Reflections on Muir's 1868 Walk from Oakland to Gilroy
A Study in Literature and Environment

Howard Cooley
Belmont, California

"See how God writes history. No technical knowledge is required; only a calm day and a calm mind."
Hayden National Park
Atlantic Monthly, April 1898

John Muir wrote extensively about his 1869 walk to Yosemite from Snelling in the Central Valley of California, and this was the story that was published as My First Summer In The Sierra in 1911; thus it is also the best known of Muir’s famous walks. Muir arrived in San Francisco in 1868, and walked to Yosemite before he found ranch work near Snelling. Muir wrote very little about his first few days in California, walking south along the East Bay. There are four sources for this story, but the number is unimportant since they all tell the same general story, and there are few facts to go on. However, it is the few differences in wording of portions of these similar stories that makes for interesting analysis. Those few written cryptic words open a door to a variety of interesting topics.

The vast majority of written Muiriana is about nature and spirituality. Oftentimes an historical perspective or a social-psychological study unravels. The 1868 walk is problematic in sources. There simply is not much to go on other than reading between what few lines Muir wrote about the walk, understanding some local history, and Muir’s mental landscape. Only when one is armed with such data may applicable thoughts, images, and speculations unfold with a realistic frame of reference.

(Continued on page 5)
Nine years ago Ron Good called a meeting of the Sierra Club’s Hetch Hetchy Restoration Task Force and, at the suggestion of David Brower, included a few “outsiders”. We met in a living room in Merced where Ron shared his vision of a restored Hetch Hetchy Valley and asked our help in making it happen.

Ron’s zeal was infectious. We decided that we should create our own single-issue organization focused on Hetch Hetchy’s restoration and elected Ron as our first Board Chair. Restore Hetch Hetchy was born! After we raised a little money, we hired Ron to be our first Executive Director.

Under Ron’s leadership, these nine years have been an exciting time. We have seen a plethora of technical reports, including our own, outlining how the valley can be restored and the water and power replaced. There has been bi-partisan political support led by Lois Wolk, Don Hodel, John Garamendi, Dan Lungren and other elected officials. And of course we have had tons of local, national and international media attention, including a video starring Harrison Ford and a Pulitzer Prize for Sacramento Bee writer Tom Phillips.

This past May, Ron informed the Board of Directors that he would be stepping down as Executive Director and will be taking on a “new assignment” that John Muir has for him—working for the National Park Service at the John Muir Historic Site in Martinez.

Anyone who has followed Restore Hetch Hetchy over the last nine years realizes that it is not possible to replace the dedication and commitment that Ron has shown in pursuit of restoration. We offer our sincere thanks to Ron for his passion, vision and leadership over the last nine years. We look forward to working further with Ron as we continue to pursue the restoration of Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park.

Spreck Rosekrans
Chair, Board of Directors

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WELCOME MIKE MARSHALL!

Restore Hetch Hetchy is pleased to announce it has hired a hard-hitting political strategist, Mike Marshall, to lead our campaign to restore Hetch Hetchy Valley. Mike has run two statewide campaigns in California, has won hard fought national lobbying campaigns and is the President of Friends of the Urban Forest in San Francisco. He cut his teeth politically working for environmental crusader Senator Alan Cranston and joins us after several years as a highly successful non-profit management consultant.

Mike’s initial focus is to expand the infrastructure we need to build consensus within San Francisco and around California to restore Hetch Hetchy Valley. To that end he is busy:

- Opening an office in San Francisco
- Designing a public opinion research effort to guide our efforts
- Building a national network of volunteers, donors and endorsements.

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GREETINGS FROM MIKE MARSHALL

I’ve been on the job less than three months but it is already clear to me that my predecessor as Executive Director, Ron Good, did an amazing job building a statewide—indeed national—network of supporters dedicated to the cause of restoring Hetch Hetchy Valley. We are well positioned to win thanks to Ron’s tireless advocacy and leadership over the last 10 years.

The days ahead won’t be easy. First we need to get the City of San Francisco to move the reservoir and restore the valley to its natural splendor. Then we need to have either the California legislature or the voters of California allocate resources to make this dream happen. Lastly, but certainly not least, we need Congress to pass, and our new President to sign, legislation restoring the integrity of Yosemite National Park. You may have heard Senator Feinstein remark on the vision President Lincoln demonstrated when he signed legislation setting aside Yosemite as a national treasure that needed to be protected. Hopefully the current President from Illinois was listening!

