

THE YOSEMITE VALLEY

By Anastasia Bogdanova

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Nature has always fascinated us – it has a calming, sedative, soothing effect, inciting true inspiration, allowing us to get away from our man-made conveniences and step into the “great temple which we had come to worship.”¹ Since 1820, our world has become increasingly industrialized – we have a variety of conveniences that make life easier and brighter; however, everyday crowds, movement, responsibilities, stress can be overwhelming, and people need peaceful time spending as well. Many enjoy a contact with nature, especially because it has become very accessible. The environment has been appreciated through countless generations, but people have also recognized that it’s extremely prone to destruction as a result of man’s actions. The spread of industrialization in nineteenth century United States and its effect developed preservation consciousness, and led to the Conservation Movement. People were interested in developing, preserving and protecting natural resources “...for the benefit of the many, and not merely for the profit of a few.”² During this era, naturalists wrote texts aimed at acquainting the general public with America’s nature resources, and magazine articles enriched by drawings were very popular. An example is “The Yosemite Valley” by J.L. Wiseley. The main theme of this article is nature, but the writer also describes travel inconveniences, includes calculations as well as references to society and religion; it is equally interesting for those who want to read his subjective comments and for those that prefer objective facts.

¹ J. L. Wiseley, "The Yosemite Valley, California," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, May 1866, <http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/pageviewer?coll=moa&root=/moa/harp/harp0032/&tif=00707.tif&view=50&frames=1> (accessed October 6, 2008).

² Gifford Pinchot, *The Fight for Conservation* (1910; repr., Echo Library, 2008).

This nature essay is found in the May 1866 issue of Harper's New Monthly Magazine. This periodical made its debut in June 1850 and was printed by the publishing firm Harper & Brothers. The initial press run of 7,500 copies sold out immediately, and within six months circulation had reached fifty thousand issues. Although the earliest issues consisted largely of material that had already been published in England, the magazine soon began to print the work of American artists and writers. Nowadays its name has been shortened to Harper's Magazine.³ Wiseley only wrote one article for it – "The Yosemite Valley, California" - and there is no evidence of his works for other magazines. The Yosemite Valley narration is accompanied by illustrations based on photographs taken by C.L. Weed,⁴ who was a landscape photographer and is well known for taking the first photographs of Yosemite in 1859. Wiseley's article provides detailed descriptions of the area while the copies of photographs help imagine the scenery even better. People like him helped attract others to America's nature wonders through informative and pleasant writings.

The main function of Wiseley's article is to describe his trip, which is why he puts in many details along with rich adjectives. The author uses a big vocabulary, so he probably was well educated. He realized the need to use such words because they incite feelings – readers feel pity in drought descriptions, compassion in travel inconvenience references, and, of course, fascination with nature sceneries. Not surprisingly, most of the article skillfully portrays sights found along the way. They are marvelous and admired by people from all over the world today, but in present times we are more used to them. Even

³ 1. "About Harper's Magazine," Harper's Magazine, <http://www.harpers.org/harpers/about> (accessed November 14, 2008).

⁴ Wiseley, "The Yosemite Valley," 708

someone who has never been to a National park can easily access pictures, movies, articles, books about these places. Today nature territories can easily be reached through well-constructed roads. Moreover, resources such as maps are provided, a lot of statistical information is known, and tourists know what to expect in a park area. In the times of Wiseley, the situation was completely different. The first expedition to Yosemite occurred in 1851; several visitors followed in subsequent years, and the tourist history of the place began only in 1855, when the first illustration of Yosemite scenery was given to the public and the view descriptions were published.⁵ Wiseley visited the valley in 1866, and there were exploration opportunities on every step of the way. Of course, this incited a great amount of fascination, because he knew that he was visiting a place others only heard about. His admiration is very sincere and bright, he masterfully makes use of literary devices to convey his feelings. We can find personification – “the cave is an ... opening looking toward the sky,” “the Merced River ... murmured a last farewell,” “frowning walls of rock,” “the ascending sun threw the long shadows,”⁶ and others. Through the use of such expressions that author compares nature scenes to human actions. Also used are metaphors: “bald mountains of solid granite raised their hoary crowns in proud relief, and sent down long dripping spurs which were lost in depths we could not yet survey.”⁷ The crowns are the tops, which had snow on them. The mountains were much higher than the valley, and this made them “proud.” Nevertheless, the scenery created a calm and peaceful view. Also, the rocky peaks were contrasting to the surrounding landscape, which had vegetation. Waterfalls are described as “long dripping spurs,” and this is a very elaborate

