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—MARGARET EISSLER
Supervisory Park Ranger

Q&A

WITH A
YOSEMITE
INSIDER



Margaret Eissler spent summers in Tuolumne Meadows where her parents were caretakers of the Sierra Club property at Soda Springs. The magnetic pull of Tuolumne drew her back in 1985 to work for the Yosemite Association, and in 1987 she joined the National Park Service as a summer seasonal ranger naturalist. She now interprets year-round in Yosemite National Park. In 1992 she founded the Parsons Memorial Lodge Summer Series, an annual forum for the arts and sciences

Q :: Please describe your connection to Yosemite National Park and Tuolumne Meadows?

A :: As a child, I associated summers in Tuolumne Meadows with absolute freedom. For six summers, from 1956-61, my parents were caretakers of the Sierra Club property at Soda Springs. We lived in the one-room McCauley Cabin just up the hill from Parsons Memorial Lodge. My sister and I immersed ourselves in the mountains and meadows. We waded and swam, watched baby Belding ground squirrels peek out of their holes and the marmot family sun themselves on the big rock in front of the cabin. We hopped from rock to rock. We knew the rocks in the neighborhood personally. We rode rock horses. We watched our favorite rock gardens and sometimes watered them. We hiked with ranger naturalists Carl Sharsmith and Will Neely and attended their campfire programs filled with stories and songs. Summer was always the highlight of the year. I never dreamed of being a ranger. I don't know why. Only many years later did working in Yosemite become an idea. And now, how could it be? I am the lead

of the Tuolumne interpretive team and committed to carrying on the legacy of excellent naturalists and programming.

Q :: Tuolumne Meadows and much of the surrounding area has inspired many park visitors, creating a lasting, heartfelt connection. Why do you think this place touches people so deeply?

John Muir answered this question well in his August 9, 1869 journal entry (*My First Summer in the Sierra*):

“Here the mountains seem to have been cleared away or set back, so that wide-open views may be had in every direction. This is the most spacious and delightful high pleasure-ground I have yet seen. The air is keen and bracing, yet warm during the day; and though lying high in the sky, the surrounding mountains are so much higher, one feels protected as if in a grand hall.”

It is this and the vibrant flurry of activity compressed within the eight to ten weeks of high elevation summer—the plants and animals trying to get everything done before winter comes. It is the open sky, bright blue or with thunderheads or studded with stars. It is the combination of granite domes, peaks and broad meadows with a river meandering through; the multitude of hiking possibilities; the sense of community—the employees and visitors who return year after year and the first-time visitors who fall in love with the place as we have There is something about Tuolumne Meadows that is very special, even magical. This can't easily be put into words. You have to come and experience it for yourself!

Q :: What do you like best about living and working in Yosemite National Park?

I love that I can live and work in a place that has always meant so much to me. With this amazing privilege comes the responsibility, as an interpreter and naturalist, to speak on behalf of place; to speak for those who cannot speak: people of the past and future, the bears, rocks, trees, rivers; to find creative ways to present a variety of perspectives, inspire new ways of seeing and thinking, and connect visitors intellectually and emotionally on local, global, and universal levels.

An interpretive program is a gift to the visitor, an offering, I believe. To speak on behalf of this most beautiful place and our home planet Earth, to bring the eloquent voices of scientists, historians, philosophers, and artists to the park, to build a staff that gives beautiful programs—that I can do this while immersed in mountains and meadows—well, this is exactly what I want to do.

Q :: Parsons Memorial Lodge, a beautiful historic building is surrounded by other historic structures. Please share the history of this area and the buildings.

Parsons Memorial Lodge, a National Historic Landmark, is a simple, rustic building with granite rock walls, lodgepole pine beams, and casement windows that overlook the Tuolumne River meandering through broad subalpine meadows surrounded by granite domes and peaks. Just to the East is Soda Springs where cold, carbonated, mineral water bubbles out of the ground. This was the setting for John Muir and Robert Underwood Johnson's decision over a campfire in 1889 to work together to create a Yosemite National Park. In 1912, the Sierra Club purchased the Soda



Above Parsons Lodge

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Springs property, which included the McCauley Cabin, and then built Parsons Memorial Lodge three years later in memory of mountaineer and conservation activist Edward Taylor Parsons. The San Francisco Bay Area architectural firm Maybeck and White designed the lodge, a perfect example of Bernard Maybeck's architectural vision of blending buildings in with the landscape. It was not a lodge to sleep in but rather a mountain headquarters, reading room, and gathering place open to the public. Parsons Memorial Lodge was a lively place, especially when hikers and campers took shelter from afternoon thunderstorms or when the Sierra Club Board of Directors held their summer meetings. Visitors read books, studied maps, played games, shared stories, ideas, and inspirations. My sister and I liked to jump in and out the casement windows and watch the people come and go.