Restore Hetch Hetchy has opened its first office in San Francisco and is launching an aggressive campaign to build public support within San Francisco for restoration efforts. As a veteran political organizer who has lived of and on in San Francisco for over 20 years, I’m keenly aware of our need to build a broader donor base, a core volunteer pool and support for our cause within several key constituencies.

But I need your help. If you are a member of an organization in San Francisco whose support would benefit our efforts, please call me so we can discuss how to win that endorsement. Likewise, if you have relationships with a foundation interested in funding environmental restoration, or work for a company which has a philanthropic arm I’d love to hear about it. Lastly, if you know someone willing to rebuild our web-site and/or help advise us on investing in a customer relationship management database I want to meet them!

I can be reached at our new office number which is 415.956.0401, or email me at mike@hetchhetchy.org.

Mike Marshall
Executive Director
The greatest obstacle to reading the John Muir Papers is the legibility of his handwriting. Researchers may access Muir’s journals online (library.pacific.edu/ha/digital) or on the microfilm, but that does not assure they can read what he wrote. Not only are many of the words barely scribbles, he frequently wrote in pencil which has now faded. In many cases, he would write in multiple directions on a single page and encircle his drawings with words. In some instances he would begin writing from both the front and back of a journal with the inevitable collision of words in the middle.

The microfilm copy of the Muir Papers does not have the color or contrast needed to decipher Muir’s hand. The digital version of Muir’s journals allows researchers to zoom in and get a good look, but still there are no online transcriptions. Due to complexity and cost, Holt-Atherton staff chose not to transcribe the journals at this time.

However, there are many items throughout the Muir Papers that are transcribed in hard copy and available at Holt-Atherton — thanks to William Frederic Badè and Linnie Marsh Wolfe. Badè was a director of the Sierra Club and edited the Sierra Club Bulletin from 1910 to 1922. Upon Muir’s death in 1914, Muir’s daughters asked Badè to serve as his literary executor and “prepare his life and letters.” He contacted hundreds of Muir’s friends and acquaintances to get the letters that Muir had written and carefully transcribed them. He also transcribed many of Muir’s journals and notebooks.

According to The Guide and Index to the Microfilm Edition of the John Muir Papers, Linnie Marsh Wolfe was “the only scholar between 1945 and the late 1970s who had full and open access to Muir’s personal papers.” She eventually published John of the Mountains and died shortly before Son of the Wilderness won a Pulitzer Prize in 1946. She transcribed many journals in preparing these books.

The transcriptions that Badè and Wolfe created are only available in hard copy at the Holt-Atherton Special Collections or, in some cases, on the microfilm copy of the Papers. A complete list is provided here.

Perhaps someday transcriptions of all of Muir’s journals and notebooks will be accessible online. In the meantime, Holt-Atherton is working on a grant-funded project with UC Berkeley’s Bancroft Library to have 6500 letters to and from Muir scanned, transcribed, and posted online. They are expected to be available by the fall of 2009.

List of transcribed material available in the John Muir Papers (“MF” indicates items are available in microform and the frame number):

- **Series 5A, Correspondence and Related Papers,** Badè Box 5 contains transcribed letters. Series 1 Correspondence and Related Papers contains many letters that are transcriptions only.

- **Series 2: Journals and Sketchbooks:**
  - 1879 July Alaska Trip (MF 25-01733)
  - 1879 October 1st Alaska Trip with S. Hall Young (MF 26-02059)
  - 1881 June Corwin (MF 27-02664)
  - 1895 July Trip Down Tuolumne (MF 28-03327)
  - 1911-1912 South America Parts 1-3 (MF 30-4636)
Series 3A: Notebooks

1869 (c1887,c1910) Sierra Journal Volumes 1-3
(MF 31-00209, 31-0382, 31-00469)

Series 5A, Related Papers, Bade Box 5, Journal Transcriptions:

1867 “Florida - Cuba”
1869 Jan 1 – May 31 “20 Hill Hollow”
1869 ca June 1-Jul 28 “Sierra Journal Summer 1869 v. 3”
1871, 1911 Journal Excerpts, 3 pages
[1881] “Northwest Geography and History” (#29)
1891 May Trip to Kings River (#36a)
1895 “Trip to the Sierra” (#36b)
1896 July 10-23 (#39)
1896 August 26 – September 30 (#37)
1897 August 7-27 “Sargent and Canby Trip to Alaska” (#41)
1897 July, September-November “Through South” (#40)
1899 May 26-June 28 (#43)
[1899] June 29-July 25 (#42)
[1899] July 26-August 2 (#44)
1902 January 13-23 (#46)
c.a 1912 [South America Trip]
Autobiography versions “C” from pelican bay in 1908
Autobiography 3 pages “Life and Letters”