⁵ Ralph S Kuykendall, "Early History of Yosemite Valley California," *The Grizzly Bear*, July 1919, http://www.yosemite.ca.us/library/early_history_of_yosemite_valley/ (accessed September 30, 2008).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 698-701

⁷ *Ibid.*, 699

metaphor. Another device used is a simile, such as "it [the El Capitan Rock] is smooth and bright as if freshly burnished."⁸ In addition, we can also find countless epithets: "bewildering mirage," "illusive horizon," "frightfully steep," "sylvan banks"⁹ and many others. All in all, there are many beautiful descriptions drawing vibrant pictures.

However, not many people were coming to visit the place. First of all, as the information about Yosemite exploration suggests, tourism had started only recently, and the general public was acquainted with the place only through articles, photographs and pictures. Of course, the area didn't have modern conveniences. People travelled on horseback, and the author mentions canter as the speed they used.¹⁰ It is a natural gait possessed by all horses, usually faster than the trot but slower than the gallop. Its speed is about 10-17 mph.¹¹ "Canter" is short for Canterbury pace, from the supposed easy pace of medieval pilgrims to Canterbury.¹² As the etymology suggests, the author and his companion were travelling at a calm pace, yet moving continuously. Travel was much more time-consuming -for example, it took the visitors the time from noon to dusk to reach a place 17 miles from their starting point.¹³ They spent much time in Bower cave, but the bad dusty roads also reduced their speed to a lower value.

Since there were no other means of transport, horses were very loved. In 1848, Joseph Warren Revere wrote: "After his wife and children, the darling objects of a Californian's heart are his horses. In this respect he is not surpassed by the Arab... [and] the

⁸ Ibid., 703

⁹ Ibid., 699

¹⁰ Ibid., 697

¹¹ "Horse Speed in MPH," The Ultimate Horse Site, <http://www.ultimatehorsesite.com/info/horsespeedmph.htm> (accessed September 30, 2008).

¹² *Merriam Webster Online Dictionary*, s.v. "Canter," <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/canter%5B2%5D> (accessed September 30, 2008).

¹³ Wiseley, "The Yosemite Valley," 698

lineage of the California horse is undoubtedly of the purest and highest... all derive their descent from the Andalusian horse... pure Arabian descent ..." In California, consequently, there grew up an astonishing "society on horseback". Walter Colton stated that Californians swing casually into the saddle to ride a few yards or a few hundred miles. Even today California has the largest horse population in the United States.¹⁴ Horses were commonly used, but of course they weren't as convenient as modern transport. "On account of the constant attention required to prevent me from coming leap-frog over the horse's head I preferred walking, or rather sliding, at the steepest parts," writes Wiseley about a descent.¹⁵ These animals were not fit for valley travel: "Among several of those gulches it is possible for a man to scramble out to the exterior world, but nowhere can a horse get in or out, excepting ... where there are two trails. ... I learned that a jackass was once taken into the valley at the upper end, but had to be lowered with ropes at some places."¹⁶ Horses had limitations just like humans, and were not suitable for the dangerous environment unless trails were created.

As for accommodation, the park entrepreneurs had already built some lodges. The first house in Yosemite was built in the fall of 1856 and was opened up the next spring as a saloon for the entertainment of that class of visitors who loved whisky and gambling. The next year it was fitted up and used as a restaurant. Several years later it was enlarged and known as Black's hotel.¹⁷ Wiseley stayed the first night at Black's ranch, maybe referring to

¹⁴ Betty Patchin Greene and Susann Heidrich, "The Arabian Horse in America," *Saudi Aramco World*, March-April 1986, <http://www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/198602/the.arabian.horse-in.america.htm> (accessed October 22, 2008).

¹⁵ Wiseley, "The Yosemite Valley," 699

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 702

¹⁷ Galen Clark, *Yosemite - Past and Present* (1909), http://www.yosemite.ca.us/library/yosemite_past_and_present/ (accessed October 5, 2008).

