

## JOHN MUIR IN WISCONSIN



MILLIE STANLEY

"Some of the happiest days of my life were [spent] in that old slantwalled garret and among the smooth creeks that trickled among the sedges of Fountain Lake Meadow." So wrote John Muir to his brother David, on March 20, 1870, after he had left the Wisconsin farmstead and eventually settled in California. "You stirred up a happy budget of memories in speaking of my [boyhood] workshop and laboratory. In recalling the mechanical achievements of those early days I remember with satisfaction that the least successful one was that horrid guillotine of a thing slicing off gophers' heads." Muir wrote this letter from a sugar pine shanty he had built at the base of Yosemite Falls where he was exploring the Yosemite Valley and the Sierra Nevada mountain range he called "the range of light." "The only sounds that strike me tonight are the flickering of the fires and the deep roar of the falls like breakers on a rocky coast."<sup>1</sup> Though living amid the grandeur of the Yosemite Valley, Muir's thoughts turned to his first home in the United States and the green, rolling landscape of Wisconsin.

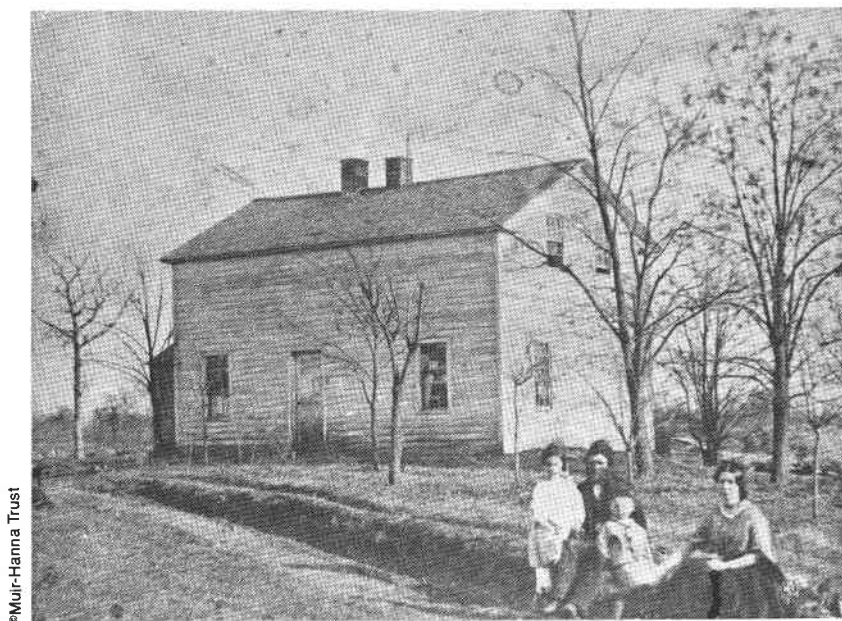
In 1849, when he was eleven years old, he was excited when he first saw the Muir family's pioneer farm located in the town of Buffalo, Marquette County. "Oh, that glorious Wisconsin wilderness! Everything new and pure in the very prime of spring when Nature's pulses were beating highest and mysteriously keeping time with our own! Young hearts, young leaves, flowers, animals, the winds and the streams and the sparkling lake all wildly, gladly rejoicing together!"<sup>2</sup>

The young boy from Scotland, who would become known as the father of our national park system, had a wonderful place to begin exploring his new world. This area of south central Wisconsin was beautiful and diverse. Thousands of years before, a lobe of the mile deep continental glacier, scouring its way southward and westward, advancing and

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*Millie Stanley lives in Marquette County, Wisconsin. A graduate of Stephens College and the University of Iowa, she is active in various local historical and literary organizations. Currently she is working on a book of Muir's Wisconsin years that draws insight from her own experience of living in the land of Muir's youth.*

retreating, had sculptured the landscape into low hills, ponds and marshes, with an occasional outcrop of bedrock. The Muir's hundred and sixty acre farm was located on a springfed lake with a little outlet creek winding its way westward through tall grasses and sedges to the Fox River a short distance away. The natural landscape of the farm was varied. It contained a prairie, the oak openings and oak woods. There were the marshes, the fen, and the many springs bubbling up like gentle fountains in the wet sedge meadows by the lake. The Muirs well described their land when they named it Fountain Lake Farm.