The Sierra Club sold the 160 acres to the National Park Service in 1973. Since then, thanks to Yosemite Association, now Yosemite Conservancy, volunteers as well as National Park Service volunteers, Parsons Memorial Lodge remains open to the public from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. everyday across the summer as an interpretive center, reading room, and gathering place.

Q :: Yosemite Conservancy supports the Parsons Memorial Lodge Summer Series, a speaker's series that takes place annually in Tuolumne Meadows. What is the history of this event and what is planned for this year?

In 1992, the year of the Sierra Club centennial, Tuolumne interpreters decided to honor and celebrate the historic Soda Springs property and all who had traveled through with a summer series of special programs at Parsons Memorial Lodge.

As a member of the interpretive staff, I agreed to take charge of the project. In the end, it felt so right to have the lodge once again fulfill its original purpose as a vibrant gathering place where ideas were exchanged—ideas that could be inspiring and life changing, ideas about how to be in this world, how to live on this Earth, ideas that matched the



TOP Visitors take their seats at the Parsons Lodge for a poetry presentation, one of the dozens of exciting events offered each summer.

mountains and powerful thinking that had come before. The Parsons Memorial Lodge Summer Series has continued ever since. It is now intrinsic to summer in Tuolumne Meadows.

The afternoon weekend presentations in July and August complement the park's interpretive program. The series is a forum for the arts and sciences, a menu of diverse and often cutting-edge offerings. Artists, photographers, writers, musicians, storytellers, and poets join research scientists, naturalists, historians, philosophers, and planners in the annual summer line-up. The setting, the easy walk through the meadow to Parsons, the intimate space, the audience—a warm and enthusiastic mix of park visitors, park staff, and residents from surrounding communities—make the experience unforgettable for all involved.

At the time of this interview, the schedule for this year's 20th annual Parsons Memorial Lodge Summer Series is still being developed. The list of authors who will be presenting include noted historian Douglas Brinkley (*The Wilderness Warrior: Theodore Roosevelt and the Crusade for America and The Quiet World: Saving Alaska's Wilderness Kingdom, 1879-1960*) William Powers (*Twelve by Twelve: A One-Room Cabin Off the Grid & Beyond the American Dream*) and Anders Halverson (*An Entirely Synthetic Fish: How Rainbow Trout Beguiled America and Overran the World*). Other confirmed presenters include artist Valerie Cohen, naturalist and certified biomicry professional Karen Allen, naturalist, writer, and instructor David Gilligan, and many other including three poets yet to be named for the 15th Annual Tuolumne Meadows Poetry Festival always scheduled for the third weekend in August.

The 2011 schedule will be posted upon completion at www.nps.gov/yose/planyourvisit/programs.htm

Q :: What advice would you give to someone planning their first trip to Tuolumne Meadows?

First, I would suggest you stay as long as you can. There is so much to see and do, especially if you like to walk. Tuolumne Meadows is a jumping off place for a wide variety of hikes of different lengths and difficulties in all directions. You could take a shuttle bus to Tenaya Lake for a lazy day on the beach or a walk along the south shore trail. If your visit is long enough, follow a trail in every direction as each is so different. Be sure to give yourself time to explore the Mono Basin, just over the crest, a half hour drive from Tuolumne Meadows. The east side of the Sierra Nevada complements the high country of Yosemite. Consider attending an interpretive program, maybe one about wildflowers or birds or bears or geology... or attend a campfire or go hiking all day with a ranger or watch the stars – such a wide range of options, all free. Be sure to stop at the visitor center. We will be happy to give you the information you need.

Q :: What advice would you give to someone looking for a quintessential overnight hike in Tuolumne Meadows?

I would say all the overnight hiking possibilities are quintessential in their own ways. Following the Tuolumne River past cascades and waterfalls and domes to Glen Aulin or walking through the glacially carved Lyell Canyon or climbing up to high lakes (Cathedral or Young), a backpacker can't miss.

Look at maps, measure mileage, and dream of the possibilities! Remember all backpack trips require a wilderness permit and a bear canister for safe food storage. ■

Learn More!

Want to learn more about Yosemite Cultural & Historic Places?

Watch Episode 13 of Yosemite Nature Notes, entitled "Ranger's Club" sponsored by Yosemite Conservancy. This episode takes you inside Yosemite's Ranger's Club, a building of historical significance within the park. Visit <http://bit.ly/yosemiterangersclub>