Series 5B, Related Papers, Wolfe Box 12, Journal Transcriptions:

1869 Journal Excerpts Wolfe Emended copy
1869-1873 Journal Excerpts Wolfe Emended copy
1869-1870 December 16 – about July 7 Yosemite
[1872 October] [Lyell Glaciers]
1873 June 1-5 Mt. Lyell
[1873?] Yosemite
1873 July 27 – August 10
Little Yosemite
1873 September Yosemite; San Joaquin Canyon
1874-1877 Excerpts
1875 June Sierra
[ca 1876] [Sierra Studies?]
1888 July 11-August 12
Rainer etc
1890 June-September
Excursion of Alaska (#44a)
1890-1891 Excerpts
1893 July (Reel 28 Frame 03198)
[1893 Summer] European Tour
1894, 1904 Excerpts
1896 August 27 [Oregon]
1902 July 15-August 16 Kern River
1903-1904 Around the World Tour (#48-52)
1905-1906 July 30-February 9 Arizona (fragments) (#52a)
1909 July 2-25 Little Yosemite (#54)
1913 August 14-27
Undated Miscellaneous fragments
Undated Notes Fragments “X-1”
“Wolfe Copy of Muir Material”
“Wolfe Notes (prepared for Son of Wilderness narration)”
“Wolfe transcription of Trip to Kings River Yosemite”
“Wolfe JM Journal Transcripts”

John Muir frequently wrote in many different directions and carefully captioned his drawings.
The researcher must strain to understand exactly what Muir had written.
(Page 6-7 of June-July 1907, Yosemite Trip with Sierra Club)
Then the story unfolds. This essay is in a cerebral realm somewhere inclusive of both available data and virtual possibility. Tracking Muir requires a clear understanding of the textual and physical geographies of Muir's life and writings and how they intersect in his books, as well as the striking sense of natural and cultural histories of the territory he explored, and how they also work together with Muir's own texts.

The story of Muir's arrival and departure from San Francisco is told in more than one way by himself, as well as by his biographers. The four sources for the story of Muir's 1868 walk give dates for his arrival by steamer ship in San Francisco ranging from March 27 to April 2. While aboard ship, Muir had befriended an Englishman named Joseph Chilwell, who joined him on his walk. As the story goes, he inquired of a carpenter for the nearest way out of town. And when asked where he wanted to go, replied, "To any place that is wild." The startled provider of directions told him to take the ferry to Oakland. But years later Muir often reworked portions of his book manuscripts to make a story an amusing tale, and this may very well be such a case.

William Frederic Badé, Muir's first executive biographer, in chapter six of Life and Letters of John Muir gives the arrival day in San Francisco as March 27, 1868. Badé makes it clear that he had checked old ship records for correct dates of passages and landings. Therefore it is most probable that the correct arrival date of the Nebraska steamer on which Muir arrived was March 27, 1868. Evidently Muir turned the story into a tale of immediate and hasty departure from the city to make it more readable for the public. The first of April is a more comprehensive and compelling starting point than March 27th. Likely, the truth may be in the discrepancy of the dates themselves -- the actual time spent in San Francisco. A second question arises as to whether Muir carried any cash or needed to find work. About a year earlier, while in Georgia, he had received a package of his own money sent to him by one of his brothers. He may still have had some cash on him when he got to California, but he stated, "I had incredibly little money..."

Muir grew up where wilderness was being transformed into settlements. Later, he saw Madison, Wisconsin, and also Indianapolis, Savanna, and New York. So he was familiar with American cultural landscapes of all stages from pioneer settlements to industrial cities. Although he preferred nature to culture, Muir was no shy recluse. He had always been straight forward with people, even his parents. As a teenager he was a challenging stump grubber for miles around and also worked on road crews, and by 1867, when he determined to drop out of the world of industry, he was building a reputation as an ingenious mechanical engineer, and an innovator of labor improvement practices. If he needed to he could and would find work, or a meal, or a place to sleep. There was plenty of human activity and opportunity, be it work, food, or just meeting friendly people.