Black's hotel; he was satisfied with it: "Here we found plenty of good hay for our horses, and excellent accommodations for ourselves, at a very moderate figure."¹⁸ Transport animals were probably not available for change in the valley: "horses and saddles were our main necessities, and we took little else" - provisions for the travelers and horses could be obtained at the lodges.¹⁹ The narrator had a pleasant stay at Black's ranch, but this wasn't the case at a cabin near the Yosemite Fall: "Our landlord scattered some withered grass and leaves round the outside of the structure and set them on fire. This, he said, was to drive the ants away. I think the precaution must have had the opposite effect, for when we retired we found as many inside as the building appeared capable of accommodating. ... We rested tolerably well, suffering no annoyance when we lay still, but in no case would our tormentors brook the least disturbance without retaliating."²⁰ Ants in a lodge are something hard to imagine today, but this wasn't unusual at the time of the author because the conveniences were limited. The innkeepers tried to resolve problems with different technologies, but, as the excerpt above suggests, some were certainly in vain. To sum it up, travel was exhausting, difficult and dangerous because of the limitations of horses as well as inconveniences that sometimes occurred in rest places. This helps modern readers admire the early visitors for their love of nature and desire to share it with others in spite of hardships.

Apart from his personal position on the surrounding landscape, the author presents readers calculations, such as road lengths and object sizes. This allows readers to fully imagine the grandeur of the scenery as well as consists of factual information, not just the

¹⁸ Wiseley, "The Yosemite Valley," 698

¹⁹ Ibid., 697

²⁰ Ibid., 700

author's subjective opinions on the surroundings. On the first page we are provided with an insight about their accuracy: "The distance we understood to be from forty-eight to sixty miles, varying, not according to the route taken – for there is only one – but according to the diversity of travelers, as to trim and endurance."²¹ The author points out that even though there is only one route which has a fixed distance, different lengths were specified by different people he asked – some might have been less enduring, and the way seemed longer to them than it really is; on the other hand, another traveler might have been well fit. This shows that the area wasn't explored enough and more or less exact calculations haven't been made. Some of Wiseley's estimations are very good: when speaking about the size of Bower cave he says: "It is over a hundred feet deep across the mouth, and about the same in depth."²² Subsequent travelers give slightly different values: In 1868, John S. Hittell writes: "The cave is a crevice one hundred and thirty-three feet long and eighty-five feet wide at the widest, with a slope of about sixty degrees to the horizon."²³ As we can tell, the visitors gave approximations according to their views, and Hittell's calculations sound more precise; however, other authors wanted to put more emphasis on description rather than possibly bore the audience with facts. All in all, it can be difficult to find the size of an object even with modern technology, that it why approximations are made based on expert judgment. In the 19th century authors did their best to give travelers at least a general idea of the size, using more precise calculations when possible and when the style of their writing permitted.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 698

²³ John S Hittell, "Bower Cave," in *Yosemite: Its Wonders and Its Beauties* (1868), http://www.yosemite.ca.us/library/yosemite_its_wonders_and_its_beauties/bower_cave.html (accessed October 1, 2008).

The article also features references which provide insights to California's social structure. For example, the author writes patriotically when describing Fourth of July celebrations in Coulterville, his starting point. Coulterville was founded in 1849 by Chinese people, and is still an active town. In early 1850 George W. Coulter established a small tent store at this location to supply miners. He followed up the store with a hotel, and the nucleus for the town was established. During the Gold Rush it was a major gold mining and supply center.²⁴ In 1874 the first road built into Yosemite Valley started from this town.²⁵ Eventually, there were three thousand American miners plus the Chinese in the city. The Americans left the placer operations to the foreigners and centered their efforts on the hillsides to establish the rich hard rock mines.²⁶ Wiseley calls Coulterville a "loyal little town"²⁷, indicating that the Americans who lived there were very sincerely patriotic in their Independence Day celebrations. Other groups did not take part in these activities, and the author was not pleased- he refers to those preparing to celebrate as "the good people of the place", contrasting them with other groups. Americans were proud of their country and actively commemorating a special day, and "would not be the first to forget their country's history and the memory of their fathers,"²⁸ while the Chinese abstained from participation. A journalist of the time points out special cultural features that the Chinese have, indicating that these people are perceived as very different from Americans, and states: "It is urged

²⁴ Gary B Speck, "History of Coulterville, Mariposa County," Ghost Town USA, <http://freepages.history.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~gtusa/usa/ca/coulterville.htm> (accessed September 29, 2008).

²⁵ Richard J Hartesveldt, "Yosemite Valley Place Names," Yosemite Online, http://www.yosemite.ca.us/library/yosemite_valley_place_names/ (accessed September 29, 2008).

