

THE CLEAREST WAY

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NOTE: This is an expanded version of the broadcast you requested.

EXPLORER: For John Muir, the Sierra Nevada wasn't just a mountain range; it was a religion and a career.

ANNOUNCER: The University of California welcomes you to its one thousand, four hundred 26th broadcast featuring the University Explorer. He takes us back to the early days of the conservation movement, with a transcribed story entitled "The Clearest Way". Here is Hale Sparks, the University Explorer.

EXPLORER: Of the hundreds of thousands of Americans who visit the national parks and forests each year, only a fraction realize what a struggle went into protecting these areas from man himself. Were it not for the vision of a few conservation pioneers in decades past, the big trees of the Yosemite might long since have been felled for lumber, and the shrubs and meadows of the Sierra valleys might have been grazed barren by livestock. Access to the Grand Canyon might be by a run-down private toll road, if the Canyon remained worth seeing; quite possibly, it would have been turned into a gigantic reservoir or rock quarry.

The story of the conservation movement and its leaders has been an inspiring one. It is recorded in documentary detail among the books, letters and manuscripts of the Bancroft Library on the Berkeley campus of the University of California. The Bancroft Library is observing its 50th anniversary this month; in 1905, the University acquired the personal library and papers of the California historian Hubert Howe Bancroft. With that first rich acquisition as a nucleus, the Bancroft has become the world's leading repository of historical material on California and the West; in addition, it has a fine collection on colonial Latin American history. Dr. George P. Hammond, professor of history at Berkeley and director of the Bancroft Library, told me recently that its conservation collections are the most extensive anywhere. This anniversary is an appropriate time for us to look at some of the early episodes of the conservation story, and especially at the life of John Muir, the greatest conservationist of them all. In the same year that the University was acquiring the Bancroft papers, Muir was deep in one of his hardest-fought and most dramatic struggles ---the campaign to put the threatened Yosemite Valley under the permanent protection of the Federal government.

From the 1870's until World War I, the story of conservation was very largely the story of John Muir, a transplanted Scotsman who loved the wilderness more than anything else and taught his adopted countrymen to love it, too. During his lifetime, and largely from his own efforts, America accepted the policy of preserving its forests and scenic wonders. Vast reservations of mountain and forest land were set aside for the enjoyment of future generations. Private interests were headed off and prevented from laying waste to the public lands and national resources. Many of the great recurring issues of conservation were fought for the first time. That they were fought with considerable success for the conservationists was due mainly to Muir's many years of writing, lobbying, lecturing and organizing. Yet Muir was 30 years old before he first saw the Sierra Nevada, the object of his longest and hardest campaign.

John Muir was born in Scotland in 1838, and came to this country with his father when he was eleven. His early years were those of heavy drudgery on a Wisconsin farm. Between farm chores, he managed to display remarkable talent along mechanical lines; among other things, he built one of history's more drastic alarm clocks, a device which dumped its occupant out of bed at five in the morning. At one point in his young manhood, he worked in a small factory in Indianapolis; while he was there, he designed mass-production equipment for making broom handles, revamped the plant layout, and advocated a shorter working day in the name of efficiency. He was offered a partnership in the company, but he turned it down, and, typically, didn't bother to patent the machinery he had designed.

Before Muir was middle aged, he rejected a succession of opportunities in business and academic life. Businessmen wanted him to go into manufacturing; geologists wanted him to be a geologist; botanists urged him to become a professor of botany. Eventually Muir did become a fruit rancher near Martinez, California, and a highly successful one at that; but he did so reluctantly, in order to support his wife and children. And he spent as little time at his ranching as its welfare would permit. He once said of himself: "I might have become a millionaire, but I chose to become a tramp." Before moving west, he attended the University of Wisconsin for two and a half years and made a reputation as a brilliant student of the sciences. But he was unsure of what he wanted to do with his future, and at one point, due to an unfortunate accident in a machine shop, it seemed that he might become blind. So he cut his formal education short to begin several years of wandering and hiking around the continent -- sometimes alone, sometimes with friends. He worked at odd jobs, camped along wilderness trails, occasionally visited relatives or settled for a few months in a friendly town. But he felt impelled to keep moving, to avoid civilization and live close to nature.

In 1867 he took his "Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf" and in Florida he contracted a serious fever. After a short visit to Cuba, he sailed for California to recover. He landed in San Francisco in March of that year, and Northern California was to be his home for the rest of his life.

As soon as possible, Muir set out to earn his keep in the Central Valley and the Sierra to the East. He was a shepherd, a ranch hand, a sawmill helper, an unofficial tourist guide. He spent many of his days exploring the Sierra alone, studying its plants and geological formations. While he was working in a Yosemite sawmill, Muir developed the theory that first made a name for him among scientists. According to the accepted theory of the time, Yosemite Valley had been hewn out in some divinely-ordained, cataclysmic upheaval of the earth. To Muir this didn't make sense; on the rocky hillsides of the valley he found striations which suggested that the region had once been overflowed by glacial ice, and that the valley had been produced by the massive force of a great glacier. To many orthodox scholars this was heresy; but some of the scientists who visited the valley and met Muir were convinced by him. Among them was Professor Joseph LeConte of the University of California, one of the most distinguished scientists of his day. Eventually Muir's theory prevailed, and with some modifications it is the one which is accepted today. While scientists were debating his theory, Muir was making unprecedented explorations of the Sierra crags. He found the remains of no fewer than 65 glaciers, still melting and grinding at the earth after thousands of years.