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*Fountain Lake home, located in south-central Wisconsin, where John Muir lived from 1849 until 1856 when his father sold the homestead to his daughter, Sarah, and her future husband, David Galloway. This rare 1860s photograph shows the young Galloway family posed in front of the house. The house burned to the ground in the early part of this century.*

A pioneer ecologist, young John early recognized interrelationships in the natural world. That first spring and summer as he rambled over the farmland and nearby countryside, he soon began to realize that in nature when "we pick out anything by itself we find that it is hitched to everything else in the universe."<sup>3</sup> His keen observations as a youth in the Fountain Lake environs foreshadowed later discoveries in the mountains of California.

Season followed season and the Muir family set about cultivating their farm in earnest. John said that "farming was a grim, material, debasing pursuit under Father's generalship," and everyone was expected to do his or her share from sunup to sundown each day. Daniel Muir was a harsh taskmaster, and severe in his treatment of his children, especially his high-spirited eldest son. John never forgot the childhood beatings at the hands of his father, and in years to come, he would speak out against child abuse in surprisingly modern terms.

As he went about his farm chores he developed the physical skills that would prove useful to him in his journeys into the wilderness. In odd moments he would read a bit from the few books in the Muir household or whittle mechanical inventions out of shagbark hickory — the first ones being the self-setting sawmills with which he dammed sluggish little meadow streams on the farm.

All the while, as he closely examined the natural world around him, deep feelings began to stir within him. Once, when he discussed poetry with his sister Mary, he said, "You and I, Mary, began to sing at the same time in life, and our song was stimulated by the same causes and objects . . . a shade of imagination, lakes, birds, thunderclouds and rabbits."<sup>4</sup>

The young naturalist also found time for adventure. He loved to explore the Observatory, as he called the nearby eleven hundred foot rhyolite promontory that rose above the landscape a couple of hundred feet. When he scrambled upwards through fern-filled ravines to the top of the rounded, pinkish rockface polished by the glacial ice riding atop the rock thousands of years before, he could see the striations that showed the direction of the ice movement. He could dream on a summer day as he viewed the panorama of small lakes and low hills stretching out for miles in front of him in shades of blues and greens. It foretold, perhaps, the time when he would become a noted glaciologist embroiled in geological controversy over his revolutionary theory that mountain glaciers sculptured the Yosemite Valley.

In later years, when Muir visited Wisconsin, he found that Observatory Hill was much smaller than he remembered, but it was still the "great cloud capped mountain" of his childhood.

In 1855 Daniel Muir bought land four miles to the southeast. For two growing seasons John walked to the new farm to help in the "building, breaking, fencing and planting, which all began anew." The next year Daniel and his wife, Anne, sold the old Fountain Lake homestead to their daughter Sarah and David Galloway just before their wedding in October. The Muir family moved to Hickory Hill farm in the latter part of 1856.



*The Muir family's second Wisconsin home, Hickory Hill, showing the entrance to the cellar where John Muir spent his early morning hours each day working on his inventions and pursuing his studies.*

John helped build a barn with structural pine beams forty and fifty feet long and ten inches in diameter, and he dug a well through the gravel and sandstone ninety feet deep. In 1857 the Muirs built a frame house on a long high slope with a commanding view of the countryside.

Though the town of Buffalo was still only sparsely settled, John, maturing, developed a number of friendships there. One snowy winter, when he was almost twenty, he began to correspond with several young men on neighboring farms. They were all reaching out beyond their lives of farm labor for intellectual stimulation and emotional expression. His friends found it easy to confide their innermost thoughts and feelings to John on such subjects as religion, poetry, romantic fantasy and schooling. These letters continued for sometime.