²⁶ "Coulterville - California Ghost Town," Ghost Towns and History of the American West, <http://www.ghosttowns.com/states/ca/coulterville.html> (accessed September 30, 2008).

²⁷ Wiseley, "The Yosemite Valley," 697

²⁸ Ibid.

that the Chinese are of no benefit, either by industry or trade, to the community; jealously hoarding every ounce of gold, and returning to China with it. They buy no American clothing, generally bringing their own stock, and living mainly upon rice, which they also bring with them.”²⁹ The Chinese strongly held to their national customs and weren’t interested in adopting American values, so they were looked upon as inferior. This led to consequences: “The immigration of Chinese into California has attracted the attention of Congress. It appears that the Chinese immigrants, on settling there, persist in maintaining their allegiance to China; and under these circumstances the Senate voted a resolution, December 19, making inquiry into the propriety of discouraging such emigration.”³⁰ This is an example of an ethnical group that was prejudiced against for not adhering to American standards, such as Fourth of July Celebrations.

Nowadays, such an attitude towards foreigners is unacceptable – the USA is often described as a “melting pot” of cultures, and we must be tolerant so that ethnical, racial and religious issues don’t get in the way. Americans should be more acquainted with foreign traditions – this would motivate contact with immigrants and their children as well as remove stereotypes. It is good that many current programs are offering such learning opportunities, because we can all benefit from interaction.

Another statement in the article refers to events that received much response from society. “... we could not help remarking what an eligible place was here for the enterprising Blondin. Should he, by his admirable perseverance, exhaust every other field,

²⁹ *Harper's Weekly*, "Mining Life in California," October 3, 1857, <http://immigrants.harperweek.com/ChineseAmericans/Items/Item003L.htm> (accessed November 14, 2008).

³⁰ *Harper's Weekly*, "Congress," January 5, 1857, <http://immigrants.harperweek.com/ChineseAmericans/Items/Item007.htm> (accessed November 14, 2008).

till he can find no two points sufficiently elevated and wide apart to match his genius, I would recommend this place to his careful consideration, with the firm conviction that it would last him during the period of his natural life.”³¹ He is referring to Jean-François Gravelet, also known as Charles Blondin or simply Blondin, who was a French rope walker. He was especially famous for crossing the gorge below Niagara Falls on a tightrope. Moreover, he accomplished this with different variations: balancing a chair on the rope, taking pictures of viewers from the chair, blindfolded, in a sack, on stilts, and trundling a wheel barrow. Later he performed many dangerous tricks in Europe. His performances were very popular, and a form of aerial ropeway was named in his honor. He was also a controversial personality. For example, some people disapproved his stunt on the Niagara, thinking this would turn the falls into a backdrop for circus acts. ³² The author explains that some of the rocks are so majestic that the gateway between them would be a truly dangerous place to walk on if a rope was tied there. This is why he suggests Blondin, who has rope walked in many risky places, to try this one; this place is so extreme that it would always attract viewers. Wiseley uses the adjective “enterprising” and the expression “admirable perseverance” to describe the acrobat. It could be irony, because the author’s later statements, such as “... exhaust every other field till he can find no two points sufficiently elevated and far apart to match his genius...”, sound like mock fascination, not true admiration. ³³ Readers would understand this reference, and this would tell them about the size of the rocks and danger of the surroundings. The same literary techniques

³¹ Wiseley, "The Yosemite Valley," 700

³² "Who is Charles Blondin?" The Blondin Family, <http://www.simpenguin.com/genealogy/blondin/charlesblondinbio.html> (accessed November 14, 2008).

³³ Wiseley, "The Yosemite Valley," 700

are successfully used today: writers insert references to make their work more appealing to different groups of people.

Wiseley's narration also has religious references. This article was written after the end of the civil war, and the pattern of American religious life was disrupted by several causes. First of all, one issue was the corruption in society. Changing economic practices gave the chance to acquire huge fortunes by legal and illegal means. The nation was rocked by a series of scandals in which public officials were bribed, and morality seemed to fall low. Other challenges were the increase of urbanization, the arrival of new immigrants, and the spread of crime and alcoholism. Another problem was the shift in intellectual climate. Darwin's "Origin of Species" was the chief symbol of new thinking, and evolution theory began to influence various areas of life. For example, Social Darwinists thought that human society should be based on survival of the fittest, and this contradicted Christian standards such as love of the neighbor. Christians sought to resist the new forces sweeping across the nation, and they re-emphasized the authority of the church, embraced a scholastic theology, or revealed a preoccupation with pietism or apocalypticism. In each of these responses, the church refused to come to terms with changes of the day.³⁴ Despite problems, religious references were still found in books, although not everything was explained through faith. Today, religion is still a powerful influence, and it's one of the forces that stops negative behavior. But of course we can't expect everyone to believe and to live according to religious standards, so social influence plays a big part: for example, a person can abstain from alcoholism understanding the need to feed the family. Our views of