All he had to do to make his way was to strike up a conversation with someone. Anyone would be assured of his worth as a hired hand, or a worthy friend. Muir was known to keep contacts with people and sometimes returned to work for the same rancher year after year while traveling to Yosemite in the 1870's. Otherwise he could get by for indefinite amounts of time with little more than flour or dried bread.

If Muir really did spend a week in San Francisco it seems almost evident he was working. This not only would provide him with needed cash, but he could use the time to obtain more information about routes to Yosemite and other points of interest and culture about California. Perhaps the carpenter who directed him to the Oakland ferry was a fellow worker with whom Muir had been talking for days. One or more persons may have convinced him that traveling south along the East Bay was the best choice. Alternatively, he could have walked south along the west side of the bay in what was known as the Valley of Oaks, and utilized at the time as horse ranches. After all, both sides of the bay converge in the Santa Clara Valley.

Muir could not have been amused by San Francisco any more than he was by any other large city. Returning to Yosemite in September 1874 after spending several months in the Bay Area, he wrote in his journal:

Tell me what you will of the benefactions of city civilization, of the sweet security of streets -- all as part of the natural upgrowth of man towards the high destiny we hear so much of.... If the death exhalations that brood the broad towns in which we so fondly compact ourselves were made visible, we should flee as from a plague. All are more or less sick; there is not a perfectly sane man in San Francisco.]

And when he was writing articles from a room above a book store in San Francisco in the winter of 1879, he complained about the "...muddy and mean-looking" streets..."

In his writings on this subject, Muir gets from San Francisco to Oakland in eight words. But let us take a closer look at the perceptual end of this. A ferry cruise from San Francisco to Oakland takes twenty minutes to half an hour. While on the boat plying across the bay Muir saw Yerba Buena Island, Alcatraz Island, Tiburon Point, Mount Tamalpais, the Marin Headlands...
and the Golden Gate, the East Bay hills and Mount Diablo, and the redwood-serrated ridge lines of the Coast Range receding on the west. Some of the most diverse and beautiful terrain on earth surely had some damping impact on Muir. He wrote, “Every inspiration yielded a...well-defined piece of pleasure...” From Oakland he followed the Diablo foothills along the San Jose Valley to Gilroy and described the foothills. In a letter to Jeannine Carr he wrote that the hills “…were robed with the greenest grass and colored and shaded with millions of flowers... and hundreds of crystal rills....” Muir’s use of the term ‘San Jose Valley’ should not be regarded as strictly referring to the valley at the southern end of the bay but must be taken as regarding the entire area of flatlands from Oakland, Hayward, Mission San Jose, and all the way to San Jose and Gilroy.

For someone today walking along the route Muir took in the East Bay in 1868 there is hardly anything that would come even close to compare the visual landscapes that Muir saw and experienced then, to what is there now, other than a few protected portions of the adjacent hills, and a few historical homesites. The old Oakland-San Jose Road that Muir walked in 1868 is now a part of a continuous metropolitan rampant with traffic signals, congested modern traffic, businesses, parking lots and driveways, and loud noise -- a world and an age away from the rural landscape Muir saw. Its northern part is called East 14th Street, which in Hayward becomes Mission Blvd. It is also State Highway 238, but is no longer the scenic and leisurely route it remained until the late twentieth century. Growth, freeways and congestion changed all that in only a few short decades. Furthermore, the old San Jose Road literally no longer exists in San Jose, for it has been highly fragmentated and divided by modern business parkways. In other places shifting to a modern highway has hidden the old route. Yet there remain a few preserved vestiges of the pioneer days to offer lessons in local history and images. And this is where we look and find how to fit Muir into the scene.

Twenty years after the Gold Rush, American settlers in California had divided up the vast Mexican land grants; there were more people and more farms. The East Bay and Santa Clara Valley were busy bustling centers of agriculture and commerce, although neither town had a railroad. In those times there were numerous landings along the bay-shore where long straight roads led toward the inland villages. Many of those old roads are now named for the pioneer landing captains. In 1868 the area looked as different from 1848 as it would from 1880.