In March, 1858, Muir's friend, Bradley Brown, wrote nostalgically of their school days just past. He recalled how their teacher, George Branch, called the scholars to order and how they listened to his wonderful lectures. In only a few short months the schoolmaster had made a lasting impression on his students. They, in turn, recited pieces and had merry times in school. John had walked a little over a mile from Hickory Hill to attend that winter term at the little log school which was nestled in the oak woods on a rise of land near the marsh and adjacent to the farm where Bradley lived.

Charles Reid spun romantic fantasy about girls as he commented on the poem Muir had written "against the sweet little creatures." He thought that his friend wrote the poem because of unrequited love and said he wished he had stopped in at the schoolhouse one day when he was in such a hurry for he "might have seen the face of a young female of eighteen with blue eyes and fair hair flowing in lines of beauty and eyes full of love" for the poet, John Muir, Esq. Muir soon dispelled this notion when he said that the young female of eighteen Charles referred to was only an imaginary maid.

During the school term John told of filling his "wisdom bins" but said he could only do this one week longer before school was out and he had to return to farm work full time. Charles advised him not to lose anything out of them, for "they are precious . . . I hope your wisdom bin is as large as the wheat bin you talk of making." John replied he would never stop learning.

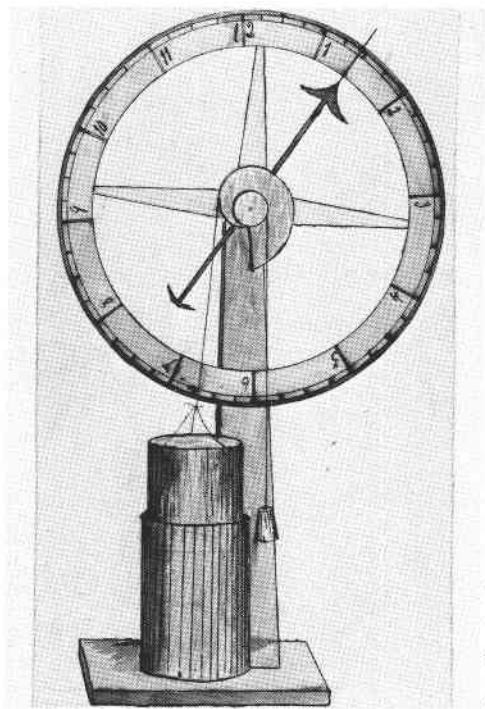
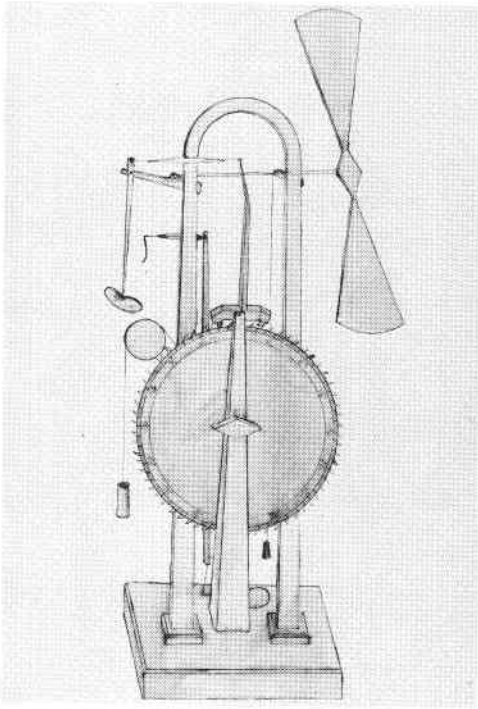
February was coming to an end and March weather was borne in on blustery winds of swirling snowstorms, dumping the winter's last deep snows on the woods and fields. The occasional rise in temperature began to melt the snow, and the Canada geese filled the air on their northern migration. In April the earth warmed, the snow melted away, and according to Charles Reid's brother William, it was "music to the ears to hear the birds sing after a long, cold, dreary winter."