Muir wrote many letters to acquaintances about the glacial theory, and was persuaded to revamp them into a single article. He sent it off to the old New York Tribune, and to his surprise it was printed and paid for, and the editors asked for more of his work. This was the first of the writings which Muir published year after year for the rest of his life and which were to play so great a part in the preservation of the wilderness.

John Muir wrote in 1890 that "the clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness". His love of nature was to him the purest kind of religion; if anything could make him angry, it was to see his beloved wilderness ruined by waste and abuse -- and he saw this happening on every side. He saw sheep trampling and chewing bare the grasslands of the Yosemite Valley and the Tuolumne Meadows. He saw the public timberlands being laid waste with axe and saw; during six years in the 1880's, it was estimated that 37 million dollars' worth of timber had been stolen from the neglected, unguarded public lands. Sheepmen and prospectors actually set fire to forests every autumn to suit their own convenience. Operators of private toll roads controlled the Grand Canyon and other natural wonders. In the California redwood belt, one lumber company hired sailors from every passing vessel to stake out claims on the public lands. The sailors remained "homesteaders" just long enough to sell their claims to the lumber company.

If he'd had his choice, John Muir would have spent his time in the wilderness, living much as he had during his years of continent-wide roaming. But the abuses he saw made him feel he had no choice but to fight for the preservation of the land. So he wrote, lectured, lobbied and organized for the rest of his life. One of his most enduring works is the Sierra Club, which he, together with members of the faculty of the University of California and others, organized in 1892 and headed until his death. The club became, and still is, a famous and influential organization of conservationists and outdoorsmen.

Muir had a direct hand in establishing several of our most spectacular national parks and monuments, beginning with Yosemite and Sequoia in 1890 -- although he had been campaigning for them for many years before that. And he had immeasurable influence that extended far beyond the establishment of specific parks. Much of his most effective lobbying for Mother Nature was done not in legislative corridors but in the mountains and forests he loved. Hundreds of distinguished visitors came to California to see the Sierra with him. By camping with them in the wilderness, he fired the enthusiasm for conservation in many of the nation's makers of policy and opinion. One of these was Robert Underwood Johnson, editor of the Century magazine, who helped in the campaign to establish Yosemite and was for many years an important conservationist. Muir's long acquaintance and many trips with E.H. Harriman, the railroad tycoon, proved invaluable to the conservation movement. Through Harriman, Muir was able to enlist the support of the Southern Pacific Railroad in his campaign of the early 1900's to incorporate the beautiful Yosemite Valley into the larger Yosemite National Park which surrounded it. And Muir's greatest single piece of open-air lobbying was the four-day journey into the woods which he took in 1903 with President Theodore Roosevelt. Muir's influence with T.R. can be thanked in large measure for the rapid advances of conservation during his two terms in the White House. In those eight years the country's national parks doubled in number and the acreage set aside in national forest reserves more than quadrupled. Congress passed the Monuments and Antiquities Act, which allowed the President -- at Muir's suggestion -- to rescue the Grand Canyon, the Petrified Forest, and many other magnificent pieces of scenery from commercial exploitation.

A unique account of Muir and the early conservation efforts was recently added to the Bancroft Library in the form of transcripts of interviews with Mr. William E. Colby. Mr. Colby, a leading San Francisco mining lawyer, has been an active conservationist throughout his adult life, and from 1900 to 1946 he was secretary of the Sierra Club -- except for two years when he was president. He knew John Muir well, and of course was closely associated with him in Sierra Club activities. The detailed interviews with him typify the Bancroft Library's activity in documenting Western history.

On two conservation projects in particular, Mr. Colby has supplied detailed first-hand accounts. One was a major battle over a small but important piece of parkland -- the Yosemite Valley. The Valley had been a state park since the 1860's, and remained one after the national park was set up around it. The state was supplying insufficient funds to maintain the area, and the state park commission, according to Mr. Colby, became dominated by men whose appointments had been political rewards. Moreover, the boundary between state and national territory was somewhat unclear, and when fire broke out on the edge the state and national park authorities argued over who should put it out. With the advantage of hindsight, it would seem to be plain common sense to combine the two parks, and this was done, finally, in 1906. But Muir and his associates had to fight for this project for two years in the California legislature and in Congress. They had to oppose powerful newspaper opposition; several political figures including one legislator who was also attorney for commercial interests in the Valley; and considerable misguided state pride. This state pride was insufficient to make adequate park funds available, but it was enough to make people furious at efforts to take the Valley and, as some orators put it, "practically move it back to Washington".

The other fight which Mr. Colby recounts was one of the few which John Muir lost, although for many years he was able to postpone defeat. This was the so-called Hetch Hetchy fight. According to Muir, the Hetch Hetchy Valley rivalled Yosemite in its natural beauty and should have been preserved; in fact, he had originally been responsible for its inclusion in the Yosemite National Park. The city of San Francisco, however, wanted to flood the Hetch Hetchy behind a dam, and use the area as a source of water and electric power. The conservationists maintained that the city could find better sources of water and electricity elsewhere, but San Francisco finally won the argument, just a few months before Muir's death in 1914.

This was the last great fight of Muir's life, and the defeat was a bitter blow. But when Muir entered a fight he usually won it. This, more than anything else, we have to thank for our system of national parks and forests. John Muir opened his "clearest way to the Universe" for many generations of his countrymen.

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