

YOSEMITE INDIANS



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by
Elizabeth Godfrey



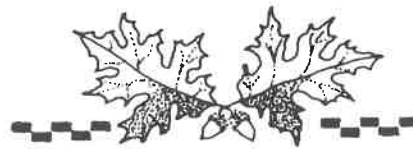
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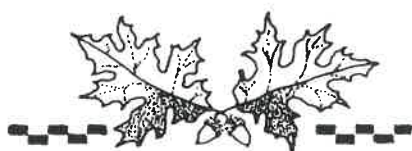
THE AHWAHNEECHEES AND CHIEF TENAYA

The first Indians entered the Yosemite region sometime over four thousand years ago. The earliest groups moved across the crest of the Sierra from the east during very dry years in the Great Basin. Some centuries later, Miwok-speaking people from the west slowly penetrated the Yosemite region as their old homes in the great valley below were taken over by other peoples pressing down the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys from the north. Mixing with the small groups of people already there, the Miwok established themselves in permanent villages along the Merced River reaching into Yosemite Valley itself, which they called "Ah-wah-nee," meaning "place of a gaping mouth."¹ Here their lives revolved primarily around the gathering of seeds and the acorns of the black oak, the hunting of deer, and the catching of trout. The work of survival took them into the high country of Yosemite each spring and summer, following the herds of deer and trading with Mono Lake Paiutes from the east side of the Sierra, returning in the fall to live through the winter on the stores they had collected.

But in about 1800, disease forced the Ahwahneechees to leave their

villages. Tenaya recalled it as "a fatal black sickness."² The few disheartened survivors of the Ahwahneechee villages left to affiliate with neighboring tribes, and for some years Yosemite Valley was uninhabited.

Tenaya's father had been a chief of the Ahwahneechees and his mother a Mono. Among his mother's people, he had been raised. Growing up, Tenaya had heard legends and tales of the "deep, grassy valley," and, when he visited the place as an older man with a few of the old Ahwahneechees, he decided to return to it. Composed of the remnants of his father's people and scattered members of other tribes, a band of approximately two hundred Indians reoccupied Yosemite Valley with Tenaya as chief. These Indians represented a small part of the Interior California Miwoks, including in ancient times around 9,000 people closely related in language and culture in the western foothills and lower slopes of the Sierra Nevada. To the white newcomers the new band came to be known as "Yosemites," a corruption of "Uzumati," meaning "grizzly bear," the animal which represented the larger of the two social subdivisions



THE MARIPOSA BATTALION

Shortly after it was authorized by Governor McDougal in mid-January, 1851, following several skirmishes, the Mariposa Battalion was organized to subdue the Indians of the area and to bring them down to the reservations to be established by agreements with the treaty commissioners.

Trader James D. Savage was elected major of the battalion. Savage knew the Indians of the area well. Many Indians worked for him, mining gold in return for food and clothing. By learning several of the local dialects and marrying women from the most numerous bands, he made himself a powerful man in the Mariposa area, though many Indians, including Tenaya and his band, resented his power and his alliances by marriage. Savage's power came from his presence in the midst of the confusion brought to Indians with the great influx of population. But Savage also had a personal grudge to settle. The previous May, his Merced River store had been attacked by Indians, and then in December his Fresno River store was destroyed and the two men in charge there killed. Three more men were killed at his Mariposa Creek Station during a raid. Convinced that the Yosemite

had organized the attacks, Savage swore, "If I ever have a chance I will smoke out the Grizzly Bears (the Yosemite) from their holes."⁶