In May, William commented in the last of this group of letters that "the grass, bushes and trees are beginning to look green again. It is a time of reviving of everything. Things temporal and spiritual seem to bud out together."

The months went by. John toiled on the farm and whittled hickory inventions of clocks, thermometers and his early-rising machine. He read the classics lent to him by William and Jean Duncan, his generous neighbors who lived a half mile down the road to the west. William would often ride over to the Muir farm in his buggy to see his fellow Scotsman's latest hickory creation.

The farm world was becoming too small now for the young inventor and he was anxious to try his wings. William suggested that he show some of his contraptions at the State Agricultural Fair in the capital city of Madison, and after much agonizing about leaving his family, John decided to follow his benefactor's advice. It was the hardest decision he had ever made in his entire twenty-two years.

He left Hickory Hill in September of 1860 with his precious bundle of whittled hickory, and took the train from nearby Pardeeville to Madison, a distance of about fifty miles. This journey was his gateway to the world. He "jumped out of the woods," as he



State Historical Society of Wisconsin

*Muir's drawings for his mechanical inventions.*

put it, to become an instant success, for his inventions were the talk of the fair. He told his sister Sarah, with whom he had a special rapport, that he was "adrift in this big, sunny world . . . tossed about by new everythings everywhere."

The Muir family circle was broken when John left home. He was the eldest son and the first of the three boys to strike out on his own. His departure created quite a stir within the family. Although Sarah had married four years earlier, she still lived close by.

John would always carry memories of Hickory Hill with him. A year or two after his departure he created a feeling for the old home place when he took a good friend on an imaginary walk around the farm:

Down here across the little ravine is my best place. But we'll go this way first. In this great field is where I've sweated and played, worked and rejoiced. There is the garden where [my sister] Margaret and I lavished many happy hours. Away down this slope and over the level prairie is where we have taken hundreds of long walks and talked of earth and heaven. And just by that great oak is where in the moonlight evenings I used to spend hours with my head up in the sky and soared among the planets — and over in this direction is where Sarah lives.

As John traveled that first fifty miles and farther, he felt keenly a sense of closeness with his family. No matter where his wanderings took him, he would always feel that way. "As a family we are pretty firmly united," he once said, "and you know one tree of a close clump cannot very well fall. In my walks through the forests of humanity I find no family clump more interwoven in root and branch than our own."

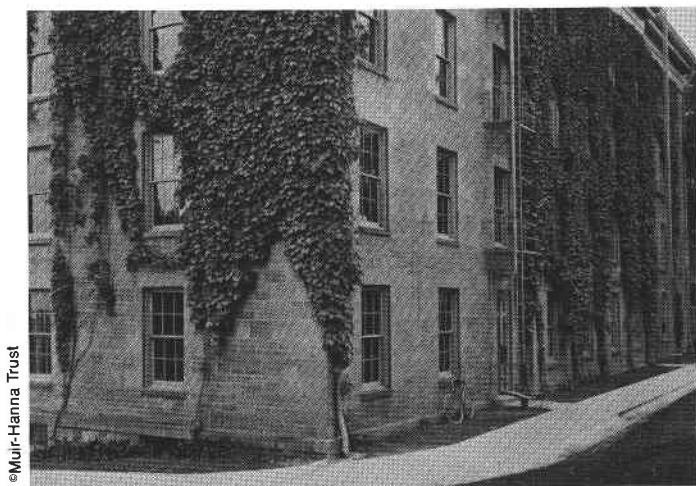
In October, 1860, the Muirs wrote to their son and brother, now in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, giving the first real glimpse into the nature of members of the family.

In that letter, David, now twenty, who had shared so many adventures with his brother, noted that "the house looks rather empty, especially on Sunday, but we begin to get used to it." Danny, five years younger, showed an inquisitive nature when he asked so many questions. Margaret told of her wistful dream that John and his mills had come back, but said she wouldn't be so selfish as to "have him back when he was better off to be far away." The little girls, Joanna, Mary and Anna, sent their love. And Sarah showed a motherly bent when she urged, "Tell me all the news, mind" and spoke about his comfort and well-being.

