, volcanic fountains, lakes, and seas of molten rock fed by a thousand glowing rivers. Amazons of gurgling, rippling fire flowing in beveled valleys, or deep Yosemite cañons, with a glare of red falls and cascades, with which our upper valley, in all its glory, will not compare.

THE WATERFALLS

These forty days of earthquake ague have made no visible alteration to the health of the valley. Now is the birth-time of leaves; the pines are retassled, and the oaks are sprayed with young purple. Spring is fully committed. Ferns are a foot high, willows are letting fly drifts of ripe seeds. Balm of Gilead poplars, after weeks of caution, have launched their buds full of red and leaves of tender glossy yellow. Cherries, honeysuckles, violets, bluets, buttercups, larkspurs, gillias, are full of bloom of leaf and flower. Plant-odor fills the valley in light floating clouds and mists; it covers the ground and trees, the chaparral and tabled rocks, coming in small flakes from the impartial stow. Standing on the smooth, plushed meadows, bossed here and there with willows, and browned along the edge with dead ferns, the yellow spray of white-stemmed poplars is seen against the purple of oaks and the high green groves of pine, back of which rise purple and gray-rock walls fringed with glossy green live-oak, spotted with the yellow and orange of mistletoe. The scents and sounds and forms of Yosemite spring-time are as exquisitely compounded as her colors. The weather is warm. The noonday temperature is about 65° Fahr. In the shade; night temperature, about 45°; and the abundant snows of our compassing mountains are freely melted into flooded streams. Beside the five principal falls of the valley—Pohono, Illouette, Vernal, Nevada and Yosemite—there are at present fed from the universal snows a large number of smaller cascades and falls, which come down on steps from a few feet to thousands of feet in height. The best known of these are the Big and Little Sentinel, Cascades, the Bachelor’s Tears, and the Virgin’s Tears—

magnificent weepers both of them. El Capitan is softened with a most graceful little stream that steals confidently over his massive brow in a clear fall of more than a thousand feet. Seen at the right time the whole breadth of this fall is irised almost from top to bottom. But of all the white outgush of Yosemite waters, the Upper Yosemite Fall is the greatest. It is on the north side of the valley and about 1,600 ft in height. Its waters gather from a basin filled with domes, which reaches back to the edge of the main Tuolumne River cañon, a distance in a straight line of ten to twelve miles. The size of Yosemite Creek, near the brink of the valley, in the months of May and June, in a snow season like the present, is where the current runs at the rate of three miles an hour, about twenty-five feet in width and four feet in depth. Those who have not visited this fall can have little conception of the forms and sounds that water can develop when, after being churned and foamed, it is launched free in air and left for 1,600 feet to its own devices. Few persons see this fall at a distance of less than a mile, and very little intimation is granted at so uncordial a distance of its surprising glory. It is easily approached on the north side by a climb up the rocks to an altitude of 1,200 feet.

Seen from up the valley near Lamon's, at about 8 A.M., a cross-section five or six hundred feet in length is most gorgeously irised throughout—not as a motionless arc, but as a living portion of the fall with ordinary forms and motions of shooting rockets and whirling sprays of endless variety of texture transformed to the substance of rainbow melted and flowing. At this Upper Yosemite Fall, and also at the Middle Yosemite Fall, magnificent lunar bows may be found for half a dozen nights in the months of April, May, June, and sometimes July. If the weather continues sunful, the falls will speedily attain to highest development. May and June are usually branded best for visits to the region; but those who behold the legions of Yosemitees that are encamped around and beyond Yosemite so-called, should come any time from the end of June to the end of October. The Spring visiting campaign has just been opened by half a dozen skirmishing parties, who reached the valley by forced marches, mostly from Mariposa; but all three of the war trails will soon be opened, although Tamarac and Crane Flat, on the Big Oak Flat and the Coulterville roads are still deeply snow-clad. Tourists will find no difficulty procuring bread and smiles—bread at three dollars a day smiles free—both articles in abundance, and excellent in quality.

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