Old maps show the main roads and locations of settlements, and sometimes with orchards or vineyards and some lines and etchings to mark streams and hills. Later maps show property lines and more streets for towns and neighborhoods. The earlier the map, the more retrospective it is of the original open and rural landscape. When one looks at these old maps, one sees plenty more than these historical factors revealed in their images: open landscapes and open roads, with small villages scattered among farms, orchards, vineyards, and wild pastures spotted with live oaks. One also envisions a busy but peaceful road connecting a rural paradise where a stroll or a long walk in springtime would be pure pleasure. Finally, one can imagine friendly people willing to offer a days' work or a meal and a place to sleep to an intelligent and entertaining traveler.

It is not difficult to determine that the old Oakland ferry landing was in the vicinity of the single numbered streets – 1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc. Today, the north end of East 14th Street merges onto San Pablo Avenue and crosses Broadway, one the first streets in Oakland, and near the single numbered streets. This is where Muir would have begun walking south. There are a number of preserved historic homes in Oakland, and DeFremery Recreation Center at 1651 Adeline Street is Oakland’s first playground, created in 1910 and named for a pioneer family. The large multi-room clubhouse is in the style of a nineteenth century farm mansion and the block-sized park is full of huge old oak trees. This park is in the midst of a modern high-rise city. Also in Oakland, The Museum of California is a good place to visit for exhibits of California natural and cultural history, and early California arts. There are many early California paintings including one of Oakland when it really was a land of oaks. Also on display are paintings by Muir’s close friend William Keith.

The metropolitan congestion mentioned earlier is exceedingly evident on East 14th from Oakland to San Lorenzo, but in Muir’s time the parcels of hills and flatlands were not subdivided and covered with houses. It is important here to point out that Muir was not walking through what we have now; the old Mexican land grants were transformed into expansive acres of orchards and farms. It was still open country. He was walking through vast land holdings, with the towns dotted along the main road. Microclimates of the foothills may still be found at places like Mills College and Joaquin Miller Park in the Oakland Hills.

The old Rancho San Lorenzo, granted to Guillermo Castro in 1843, spread some 7000 acres from Mission Blvd. at Hampton Road west to Hesperian and south as far as Winton Avenue, an area now paved with subdivisions. In 1859 William Meek, one of the first pioneers of agriculture in Alameda County bought 3000 acres of the property. He built a mansion there in 1869. His
Urban sprawl now covers early routes across Niles, Fremont, and Mission San Jose Google Earth, 2007

former business partner from his days in Oregon, Henderson Lewelling, also moved to California and purchased adjoining land to the north, the former Estudillo Land Grant. East 14th Street crosses Estudillo Avenue near San Leandro Creek. These properties became known as “Cherryland” because Meek and Lewelling had extensive orchards of cherry, apricot, plum, and almond. Even today there are old neighborhoods called “Cherryland;” there is a Cherryland Park and a Cherryland Market might still be found on some corner of the old neighborhood. Meek organized Hayward’s first Agricultural Society, and was its first president in 1867. Meek was also a member of the first board of trustees of Mills College. In 1964 the last parcel of the old property was about to be sold and the mansion to be torn down for a housing development. The citizens and the Hayward Area Recreation and Park District bought the thirteen-acre estate and in 1973 it was registered as a National Historic Site. The Meek estate and park is one of the very few historic farm sites in the area that gives a sense of the ambiance of a former time. Muir must have seen many such estates and farms along his route in 1868.

Not far from the Meek property, on Lewelling Blvd., across from the San Lorenzo High School, there stands a giant and ancient California Bay tree replete with history and legend. This tree is nine feet in diameter, fifteen and one half feet at the base, and over seventy feet tall. It once stood in the open near the bank of San Lorenzo Creek, along with a diversity of native riparian grasses, wildflowers, herbaceous plants, and ferns, with associated wildlife. Native Americans used it as a landmark and meeting place. Local legend has it that when José Joaquin Estudillo ceded his land to Americans, he hid his treasure under this tree, but alas it was later found, indeed buried below the base, and hence it vanished. Now the tree stands behind fences, between apartments, and isolated from the creek, which is now a fenced concrete culvert over which traffic crosses. Another culvert runs between Meek Estate and the BART tracks. Many of the “crystal rills” that Muir saw flowing out of the hills are now in concrete culverts and crossing under the highway.

