

FORGET-ME-NOT: REMEMBERING PARK RANGER AND ALPINE BOTANIST CARL SHARSMITH

By Laura J. Sefchik

CARL W. SHARSMITH, FAMOUS YOSEMITE RANGER-NATURALIST, died peacefully in bed in his San Jose, California, winter home on October 14, 1994, at the age of 91. As the angel chorus sang to welcome Carl into paradise on that morning, the heavens were sending snow down on his beloved Tuolumne Meadows, furnishing a blanket for his alpine plants. The flowers rest early this year.

Carl may be remembered as the oldest and longest serving national park ranger, as an expert alpine botanist, as professor emeritus of botany at San Jose State University, as discoverer of previously unclassified wildflowers, or for establishing the herbarium at the university, which now bears his name, but he will be best remembered as Tuolumne Meadows' best-loved naturalist. Carl was an inspiration to all and has influenced thousands of children and adult visitors to Yosemite. I am one of those, having first met Carl on his meadow walk in June 1987. He was magical and delightful while encouraging all of us to develop a greater appreciation for wilderness. Carl's love for the flowers and the mountains defined his life, which he joyfully shared with all park visitors and friends.

Wallace Stegner, Pulitzer prize-winning author, once said, "A place is not fully a place until it has had its poet. Yosemite and the Sierra Nevada have had two great poets, Muir and Adams." The third great poet of Yosemite is Carl Sharsmith. He looked on Tuolumne Meadows and its high country peaks with reverence and had been delighted with the white blossoms of sweet cassiope, and exhilarated by continually learning nature's secrets.

Tuolumne Meadows in Yosemite National Park had been Carl's summer home since 1931. He was its first ranger-naturalist and its best friend since John Muir. Carl was greatly influenced by Muir having first discovered his writings as a boy. Carl noted, "I always knew about Yosemite because I knew the writings of John Muir by heart; and I was all prepared to see what I saw. Studying at the Yosemite Field School in 1930 was just the most wonderful thing I could do; and it led to an invitation to become a ranger-naturalist."

For decades, Carl led park visitors on ranger programs that engendered love for these mountain places. Consequently, he gained a good following to help protect park resources. He also understood what motivates people to learn, saying, "I find people are not interested in facts. The greater appeal is to the heart." In the Robert Redford film, "Yosemite: The Fate of Heaven," we can see Carl's playfulness, his romance with nature, his wisdom, and his heartfelt desire

that, "we bring back the primitive, primeval condition that formerly existed in the park." Carl's nature writings from 1931-1978, to be published soon in the book, "A Naturalist in Yosemite," encourage us to experience the joy of observation and investigation into nature's beauty in much the same way his nature walks delighted us.

Like Muir and Adams, Carl will have a peak named for him soon, perhaps the Tuolumne Meadows region peak, Peak 12,002', his "sundial."

He already has several wildflowers named for him. One is the beautiful forget-me-not flower, *Hackelia sharsmithii*, which grows only in the shadow of the rocks in the Mt. Whitney area. But Carl, the poet, and venerable ranger-naturalist who obtained extreme delight in explaining the life of the meadows, would want us to honor him by having each one of us develop a greater appreciation of the wilderness to which he had dedicated his life.

Working in Tuolumne Meadows is how Carl spent his last summer. "What else would I do? Tuolumne Meadows is home to me, so to speak. It is the happiest place in the mountains. God blessed this place. This is the place that holds; this is the place that charms," he said. He told me that in Tuolumne Meadows, his spirit had found its home. 



Ranger Carl Sharsmith, 1903-1994

PHOTO BY JIM LONG

Laura J. Sefchik lives in Yosemite and works for the Sierra Club Le Conte Memorial in Yosemite Valley. She leads children and their parents on nature hikes and presents evening slide programs. She plans to publish Sharsmith's nature writings this spring. Her phone number is (209) 372-4101.