

Yosemite in Winter: A Terrific Titan Tradition

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SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

To generations of students, the words "second semester senior" conjure up images of biding time to graduation - sliding through a calendar of todays while adrift in hopeful images of tomorrow. My own final semester in 1974 featured a somewhat relaxed academic schedule (don't tell my kids!).

But that winter, a program begun the previous year was elevated to a tradition at SMHS: a snowy week in the Yosemite Valley.

Camping at the Yosemite Institute (YI) is now a generation-long ritual; this year's seniors and a few juniors embark February 10 on the school's 28th annual sojourn. The Yosemite trip has remained the stalwart SMHS highlight defining all others, thanks to dedicated faculty both in town and at the mountain camp. In fact, SMHS has partnered with the Yosemite Institute since the Sierra school's inception.

School Board President Barbara Maxwell first suggested participating in the newly forming Yosemite

Institute in 1972. Principal Kenneth Bullock and Vice Principal Jack Rankin agreed to join the program for its inaugural year, choosing a winter February week in 1973 to challenge his warm weather students.

Rankin remembers, "The goal was to have a live classroom experience in an outdoor environment. The main message was to protect the environment." The Yosemite Institute instructors were mainly young science graduates, including biologists, marine biologists, and environmental scientists, but historians and philosophers also lent their expertise.

While one of the goals of the program was to test one's limits, a few teens on the first trip chose instead to test the limits of the curfew. After their discovery they were summarily

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seated on a bus back to L.A., where

Superintendent Walter Dingus and their mortified parents met them. Reviewing the rules at camp the next day, a student asked Mr. Rankin what to do if they had to use the outhouse after curfew. "If Mother Nature calls, Father Rankin takes you to San Marino," was his legendary response.

Despite the fact that school rules remained in place, a distinguishing feature of the annual Yosemite trip was its popularity among students and teachers alike. For years, students would arrive at 6:30 or 7:00 P.M. the evening before sign-ups, camping overnight to make sure they got a slot.

Later, seniors were given priority, which eased the panic of sign-ups.

Rankin continued the high Sierra tradition when he took over as SMHS principal. "It was such a superior experience. I loved it, period. I loved it because it gave me a chance to show that a principal was a human being. It was fabulous for everyone involved." His only regret was that Dingus "wouldn't let me go every

year."

Rankin passed the planning books to Michael (Mickey) McNamee in 1980.

McNamee recalls, "When he (Rankin) left SMHS, he handed me the YI folder and said distinctly, 'Keep it going!'" The charge has been a rewarding one for McNamee. Hundreds of students have told him and other SMHS teachers over the years that the experience was the highlight of their SMHS career. Two- or three-dozen students have counted it as a life-changing experience.

For several SMHS students, this impact was particularly distinct. At least three graduates later worked as YI leaders, and one subsequently married a YI leader after college. One distinguished SMHS student, Annie Barrett, became a YI leader after a Berkeley degree and time with the Park Service.

She later earned a teacher's credential and returned a third time to the Institute as Assistant Program Director.

Many of the programs are geared towards creative expression or interpretation of the natural surroundings.

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Creativity is a talent that many students encounter or rediscover at Yosemite. "You should see some of the writings, some of the paintings," enthuses McNamee. Rankin proudly displays a watercolor of Yosemite Falls given to him by student artist Jane Mullfinger in the late 1970's.

For all of the students, the experience is character building. "They are able to break down social barriers, meet and make new friends, and do things they hadn't thought they were capable of," relates McNamee. "Many have gone to the top of Yosemite Falls when a flight of stairs is as far as they'd been before. They're thrilled."

They were also thrilled one year when a YI staffer named Garth gave a one-man performance as John Muir. As the story unfolded, Garth recruited then-Principal Jack Rose to be a bear, while swim coach Burt Kanner was drafted as a wolf. Rose obligingly crawled and growled in ursine imi-

tation for enthralled SMHS students. "He was a great bear," remembers McNamee.

Jeremiah Melnyk, an SMHS senior and wildlife lover, missed bear encounters when he attended YI last year, but did see raccoons and a bobcat. "Yosemite was the most beautiful place I'd ever been," he recounted, and "the best program the high school has." He was so eager to climb to the top of each peak that he found the group activities could be a distraction. "A lot of the time, we'd be up at a critical point on the hike - about to get to a view - and we'd stop and do a group activity."

Jeremiah hoped to repeat the trip this year, but his work schedule wouldn't allow it. He did inquire of the YI counselors what kind of college degree and work experience might prepare him to return as a staffer. "That kind of got me interested," he added.

Yosemite's atmosphere provides an enlightening experience in whatever arena a student is willing to grow. I learned that teachers and students who had previously escaped my

notice had interesting gifts to contribute, and an intrinsic value I had never imagined. But I also internalized the main take-away lesson of the Institute: that Yosemite and all natural places are both precious and few. This perspective is acquired by living even for a brief time within the bewildering beauty of the Valley. The viewpoint is reinforced by the YI instructors, who emphasize the need to protect nature's "free" services, from food, fiber, medicines and energy, to nutrient storage, to purifying and regulating water, to opportunities for recreation and tourism.

Yosemite Institute will soon host my son, who seeks a well-earned break from his senior year. Having moved here after five years in Colorado, he's confident that he is prepared for the winter survival program. I haven't told him that he's long since acclimated to the lower altitude and higher thermostat of Southern California. But I hope that long after he forgets the High Sierra winter cold, he'll remember the warmth of new friendships and the burning power of new ideas.