In Hayward, traveling south on Mission Boulevard, is Garin Avenue, facing from the hills. Étienne Garin sailed from France in the mid-1860’s with two sons. He died en route. His son Paul worked as a draftsman in San Francisco and Oakland in 1868. And Paul’s brother Victor worked as a carpenter in San Francisco. Victor later bought land a few miles south of old Hayward and planted produce and a vineyard. Today that property is known as Garin Regional Park, and is complemented on the south with Dry Creek Regional Park, donated directly to the park district by the Meyers sisters, daughters of a pioneer family. Together the two parks cover some 5,000 acres of a unique isolated watershed adjacent to a large metropolitan area. Because of its protected status the slopes of the front ridges offer a natural view from many places in the local flatlands.

There is no reason to believe that in 1868 Muir kept intent on the public road. After walking a thousand miles through eastern forests and mountains, the hills, ridge lines, and canyons of the East Bay had to have intrigued him immensely, and most certainly he at least went for brief jaunts into their midst. He wrote that he and Chilwell “...proposed drifting leisurely mountainward, via the valley of San José, Pacheco Pass, and the plain of San Joaquin, and thence to Yosemite by road that we chanced to find; enjoying the flowers and light, ‘camping out’ in our blankets wherever overtaken by night, and paying very little compliance to roads or times.” He also explained, “I wandered enchanted in long wavering curves, knowing by my pocket map that Yosemite Valley lay to the east and that I should surely find it.” Muir took six weeks to get to Yosemite; total distance: about 200 miles. That gives Muir an average advance of less than five miles a day! And with Gilroy only 80 miles from Oakland, at that rate he could have taken nearly three weeks to wander, or work, or camp, in the territory in between. Muir could easily wander in a general area for days at a time.

Mission San Jose in the late 1880s
Picturesque California: The Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Slope, edited by John Muir, 1888
By the mid-1950s a growing population had transformed much of the southwestern part of Alameda County from farms and orchards to suburban communities. The town of Decoto became part of Union City, while Niles was one of five districts combining to form the city of Fremont. One area that has undergone changes in several converging old routes is Niles. Muir came through before the railroads. The old Oakland-San Jose road merged with one coming up from Alvarado by the bay, but after the railroads were built, an underpass separated the two converging roads. And the main road through Niles was later shifted outside of town. Furthermore, the old road was cut off at the south end of town where an old bridge crossed Alameda Creek.

In 1842 an adobe house was built by José de Jesus Vallejo on the Rancho Arroyo de la Alameda at the north end of what is now Niles. In 1866 a 500 acre parcel of the property was sold to a German immigrant named John Rock. Rock built it into one of the largest and best nurseries in the United States, and Rocks’ worldwide connections, and science and business sense made him the leader of Pacific nurserymen.13 The old California Nursery at Niles was widely known for many decades. In the 1970’s most of the old acreage was sold to developers, the tract was named ‘The Trees’ and the business part of the nursery became much smaller. But the back end of the nursery is still planted with old oaks, yew, cedars, and many other trees. This portion of the old nursery and the old Vallejo Adobe is now California Nursery Historical Park. When Muir came this way Rock had just started and one may wonder whether this could have been one of his real stops because of his intense interest in botany.

The mouth of Alameda Creek had to have intrigued Muir, causing him wonder about the nature of this immense watershed. In those times the volume of water and the width of the creek was more like a river. In 1853, the Vallejo brothers built a flour mill here on their ranch. Again, it is a question of what environment Muir was really walking through. C. H. Shinn wrote in 1889 that the old mill had long vanished, but that in the same area stood a few houses, stores, and saloons—not far from what Main Street is like now. The foundation of the old mill is still there in Vallejo Mills Historic Park at the mouth of Niles Canyon.14

On the south end of town, where the road turns left and again passes under the tracks, the old road crossed Alameda Creek. The state highway was shifted to the east and a brief portion of the old road named Overacker, for another pioneer. Amazingly, part of that isolated street still has a rural setting with old time homes embedded in thick woodland. Also on that side of the creek, off Mowry Road, is Shinn Historic Park and Arboretum. James Shinn came to California in 1855 and started an orchard and nursery on 110 acres here at Niles, across the river from the Vallejo adobe. Shinn was also an influential horticulturist.15 His son Charles Howard Shinn, born in 1852, had a prominent and varied career in California history. He often returned home to Niles to write articles for magazines. When Muir began selecting writers for his edited Picturesque California in 1880, he called on C. H. Shinn.16

Past Morrison Canyon is Mission San Jose. The old mission town was small in 1868, but there were old vineyards and orchards. More importantly are the microclimates of Mission Creek and the protected grounds of the mission. This was originally an Ohlone Indian village, the heart of which is now a group of townhouses named for the old Indian village, Oraysom. In a photograph of Mission San Jose dated 1868, a bakery sign is clear. Do we envision John Muir stopping in here?

