

Location of John Muir's "First Summer" Silver Fir Camp

by Dan Styer, 10 April 2020

John Muir spent the summer of 1869 in the high Sierra herding sheep for rancher Pat Delaney [1]. From 17 July to 7 August, the herders stayed at the "blessed silver fir camp" [7 August] located "in a magnificent silver fir grove at the head of a small stream that flows into Yosemite by way of Indian Canyon" [17 July] and "within a mile of the famous valley" [24 July].

In a letter to Jeanne C. Carr dated 17 July 1869, Muir confirms that "We are now camped in a splendid grove of spruce only one mile from Yosemite wall. The stream that goes spraying past us in the rocks reaches the Valley by that canyon between the Yosemite Falls and the North Dome." [2,3]

On 1 August 1869 Muir wrote to his sister, Sarah Muir Galloway, saying he was "At camp in Spruce grove near upper end of Yosemite two miles from the north wall." [4]

Despite all these references to a grove, the camp must have bordered one of "many fine meadows imbedded in the woods, gay with *Lilium parvum* and its companions" [16 July] because in the manuscript [5, at page 79, 20 July] Muir mentions "stars like big white lilies shining through the branches & spiry tops of the trees & a wide swath of them seen down the meadow." Later in the manuscript [5, at page 125, 26 July], Muir describes running from Mount Hoffmann "without conscious fatigue to my camp on the border of a beautiful meadow above the Yo[osemite] wall". And still later [6, at page 36, 6 August] he remarks on the "silver firs that edge our little meadow".

The camp must have been on an eastward facing slope, because, on 19 July, Muir was "Watching the daybreak and sunrise. The pale rose and purple sky changing softly to daffodil yellow and white, sunbeams pouring through the passes between the peaks and over the Yosemite domes, making their edges burn; the silver firs in the middle ground catching the glow on their spiry tops, and our camp grove fills and thrills with the glorious light." [7]

And the camp had a view of what is today called "Half Dome" although it was called by Muir "Tissiack" or "South Dome". On 20 July Muir wrote "Yonder stands the South Dome, its brow high above our camp." (Compare manuscript: "Yosemite South Dome looming high above our camp" [5, at page 76, 20 July].)

On 21 July Muir "paid a visit to the bear in the middle of a small garden meadow between the [North] Dome and the camp ... [less] than half a mile from camp". (Manuscript adds "the flowery glade from which I saw him saunter is one of the choicest of all I have yet discovered, where two small streams meet on their way down to Yosemite" [5, at page 91, 21 July].)

Muir made a sketch of this camp captioned “Camp above Yosemite Valley; north side” in the manuscript [5, at page 67, 17 July]. It has been clipped from the manuscript and can be found at <https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/jmd/369/>. This sketch shows only one distinguishing feature: The largest silver fir trunk is bent near its base. Indeed on 22 July Muir discusses trees “remaining more or less bent” from a “storm [that] came from the north”.

Finally, on 22 July Muir found a silver fir “growing on bare rock, thrusting its roots into a weathered joint less than an inch wide, and bulging out to form a base to bear its weight” that “stands on a granite ridge a few hundred yards to the eastward of camp”. The manuscript [5, at pages 101-102, 22 July] adds that “On the north side of the trunk close to the ground there is a very dense growth of closely packed branches the flat fronds being packed on top of each other ... about three feet high”.

I intend to search for Muir’s camp by locating, on the west bank of Indian Creek, a meadow in a silver fir grove with a view of Half Dome and of the passes between the peaks, near a trunk bent toward the south. I will search, a few hundred yards to the east, for a weathered joint in a granite ridge supporting a broken silver fir or, more likely, its 125-year-old remains. I will also search, half a mile away in the direction of North Dome, for a meadow where two small streams join. I might or might not find these places, but the search will be inspiring regardless.

[1] John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, June 1911).

[2] Bonnie J. Gisell, editor, *Kindred and Related Spirits: The Letters of John Muir and Jeanne C. Carr* (University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, 2001) page 88.

[3] **Spruce vs. fir.** In the 1887 manuscript of *My First Summer*, at page 7, <https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/jmn-sj2/> Muir calls this tree Silver spruce, *Picea amabilis*. (*Picea* is the spruce genus.)

In “The Coniferous Forests of the Sierra Nevada: II” (Scribner's Monthly, volume 22, number 6, October 1881, pages 921-931), at page 922, Muir calls this tree “Lovely Silver-Fir; Red-Fir; *Picea amabilis*”.

In *The Mountains of California* (Century, New York, 1894), chapter eight, “The Forests”, Muir calls this tree “Magnificent Silver Fir, or Red Fir; *Abies magnifica*”. (*Abies* is the fir genus.)

In the 1911 published version of *My First Summer*, Muir calls this tree Silver Fir, *Abies magnifica*.

In 2020, the US Department of Agriculture PLANTS database calls this tree California red fir, *Abies magnifica*.

[4] <https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/jmcl/11384/>

An excerpt from this letter appears in William Frederic Badè, *The Life and Letters of John Muir* (Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1924), chapter 7.

[5] In volume 2 of the 1887 manuscript of *My First Summer* at

<https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/jmn-sj2/>

[6] In volume 3 of the 1887 manuscript of *My First Summer* at

<https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/jmn-sj3/>

[7] This is almost certainly the same meadow described using nearly the same language in chapter eight, “The Forests”, last two paragraphs in section “Magnificent Silver Fir, or Red Fir”, of John Muir, *The Mountains of California* (Century, New York, 1894).

Excerpt: “the delicious purple of the dawn changes softly to daffodil yellow and white; while the sunbeams pouring through the passes between the peaks give a margin of gold to each of them. Then the spires of the firs in the hollows of the middle region catch the glow, and your camp grove is filled with light.”