

# WAWONA

## Yosemite's Grand Lady of the Past

Over two million years ago, massive glaciers covering what is now the Sierra Nevada, advanced downslope from the north. Slowly they gouged out the canyons and sheered off the massive granite outcroppings to form the magnificent panoramas of Yosemite Valley.

In October 1849, William Penn Abrams, a gold seeker, and a companion became lost while tracking a grizzly and recorded the first white man's sighting of this breathtaking natural wonder.

In 1856, Galen Clark, an Easterner who had come west to make his fortune in the California gold fields, established his homestead at Wawona, at the southern entrance to Yosemite. A doctor had told him he would die soon of consumption, and he planned to live out his final days there. The doctor's diagnosis proved to be wrong.

On his 160 acres, which he called Clark's Station, he constructed an overnight lodging facility for Yosemite-bound tourists brave enough to endure the dusty and jolting 45-mile stage ride from Mariposa to Wawona. The next year, while hunting for fresh meat to feed his guests, Clark discovered the Mariposa Grove of Big Trees—giant sequoias forgotten by time. Clark publicized these centuries-old trees and later guided amazed visitors beneath their towering branches.

Clark was known as a quiet man, genuinely devoted to the natural splendor of Wawona and Yosemite. Clark was not, however, a good businessman. In December 1874, after years

spent trying to get out of debt, Clark and his partner, "Deacon" Edwin Moore, sold all interests at Wawona to the Washburn brothers — Edward, John and Henry.

The former Clark's Station was permanently re-named Wawona, the Indian word for "Big Tree," by Mrs. Henry Washburn in 1884. The Washburns covered the open bridge Clark had built leading from Wawona north across



*A fountain and lilypond grace the hotel's main entrance.*

the Merced River. They built the Long White (all the hotel buildings were given names) in 1879. The Main Hotel building, which still stands today, was added in 1885—constructed on the site of Galen Clark's original rustic lodging house. More buildings were gradually added, until there were eight in all, and the grounds had grown from 160 to almost 4,000 acres.

The Washburn brothers were enterprising, with determination and foresight. They cleared the Wawona Road down into Yosemite Valley and operated the Yosemite Stage & Turnpike Company, running up to eleven stages daily from the terminus of the Southern Pacific Railroad in Raymond, in the Sierra foothills, to Wawona, and from there into the Valley.



*Clark Cottage is named for Galen Clark, a Wawona pioneer.*

These "stages" were actually open wagons with a protective covering over the top, and were drawn by four-horse teams. Travel was exhausting, since these "mud wagons," as they were known, made slow progress up steep inclines through choking dust and deep mud. Passengers often arrived at their destination so covered with mud and dust as to be almost unrecognizable.

The Washburns wanted to establish a luncheon station halfway between Raymond and Wawona—a place where weary travelers could stop, eat and refresh themselves. Henry Washburn asked William Sell and his wife Etta to establish and run a rest stop near the present town of Ahwahnee. Mr. Sell had become acquainted with the Washburns while working as a telegraph operator in Merced. He later became the first telegraph operator in Yosemite Valley.



*The Main Hotel's long covered front porch evokes memories of a quieter time.*

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The new rest station lay nestled in a lush green valley. The Indian word for valley was "Ahwahnee," and so the station was named Ahwahnee Tavern.



*The swimming pool, nestled beneath majestic pines, is a great place to cool off on a warm summer day.*

In 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt took the rugged stage trip from Raymond to Ahwahnee. A staunch outdoorsman, Roosevelt thoroughly enjoyed the less-than-luxurious conditions, splashing alongside other travelers with gusto in the washing trough on the Tavern's back porch.

Mrs. Eleanor Crooks, the Sells' daughter, recalls her mother's dismay when one of Roosevelt's aides devoured all the cookies she had specially prepared for the President while the Chief of State was

busy washing up out back. Roosevelt also disappointed the Washburns at Wawona. Despite their elaborate preparations, he didn't stay overnight, but merely rode through, choosing to camp outdoors in the Mariposa Grove with his guide, John Muir. Roosevelt later described the time he was to spend in Yosemite's backcountry as his "three days of heaven."

In the early 1900s, the Washburn-run hotel at Wawona was at its peak. Twenty Chinese workers were employed in the kitchen, laundry and gardens. Fresh produce was always available, and the hotel kept its own dairy cows for milk. Cattle grazing in Wawona's lush meadow provided visitors with the freshest meat. Trout from nearby mountain streams and local venison were also available in season—all for the rate of \$4.00 a day.