All the way from Mission San Jose to beyond Warm Springs...
Muir wrote: 

The landscapes of the Santa Clara Valley were fairly drenched with sunshine, all the air was quivering with the songs of the meadowlarks, and the hills were so covered with flowers that they seemed to be painted...16

This is one of the most fertile valleys...of the coast; its rich bottoms are filled with wheatfields and orchards and vineyards and alfalfa meadows... Larks and streams sang everywhere; the sky was cloudless, and the whole valley was a lake of light....

The foothills (that form the sides of our blessed font) are in near view all the way to Gilroy; those of the Monte Diablo range on our left, those of Santa Cruz on our right; they are smooth and flowing, and come down to the bottom levels in curves of most surpassing beauty; they still wear natural flowers, which do not occur singly or in handfuls, scattered about in the grass, but they grow close together, in smooth, cloud-shaped companies, acres and hillsides in size, white, purple and yellow, separate, yet blending to each other like the hills upon which they grow.19

The Oakland Road coming from Mission San Jose, and the Monterey Road coming from Salinas, did not merge directly but were staggered by several blocks of old downtown San Jose between 1st and 13th streets. That area of San Jose is still composed of structures from the 1870's to the 1940's and is now preserved as The San Jose Downtown Commercial Historic District and listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The boundaries of this district reflect the same historical limits of old downtown San Jose. There should be little doubt that by this time Muir had found his way and was comfortable with where he was, where he was going, and what he was doing. He probably passed through San Jose without spending much time there. But by 1875 he would be lecturing on forests, at San Jose.

Morgan Hill and Gilroy, south of San Jose, once consisted of vast Mexican land grants, but after the Gold Rush, American pioneers flooded the fertile valley with farms, and cattle and horse ranches. By the time Gilroy was incorporated in 1867, it had a brewery, a distillery, and a flourmill. From Gilroy Muir and Chilwell turned toward Pacheco Pass and Yosemite.

Now that we have seen how Muir fit into the scene of the East Bay in 1868, we must fit the scene to Muir. Too many Muir scholars have under emphasized John Muir's deliberate decision to journey to California. Upon arrival in San Francisco, the story of the carpenter directing him to the nearest wild country obscures the degree to which Muir knew about where he was headed and what he wanted to see. While recovering from the eye injury in Indianapolis in 1867, Muir was given a brochure by a friend about Yosemite Valley in California. After walking a thousand miles in the east he contracted malaria in Florida. It can be said that when John Muir came to California, in a soulful sense, he was not exactly a stranger in an unfamiliar country. He was used to being outdoors and roaming free, exploring and botanizing, had read about Yosemite, and, he carried a map of California. When he arrived in San Francisco he was no mere drifter or wanderer; he came to California with a goal – health, and Yosemite; and a destiny awaited him as well.

Muir spent the rest of his life with his wife and two daughters in Martinez on the northwest side of Mount Diablo and was always urged to write by prominent and influential friends. In ten years time John Muir had become widely known to the general public as a brilliant writer, spokesman, and wilderness guide, and an influential magnet to scholars, professors, scientists, writers, editors, artists, businessmen, clergy, and politicians. Traversing the East Bay and Santa Clara Valley in 1868 were the first steps of that journey in California. He wrote, "Slow indeed was my progress through these glorious gardens, the first of the California flora I had seen."20 At a time when most chroniclers
were making records and drawings of settlements and farms, Muir was one of the few to leave us a few notes about the former natural environment of the East Bay and Santa Clara Valley. As the years unrolled into the first decade of the twentieth century, the legacy Muir was creating was to have lasting influence on literature and conservation, in America and around the world.

NOTES


Muir quoted his “Personal Narrative” to a stenographer in 1908, and that source was what Badé applied as fragments of narrative among his own commentaries in Life and Letters; however, for the story of Muir’s arrival in San Francisco, Badé used Muir’s “Rambles of a Botanist” from 1872, and states that Muir himself penciled into the narrative draft that this story was to be filled in from an earlier draft, presumably “Rambles.”