Father gave his son a long religious lecture, the first of many. "I am glad you are well in body. I should like to hear of your spiritual health being good [also]." He explained about the trunk he had bought in Portage that he was sending to John in Prairie du Chien.

Mother, like Sarah, wished for John's comfort and well-being also. She further described the trunk Father bought and meticulously detailed its contents, including the new suit of clothes, a hat, three pairs of socks and a pair of drawers. She explained that Father had intended to put in a silk napkin for John's neck, but forgot to do so before he mailed the key. This was a spurt of uncharacteristic generosity on Father's part.

Anne Muir's well-written letter to her son was the first of about sixty-five still in existence. She said she found her greatest satisfaction in the happiness of her children and this thought always shone through. Her concise accounts of Muir family life and neighborhood news presented an informative commentary on life in Marquette County.



*Circa 1930s photograph by Herbert W. Gleason showing the northwest corner of North Hall where Muir lived while attending the University of Wisconsin in Madison.*

Later that first year away from home, John attended classes at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and was thrilled with the study of botany, the cornerstone of his study of all phases of nature. He and his family soon began a lifelong practice of tucking pressed flowers and bits of greenery into their letters. As her brother traveled more widely and sent specimens from far away places, Sarah said, "the little buds and flowers seem to tell us of rocks and mountains and of a warm enthusiastic heart very nearly allied to us wandering among and admiring their beauties."

In 1862 Muir spent his second university summer with Sarah and David Galloway at the Fountain Lake farm to help his brother-in-law with the farm work and harvest. He would not go back to his father's. From that time on, no matter where his wanderlust would take him, John would think of Sarah and David's home as his own.

At the end of a third year at the University of Wisconsin, he returned to Fountain Lake to work and ramble during the summer. He stayed with the Galloways the next fall and winter until early 1864. Since he had not yet been called up in the town of Buffalo's Civil War draft, he decided to leave Marquette County for a time to explore the Canadian wilderness.

But before he took the train in February, he offered to buy from David a treasured forty acres of Fountain Lake wet meadow with the stipulation that it be fenced in from the feet of trampling livestock. "I want to keep it untrampled for the sake of its ferns and flowers," he said, "and even if I never see it again the beauty of its lilies and orchids are so pressed in my mind that I shall always look back to them in imagination, across seas and continents, and perhaps even after I am dead." But David regarded this plan as "an impractical, sentimental dream. He thought that the fence would be broken down and the work all done in vain."<sup>5</sup>

Although David would not sell this precious bit of Wisconsin landscape to his brother-in-law, that first effort in 1864 to buy and protect land for its beauty alone was the seed of the idea of land preservation that germinated in John's heart and mind — the idea that took root and grew into the national park system.

Eventually, John found his way to Indianapolis, Indiana, where he worked for a company that made carriage parts. He relished the opportunity to use his inventive, mechanical talent to design methods for their manufacture, but a tragic accident to an eye brought this career to an abrupt end. A metal spring pierced the eye and he nearly lost the sight in it.

It was an emotional blow as well as physical, for as he lay in a darkened room, he thought he might never see the beauty of a flower or sunset again. However, the sight slowly returned, and after a few weeks, he went home to Sarah and David for further recuperation. He knew now he must change the course of his life completely. "I must get as close to the heart of the world as I can," he vowed.

That summer of 1866 Muir began to fulfill his resolve as he roamed the Galloway's recently purchased Mound Hill farm. He described one walk, "It was a fine evening — the clouds which attended the sunset were grandly colored. We could see the beautiful, waving, swelling green hills wherever we turned . . . and those that were blue and far away, and the clouds and the Fox River and the sky." But his favorite place was the tiny half acre lake over the hill behind the house. This glacial pond he called Fern Lake was situated in a grove of young oaks with osmunda ferns growing around it tier on tier.

