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Reminiscence of John Muir by Lindsley, Grace Sterling

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During the discussion of Dean Russell's paper on the Life of John Muir, at the meeting of the Madison Literary Club on Dec. 9th, 1935, Dr. Birge asked whether John Muir had ever been in Madison since his University days. I am glad to be able to answer that question. He was here to my knowledge in 1896. As to any other visit I cannot say.

In 1896 I was visiting my mother, Mrs. J.W. Sterling, in our family home, 811 State Street where the Phi Kappa Psi Fraternity House now stands. John Muir called on us there, probably in the early part of June, as he told us he was on his way East to receive a Degree from one of the Eastern Universities -- probably Yale. I recall that he said: "I don't know why those fellows want to give me a Degree, but since they do I suppose I'll have to go and receive it."

I can verify the year 1896 as accurate from the fact that I had with me my two little boys who were then three and four years old respectively. John Muir took them on his knee and told them of his encounter with a bear in California. How he was on one side of a log and the bear on the other, and how they cuffed each other over the log, until the bear - dignity evidently offended - turned and ran off.

Earlier recollections of John Muir concern the time when he was a student in the University. My sister Susan and brother Charles and I were very small children. In fact I think Charles must have been an infant too young to be a visitor with Sue and myself to John Muir's room in the old North Dormitory. I can vividly recall the tall clock which he made, and which was connected with his bed in such a way that when the time came for which he had set it, the mechanism was released which tipped up the bed and threw the occupant on the floor, and at the same time struck a match and lighted a candle, or perhaps it was an alcohol lamp, at the foot of the bed. He entertained us by putting us on the bed, and setting the clock so that in a minute or two we were thrown off.

I also recall, though not so clearly, the revolving book-rack which held the books he studied. It gave him a prescribed time to study a lesson, and then revolved, bringing into place the next book. My mother who had a keen sense of humor, told him the invention did not go far enough; that he ought to have so arranged it that if he hadn't properly learned the lesson, a hand would come up and box his ears. During our visit to John Muir's room he treated us to crackers spread with jam. On our return to our own rooms in South Dormitory we told our mother of the crackers and jam, and she said it probably robbed him of his next meal, for he and other boys "boarded themselves," living on very simple and restricted fare, though probably supplemented by such things as could be brought from their homes.

The last observations are not from my own knowledge but from memories of conversations and from letters of my parents which we have preserved for many years.

Grace Sterling Lindsley.

Madison, Wis.,
Dec. 31, 1935.