³⁴ Terry Matthews, "The Challenge of the Gilded Age," Prof. Terry Matthew's Home Page, <http://www.wfu.edu/~matthetl/perspectives/fourteen.html> (accessed November 14, 2008).

the world have changed with industrialization, and some religious doctrines were challenged. It is good that new forces are able to stop harmful behavior.

We can find some religious comparisons in Wiseley's article. For example, the carcasses of cattle dying from drought reminded him of Ezekiel's Valley of Dry Bones.³⁵ The prophet Ezekiel was a captive along with the rest of the nation of Israel, which had fallen away from God in sin and rebellion. This resulted in Israel being conquered by their enemies, the people were taken to serve in foreign lands. In one such land, Ezekiel was given a vision from the Lord. Ezekiel wrote: "[He] set me down in the middle of the valley; and it was full of bones. And He caused me to pass among them round about, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley; and lo, they were very dry. And He said to me, 'Son of man, can these bones live?' And I answered, 'O Lord God, Thou knowest.'" Then, Ezekiel gazed in amazement as flesh and muscle formed on the bones and finally life was breathed into them.³⁶ Wiseley was reminded of this valley because there were many corpses and bones, just like Ezekiel's first vision. Also, he compares this view of animals being unable to survive with the Valley of the Shadow of Death.³⁷ "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me."³⁸ Death casts a frightening shadow over us because we are entirely helpless in its presence.³⁹ There is a dark shadow over the valley with cattle because many of them have died of starvation, and there is nothing that can be done.

³⁵ Wiseley, "The Yosemite Valley," 698

³⁶ Jon W Quinn, "Ezekiel 37:1-3 - The Valley Of Dry Bones," *Expository Files*, no. 11.2 (February 2004), <http://www.bible.ca/ef/expository-ezekiel-37-1-3.htm> (accessed October 9, 2008).

³⁷ Wiseley, "The Yosemite Valley," 698

³⁸ Ps. 23:4 (NAB).

³⁹ Ron Fandrck, "The 23rd Psalm," Distinctive Church Collection, <http://www.rwf2000.com/2000/23pslm.htm> (accessed October 9, 2008).

Another reference is found a few pages after, when Wiseley mentions: "but we were as yet only in the vestibule of the great temple in which we had come to worship."⁴⁰ This phrase might simply suggest that nature is very majestic in the eyes of the travelers and is beyond human reasoning, which is why it deserves a special attitude. However, another meaning could be that nature and science should be appreciated more, as Darwin's theory of evolution has proven that this is what contributed to change throughout the centuries. I believe that the first idea is more likely to be true: Wiseley compares current occurrences with events described in sacred texts; this shows his religious knowledge. If he did not believe in God, he would not be using such quotes. Maybe he was one of the people that could not deny new ideas, yet did not break with faith, trying to combine both. All in all, religious mentions in "The Yosemite Valley" show that many people of the time were well-educated in theology, as the author expected his readers to understand and know what he is referring to.

"The Yosemite Valley" by J.L. Wiseley is a well-written article that not only acquaints readers with the scenery of the place, but does so in a manner that will satisfy all types of people. Those that want to imagine the valley will be able to do so with the help of bright exciting descriptions supported by illustrations. Moreover, they will understand the true significance of these monuments because the author has provided their sizes. There are statements that reflect general attitude in the country – many nineteenth century white Americans would have approved the author's dislike for groups that didn't take part in Fourth of July celebrations. Moreover, the article mentions popular people of the era, such as Blondin, whose talent attracted crowds of viewers. The readers also understood

⁴⁰ Wiseley, "The Yosemite Valley," 699

religious references; this article would be appealing to the different readers because it does not explain everything scientifically but also doesn't describe things from the religious point of view. Nowadays, we can learn more about nineteenth century society by examining the author's journey, and this is why "The Yosemite Valley" has become not just pleasant to read, but also valuable.