Thomas Hill, a well-known painter of Yosemite landscapes, established his studio, The Pavilion, on the hotel grounds in 1884, following the marriage of his daughter Estella to John Washburn. The studio became a center for music, poetry and art.

Eleanor Crooks, who still resides in Ahwahnee, remembers a stage ride she took to Wawona as a young girl. "Toward evening," she recalls, "we arrived at the hotel, with the fountain in the center of the lawn as it is now. The stage drivers drove up to the steps of the hotel with a great deal of pride. The porters, who were all older men, took the passengers down, dusted them off, and then conducted them up the steps into the lobby."

"On the porch," she continues, "the women associated with the hotel would be sitting in their fancy clothes awaiting the arrival of the tourists." Following a hearty meal, there would be singing, and perhaps a dance in the dance hall. The following morning, the guests would tour the Big Trees and then continue by stage to the Valley floor.

In 1914, automobiles were first permitted on the Wawona Road, and by 1916, they were the preferred mode of transportation. In May of that year, the final Washburn



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**-Eleanor Crooks**



*A painting of Yosemite Valley and Half Dome by Yosemite artist-in-residence Thomas Hill. His studio was just outside the Wawona Hotel's main entrance.*

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"mud wagon" arrived at Wawona from Yosemite Valley. By 1925, airplanes were landing in Wawona's spacious meadow, making daily flights from Merced to give hotel guests a thrilling and dangerous view of Yosemite Valley for \$7.50.

In 1932, John Washburn's son, Clarence, sold the family holdings at Wawona—some 3,724 acres—to the National Park Service. In 1934, the Yosemite Park & Curry Company purchased the hotel furnishings and began its management of the facilities, which continued until 1973, when MCA (Music Corporation of America) purchased the Curry Company.



*The covered bridge leads across the Merced River to the Pioneer History Center.*

Today, that special charisma that first prompted Galen Clark to choose Wawona as the site of his homestead, remains. Wawona's uniqueness lies in its faithful adherence to the elegance and relaxed pace of a time gone by. The absence of the trams and buses loaded with tourists that often crowd the Valley floor, the crisp white buildings with stately covered porches, the birds nesting in the eaves, the gentle splash of the fountain in the lily pond nestled in the middle of the luxurious green lawn, create a peaceful hideaway, singularly untouched by the modern age.

The hotel complex is essentially as it was when the Yosemite Stage & Turnpike Company first transported its dust-laden visitors. The cottage-style guest buildings that surround the Main Hotel still bear the names of Wawona pioneers—Clark Cottage, Moore Cottage, Washburn Cottage and Hill's Studio.

The hotel lobby is furnished with richly-upholstered settees, marble-topped oak tables, leaded glass lamps and delicate gray floral wallpaper that would have made Estella Washburn feel right at home. Among the hotel's 60 employees there is a palpable sense of pride, a sense that this is more than just a place for tourists to pause overnight on their way somewhere else.

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The past is preserved with an obvious concern for authenticity, evidenced by the recent renovation of Moore Cottage with period furnishings and accessories in tones of rich apricot and dusty rose; chosen to complement, not compete with, Wawona's spectacular natural setting.

The first-time visitor feels this sense of apartness, while actually being close to a wide variety of sights and activities. On the grounds are tennis courts, a golf course and swimming pool. The Mariposa Grove, six miles to the southeast, is accessible by tram or footpath. Twenty-six miles to the north lies Yosemite Valley, and eighteen miles northeast is Glacier Point, offering a breathtaking view of the Valley's chisled granite features.

Directly north of the hotel is the Pioneer History Center, an authentic late 1800s village dotted with original buildings moved to the site from throughout the Yosemite area. The Wawona Stables offer a variety of trail rides, including a moonlit evening ride around the Wawona meadow; and east of the privately-owned community of Wawona is the starting point of a rugged four-and-a-half mile trail to the top of Chilnualna Falls.

But visitors need do none of these things to experience a thoroughly enjoyable stay at Wawona. Sitting atop one the smooth boulders lining the banks of the Merced River, your feet dangling in its icy foam, or lying peacefully on a grassy expanse beneath a towering pine, while the dragonflies cruise lazily over the herd of deer in the meadow, are reasons enough to come.



*Moore Cottage is named for Galen Clark's partner, "Deacon" Edwin Moore.*

Wawona is like a Grand Lady of the past—now living in the modern world but not overtaken by it—a special place where weary travelers can relax, refresh and renew.