A few years later, when he was established in a career of exploring the California wilderness, John Muir's thoughts once again turned toward Wisconsin — to Fern Lake and Fountain Lake. For a second time he attempted to preserve a bit of Wisconsin landscape that was dear to him, this time a forty acre parcel adjacent to the old Muir farm. "It is a splendid natural garden," he told Sarah in 1871, "and I wish I could send a portion of myself to guard it." He enlisted Sarah and David's help to negotiate a purchase of the Fountain Lake acreage, and the three exchanged letters about it for over a year.

"I have done my best to get David to write you a few lines about that land affair," Sarah wrote to John, May 30, 1871, "but I find I may just as well speak to the wind.



*Beautiful Fountain Lake where John Muir pursued his early interests as a naturalist.*

He says he is too busy to think. The weeds among the corn are growing big and he must away with Nell to cultivate. But he says to tell you that the ferns [at Fern Lake] shall not be disturbed and it shall be called yours until you come home. He says he will see the Ennis boys about the Fountain Lake forty, but he doubts about its being bought."

In September of that year John stipulated, "If you think that the cattle and hogs can be kept off by any ordinary care and fencing, I wish you would offer Ennis from two and a half to ten dollars as you can agree, but if you think that the stock cannot be fenced out I do not care to have the land at all." Even then Muir understood all too well the damage that would be done by cattle impacting the soil and the destruction caused by erosion.

At Christmas time Sarah reported that the Ennis boys wanted at least ten dollars an acre for the Fountain Lake property and that in David's opinion the cattle and hogs could hardly be kept out. Although he was unable to buy the land at Fountain Lake for John, David had done what he could to keep the cattle out of Fern Lake, and John was grateful. "Heartly thanks, David, for your care of the mud pond dear to nature and to me," he said.

Twenty-five years later, at the height of his career, Muir made one more effort to buy Fountain Lake acreage when he came back to Portage at the time of his mother's death in 1896. He failed for a third time.

It is ironic that John Muir, the famous naturalist, largely responsible for saving vast tracts of wilderness for national parks, failed in his efforts to preserve bits of the Wisconsin landscape that he loved. Today, tiny Fern Lake at Mound Hill is no more than a stagnant pond almost trampled out of existence by cattle. There are no ferns or orchids there now. Hickory Hill farm has been owned by the same family since 1873 and is still a busy, active farm. The barn and remodeled house still stand in good repair and the well John dug still supplies water.





Courtesy, John Muir Chapter of the Sierra Club

*Muir tried throughout his life without success to preserve the "fine wild region" around Fountain Lake. It was not until 1957 that the area he loved so much was made into a park by Marquette County. The park today contains a small mowed area which displays a plaque to the memory of John Muir's years in Wisconsin; the remainder of the 135 acres remains in a natural state. Muir's dream of preserving this area still lives on: for the last year the John Muir Chapter of the Sierra Club has been working to expand the north side of the park. This aerial view shows the Muir Park and its proposed addition.*

The area around Fountain Lake is still primarily agricultural and much of the land John Muir tried to buy is preserved as a Marquette County Park. In a shallow depression on a rise of land sloping down to the wet meadow and lake beyond, half hidden by tall grasses, lie a few glacial boulders, that were once a part of the foundation of the frame house built by the Muirs in 1849. On each side of the depression where the house once stood, ancient lilac bushes still grow that Sarah Muir and her father planted over a century and a quarter ago. These are the only remnants of the home where John Muir, the father of our national parks, spent some of the happiest days of his life.

#### NOTES:

1. Letters from the John Muir Papers, Holt-Atherton Center for Western Studies, University of the Pacific, Stockton, California, are quoted extensively.
2. John Muir, *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), p. 53.
3. John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916), p. 157.
4. Newman Collection, John Muir National Historic Site, Martinez, California.
5. John Muir, "Proceedings of the Meeting of the Sierra Club," *Sierra Club Bulletin* 1 (January 1896), pp. 271-284.