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Reminiscence of John Muir by Swett, Helen

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In these days of research to try to determine what are the lasting values in human affairs, the importance of a happy childhood with a sense of security is coming to be recognized more and more clearly. I pay glad tribute today to John Muir as having been one feature of the abounding happy home life enjoyed by John Swett, the educator, Mary his wife, and the four children who made up the household on Taylor Street in San Francisco of which I was one. For a few bright years in the seventies John Muir lived as a member of the household and later made the Swett home his headquarters whenever he was in town.

John Swett was the older of the two men. Whereas Muir had been born in Scotland, Swett was a native of New England. The two had much in common - an abiding love of nature, a taste for outdoor life, a good humor which pervaded their conversation and prevented their discussion from ever becoming acrimonious, however much the Scotchman and the New Englander might differ on some of the many subjects they passed in review.

John Muir was one of the most delightful raconteurs in the world. Mary Swett, my mother, was one of the best listeners. She had the knack of drawing out the somewhat shy young man and we children gathered about fascinated at the true stories he told of adventures in Yosemite, the high Sierras, and later one, in Alaska wilds.

Then Mother would urge him to write it down, so that the world might have the benefit of his rare gift of interpreting the beauties and the grandeur of nature to those whose opportunities were more restricted or whose vision was less penetrating.

Mr. Muir was living with us at the time I made my advent into the world. The incident they tell of the naming of the baby will serve to illustrate the perfect harmony that existed among the three friends. Nothing had been said in advance, but before the baby was many days old the subject of a name came up, and Father said he had a name in mind for the little girl. Mother intimated that she had a preference, and Mr. Muir said he, too, had a choice. Each hesitated at first to speak, but when they did it was to discover that all had hit on the same name - Helen - so Helen it was, and still is.

Mr. Muir was an easy talker, but a laborious writer. Mother continually instigated him to get his wonderful experiences and observations written down, and tried to make conditions in the household favorable to the production of manuscript. Sometimes she would see the door of his room ajar, and looking in, would see me there, "Does the baby bother you?" she would say, and offer to take me away, and Mr. Muir would reply "No, leave her here. I can write better with Helen on my knee". Now when I read books which were later published, and are now read the world over - "Mountains of California" and other gems of prose poetry, I have the thrill of having had a part, however humble, in their original preparation.

In the room of Mr. Muir, where I spent many happy hours as a child, I found many things to interest me. Sometimes when inspiration was slow to come, John Muir would pick up the scissors, and standing before the mirror over the old-style marble grate, would leisurely trim his curly hair and beard. No barber shop for him! One curl at a time, a snip and then the next curl, this process in no way

interrupting the continuity of a fanciful tale spun on the spur of the moment to entertain his child guest.

A chest stood in the corner - a plain wooden affair without ornament but with a stout hasp. How eloquently it spoke to my childish mind of the mystery and delights of travel in far corners of the earth. Later on in Alhambra Valley, the room occupied by John Muir as his den, first in the old Strenzel house and later in the larger mansion on a knoll nearer town, was a veritable museum of rarities of all sorts, photographs and letters from eminent scientists the world over, geoglogical, botanical, and ornithological specimens, and scientific pamphlets and reports such as one saw nowhere else. What a privilege for a child to have access to a roomful of treasures so unique!

Mr. Muir had many characteristics which endeared him to children. He was gentle, cheerful, and filled with good humor. He never teased or ridiculed a child, never scolded, and was never personal. We were always fascinated when he brought out for us the broad Scotch burr of his native land and even sang for us occasionally a snatch of a Scotch ballad.

On returning from trips of exploration this slender, bearded, blue-eyed enthusiast always came in laden with specimens of all sorts - bits of granite showing deep scratches as a result of glacial action; ever-green brought laden with cones; from Alaska, curios made by Eskimos. One of my most prized possessions for years was an Alaska child's rattle, made up of bears' toe-nails which, when shaken, produced a sound as musical as any glacial waterfall. A sailor presented him with the wing of an albatross and he brought it to the house on Taylor Street where it served for years as a reminder of Alaska and its wonders. As he related them to us, in the guise of bed time stories told around the open fire. He himself would not have killed the albatross. His way was to observe and relate, but to leave the birds and the beasties themselves unharmed.

We see young people nowadays poor in vocabulary in the midst of plenty. The informal talks of Mr. Muir furnished us children with many an expression that was new to us and which enriched our own vocabularies without our being fully conscious of what was happening.

In later years Mr. Muir made the acquaintance of Dr. and Mrs. Strenzel, early settlers in the beautiful Alhambra Valley, near Martinez, in Contra Costa County, and married their charming daughter Louie, who was not unknown to our family, having been a pupil of my mother's in Miss Atkins' School in Benicia, the school which was afterward moved to Oakland and which finally became Mills College.

No sooner was friend Muir settled in Alhambra Valley than John Swett began casting about for some way to continue the close association with John Muir that had given so much pleasure to both. He looked around the valley and found that a farm adjoining the Strenzel-Muir estate on the south was in the market, and in the early 80's he bought the place.

There followed many years of the most delightful neighboring that can be imagined, and the descendants of two Johns are friends and neighbors still. Life in the Alhambra Valley from the 80's on was most idyllic.

There was a constant interchange of informal visits among neighbors, most of whom had moved to the valley from the Bay region and were congenial. Choice flowers, fruits, and other farm products were interchanged, and on the broad veranda of the original Spanish adobe on the Swett place, the two Johns would sit talking many an afternoon until lengthening shadows warned John Muir to make his way home to Louie and his own two charming daughters, Wanda and Helen.

Finally there came a time in May 1913, when the University of California planned to honor on Charter Day, not only the speaker of the occasion, but two Californians who had made their own unique contributions to the cultural life of their adopted state.

Nothing was said at home by John Muir of the letter he had received inviting him to attend at the designated time and receive the honor of a doctorate. Wanda and Helen Muir would not have known about it, and would not have been there, had not the Swett young folks asked them about going down to the ceremonies.

I can close my eyes today and see that picture of the Greek Theater on a bright summer day. The two Johns, two good friends, hats off, white hair blown back from their foreheads by the breeze—two stalwarts, for all the world like the trees they both so greatly admired. And so we leave them, two of nature's noblemen, of whom California may well be proud.

(Mrs.) Helen Swett Artieda
Radio talk on K L X,
Monday, April 22, 3:30 P.M.