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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

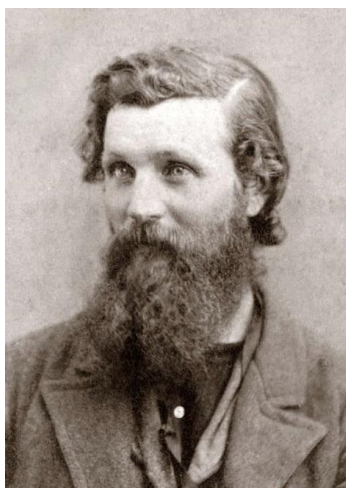
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Legendary naturalist **John Muir's** name crops up so often in California – it's given to schools, parks, nature preserves, hiking trails, libraries, roads, even medical centers – you'd think his first actual home there, a log cabin in **Yosemite National Park**, would be lit by neon signs. (Or a visitor's center at the very least). Surprisingly, there is no marker at all; only a few Muir aficionados are even aware of its location, which is not far from the popular main trail below the Lower Yosemite Falls. But this conspicuous absence has its own Muir-like poetic logic, I found, when I was guided to the precise spot on a crisp summer's morning. The strictly-designated trails in Yosemite often seem to keep visitors at a distance from of any genuine experience of its forests. But just nosing through the trees here offered glimpses of nature that would have sent Muir into fits of lyrical ecstasy. The mountain air was perfumed with ponderosa and cedar. Blue jays, larks,

and chipmunks gamboled about like Disney creations. And every turn offered more of the famous cliff views of the Yosemite Valley, so miraculous in their scale that the first white visitors compared them to the soaring walls of Gothic cathedrals. (“Who wouldn’t be a mountaineer!” Muir wrote. “Up here, all the world’s prizes seem nothing.”) To me, the combined effect was otherworldly, and it was obvious why early Californians regarded Yosemite as the new Eden.



Leading me through the wilderness was Bonnie Gisel, curator of the **Sierra Club’s** LeConte Memorial Lodge in the park, whose has recently written her second book on Muir, this one examining his lifelong passion for botany. “The Yosemite Valley was the ultimate pilgrimage site for Victorian Americans,” Gisel explained as we strolled. “Here was the absolute manifestation of the divine, where they could celebrate God in nature.” Locating the Grail on my own modest pilgrimage, however, took some tenacity. At one point, a sign mentioned Muir’s cabin, but did not give its exact location. A bronze plaque placed at the foot of the falls in the 1920s claimed to mark the cabin’s site, erroneously. (“It’s a nice spot,” said Gisel. “But it wasn’t

here.”) Soon we were wading through knee-high grass and clambering over fallen trunks alongside Yosemite Creek. (Was Gisel looking for a secretive Sierra Club marker, I asked? She paused and readjusted her John Lennon sunglasses: “Actually, I’m looking for the place where kids from the park’s school bring their gerbils.”) Finally, she paused in triumph: “*This* is where it was.”

We were in a shady grotto, overflowing with bracken ferns and milkweed, as picturesque a home as fans might have hoped for the 31-year-old drifter who, within his lifetime, would become America’s most influential conservationist. Although there are no structural remains, we know from Muir’s diaries and letters that he built his one-room cabin from pine and cedar with a friend, Harry Randall, and that its playful design reflected his boyish personality. He even diverted the creek to run beneath the floor. (“Muir loved the sound of water,” Gisel told me). Plants grew exuberantly through the floorboards. Muir wove the fronds of two ferns into “an ornamental arch” in the window over his writing desk. And he slept in a hammock softened by green cedar boughs under sheepskin blankets. He couldn’t have lived closer to nature without sleeping inside a tree trunk.

It was a beguiling glimpse of Muir in his own version of **Walden Pond**. He is such an icon that it’s sometimes difficult to believe he was a living human being, let alone a highly whimsical young man. He can seem a remote figure even in Yosemite National Park, the slice of America he loved best, 200 miles east of San Francisco in the central **Sierra Nevada**. A life-sized bronze statue of Muir in the new Visitor’s Center presents the more classic image of him as a wizened prophet, complete with flowing Methuselah beard, leaning on a staff and gazing into the distance as if listening to the music of the spheres. In the nearby museum, Muir’s battered tin cup and the traced outline of his foot are displayed like religious relics.