



Galen Clark was the first guardian ranger of Yosemite for nearly 30 years (facing page) With Galen Clark in front, the Wawona Tunnel Tree stands behind with its eight-foot-wide opening

GALEN CLARK *Beloved Guardian of Yosemite*

STORY BY DAVID MCNEILL

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He was officially named the “Beloved Man of Yosemite” by his fellow citizens of Mariposa County, high in the foothills of the western slope of the Sierra mountains. That moment culminated a career that took Galen Clark from mountain man and adventurer to naturalist, author and beloved guardian of Yosemite. Like his good friend, John Muir, Galen was far ahead of his time. He was a man so humble that history passed him by.

One fine summer when I was working with a trail crew high in the mountains above June Lake in the Eastern Sierra, I grabbed a book out of our two-box library by Shirley Sargent called *Galen Clark: Guardian of Yosemite*. I had no idea who Galen Clark was, but by the time I finished reading Sargent’s book, it was like discovering the missing link between John Muir and Josiah Whitney. John Muir

is famous and revered for being the founder of Yosemite, but Galen Clark built it with roads, trails and bridges. He was the man who never got the credit he deserved in history for all of his hard work and good service to the American people. And that is just the way this most modest of men would have wanted it.

As the story goes, Clark was mining in California after the Gold Rush and became ill with a serious lung infection. The doctor gave him six months to live, and with nothing to lose, he headed for the mountains to homestead a ranch in a beautiful meadow in Wawona. This later turned into a popular hotel that Clark presided over. It was at this time in 1857 that he and a friend became the first Anglos to explore the mighty Giant Sequoias in the Mariposa Grove. His love for the great trees led him into a career as an originator of

the concept of a “National Park.”

What is ironic is that Galen Clark lived to be 96 years old and was the first guardian ranger of Yosemite for nearly 30 years. He had it together as a person and was described as “efficient” in his duties at the park.

At business ventures he was just the opposite, and borrowed money, mortgaged his hotel and lost it all. He was kind and hospitable to everyone he met and jealous of no one. His love for Nature made him a keen observer and expert on Yosemite and the Big Trees. Not a boastful person, he preferred to remain in the background of fame and fortune. When they wanted to name the Mariposa Grove after him, he politely refused.

Galen Clark and John Muir were tight friends

and took some memorable hikes together in different parts of the Sierra. One can only imagine what it must have been like to listen to those two sitting around the campfire, shooting the breeze. I'm sure that most of their preservationist philosophy was shaped during those outings and times spent together in the backcountry. I wouldn't doubt that Muir softened his feelings about the Native Americans in his old age through Clark's influence. When Clark was in his 90's he wrote several books about Yosemite including one about the Yosemite Indians. He had been their friend from the day he met them and sought to preserve their culture through his writing.

Like Muir, Clark spent a lot of time in the mountains alone. He would take a rifle and always bring back deer meat and occasionally a bear. Sometimes, he would have to enlist help to get the meat out of the woods, while other times he packed out all he could carry. This was at a time when there were few trails in Yosemite and most hiking was bushwhacking. Clark and Muir would play a silent game to see who was the best hiker: Clark was better in the thick brush, while Muir excelled in rock hopping.

Clark had a few eccentricities, like sleeping on the rough ground on rocks and sticks, never wearing a hat and breathing through his nose while hiking. He felt that breathing through the nostrils invigorated a person and increased lung capacity. Try it sometime and see how long you last without gasping for breath.

Before Galen died he had all his burial arrangements taken care of, right down to digging the hole where he would later rest. Of course, he picked a choice location in his beloved Big Trees and planted a small Sequoia in each corner of the plot. He planted other flowers and bushes that he kept well tended there, as well. He shared and enjoyed a most wonderful, fruitful life of service to Nature and his fellow man. He did it in style with humor and grace and set an example that lasts to this day. SH