2. There are no letters to or from Chilwell within the Muir Papers, nor is there any indication Muir visited Chilwell in England later in life while on his world tours. Muir mentions Chilwell’s last name in a typed manuscript (circa 1910) on his first trip to the Sierra. It is unclear where Badé found Chilwell’s first name. Information provided by Shan Sutton, Head of Holt-Atherton Special Collections, University of the Pacific Library, personal correspondence from Shan Sutton in author’s files. Further information is found in The Guide and Index to The John Muir Papers, 1858-1957, Microform Edition, ed. Ronald H. Limbaugh and Kirsten E. Lewis (Alexandria, VA: Chadwyck-Healy, Inc., 1986), Reel 45: frames 11013-11582; Reel 46: frames 11583-12048; 12497-12491; 12502-12512 [Chilwell Incident].

3. The Yosemite, p. 4. Badé in Life and Letters phrased it “To any place that is wild...”. See 1:177-78.

4. The Yosemite, p.3.


9. By the term, San Jose Valley, Muir is referring to the entire East Bay from Oakland to San Jose. By the term, Livermore Pass, Muir is referring to Niles Canyon, the route of the Southern Pacific Railroad.

10. These same views may be had today from the Bay Area Rapid Transit system (BART). There is a railroad museum in Niles and rides in open cars pulled by antique locomotives are available through Niles Canyon.


12. The Yosemite, p. 4.


14. In 1991, William Sturm, History Librarian for the Oakland Public Library, and a member of the Alameda County Historical Society, discovered a series of 21 newspaper articles by Charles Howard Shinn from the Oakland Inquirer in 1889. The Society then put these together and published a book titled Historical Sketches of Southern Alameda County, by Charles Howard Shinn. These essays include historical sketches of San Lorenzo, Alameda Creek, Warm Springs, Irvington, and Niles. Shinn did a very good job of describing farms, vineyards, orchards, homes, and towns of that time, as well as the progress and success of agriculture in the area. Shinn’s records were made from original journals, diaries, historical records, and personal knowledge. These data have helped much in accuracy and dating of cultural imaging.


By 1874 the railroads had come to California, and Muir began riding the rails from the Bay Area to Tullock on his way to Yosemite. In a letter to Jeanne Carr he wrote: “From the car window I watched the gradual transition from muddy water, spongy tule, marsh and level field as we shot up the San Jose Valley [the East Bay], and marked as best I could the forms of the stream canons as they opened to the plain, and the outlines of the undulating hillocks and headlands between. Interest increased at every mile...we turned suddenly and dashed into the narrow mouth of the Livermore Pass [Niles Canyon]. Life and Letters 2:11.

17. The Yosemite, p. 3-4.

18. The Yosemite, p. 4.

19. “Rambles of a Botanist,” p. 767-68

20. The Yosemite, p. 4.

Author’s Note: Howard Cooley is a self-taught naturalist and horticulturist, having spent several decades doing research and fieldwork. He has a keen interest in natural history and has hiked extensively in the Regional Parks and hills of the San Francisco East Bay studying all aspects of the natural environment. His essays have appeared in The John Muir Newsletter, The Banderita (the newsletter of the Northern Mariposa County History Center in Coulterville, CA), and in the Bulletin of the California Lichen Society.
“I canna get doon,” wails young Davie Gilrye Muir, gripped by fear during a roof-climbing contest. John, clinging precariously to the windowsill, rescued his brother. The Muirs immigrated from Dunbar, Scotland to the United States in 1849 and settled in Marquette County, Wisconsin. David grew up on the farm. He attended the University of Wisconsin for several years of study. Afterwards, David went to work at Parry & Muir, a Cash Dry Goods House in Portage, Wisconsin. Mr & Mrs Muir moved to Martinez, California in 1892 to manage his brother’s farm. This freed his brother John Muir to wander in nature, start the Sierra Club, advocate for National Parks and preservation of the wilderness through his writings. David Muir and Julia, his second wife, moved to Pacific Grove in 1905. Deep sorrow has touched his life with the long illness and death of his first wife Catherine Cairne and drowning of John, his sixteen year old son. David Muir was an honored and loved deacon of Mayflower Congregational Church. He attended meetings, sang in the choir and was a man of strong integrity and Christian virtues influencing many of the men in his church and community. David Muir passed away in 1916 after three days of illness. He had learned of the death of Carrie, one of his daughters, three weeks before, which may have precipitated his death.

Mayflower Presbyterian Church; when David Muir attended, it was the Mayflower Congregational Church.
Diane Stegmeir photo

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