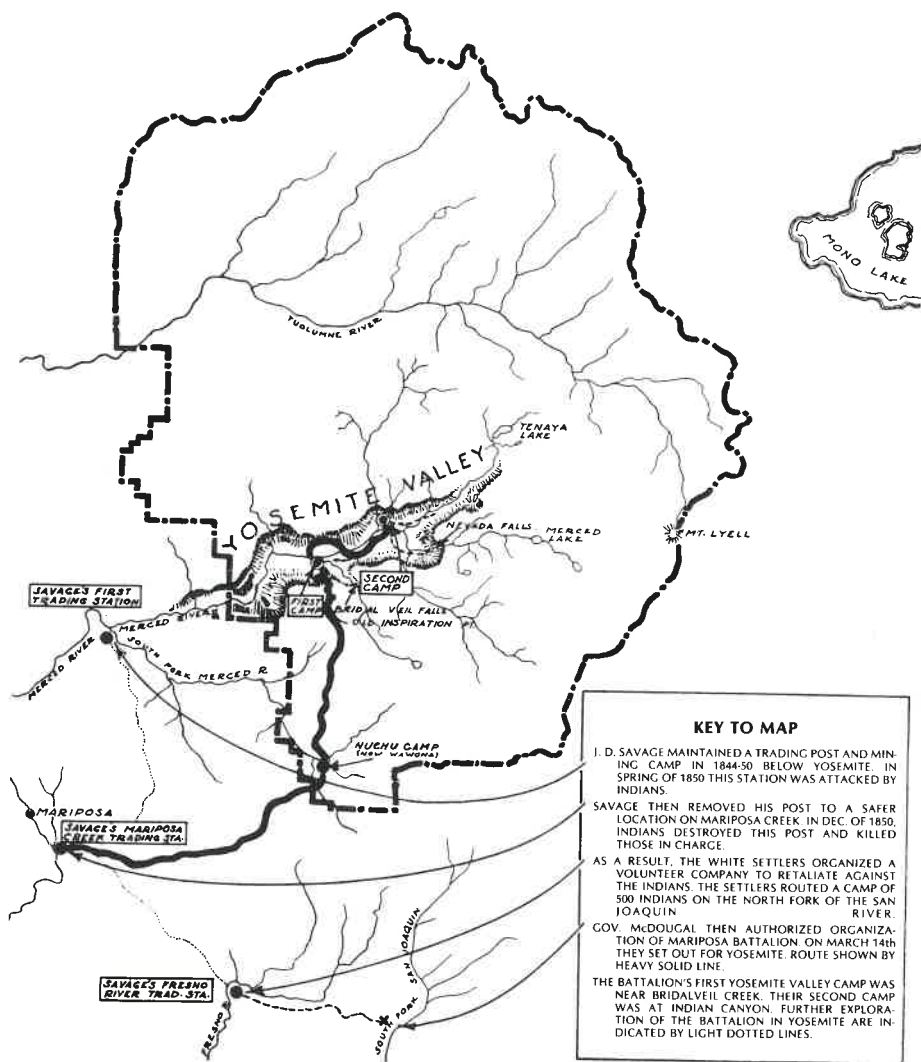
After the Mariposa Battalion had surprised and captured an Indian rancheria on the South Fork of the Merced River at what is now Wawona, Savage sent an Indian messenger ahead to demand that Tenaya surrender, emphasizing that it would be to the advantage of the Yosemite to sign a treaty with the commissioners to quit-claim their lands and to leave for the reservation on the Fresno River without resistance. Tenaya came alone to Savage's camp and answered, summing up the fears of his band and the confusion that had come to them with the gold rush, "My people do not want to go to the plains. The tribes who go there will make war on my people. We cannot live on the plains with them. Here we can defend ourselves against them."⁷ But Savage gave him no alternative. If you "do not make a treaty," he warned, "your whole tribe will be destroyed, not one of them will be left alive."⁸

Upon Tenaya's advice, the Yosemite agreed to make a treaty, and the old chief himself went on

YOSEMITE INDIANS — YESTERDAY AND TODAY

ROUTE OF MARIPOSA BATTALION

First Expedition — March, 1851



back to a tree, but not well enough that they could not work their way loose. Their guard, a young man from Texas who felt it was his duty to kill all the Indians he could, noticed this with a smile. When they finally did escape, Tenaya's youngest son was killed with a bullet in his back at fifty yards. The guard received a severe punishment.

Shortly afterward, Tenaya was brought into camp. He saw the body of his most beloved son lying in a pool of blood. Dr. Bunnell watched the old man, and, "as he raised his head, the index to his feelings was exhibited in the glaring expression of deadly hate with which he gazed at Captain Boling," whose regrets could not allay Tenaya's grief.¹⁵ For Tenaya, the death of his son also signified the end of his liberty and happiness. Tenaya's band had seen the incident from above the valley, and they also knew what it meant.

A few days passed. When Tenaya's band failed to join him in surrender, he attempted to escape but was caught as he was about to plunge into the river. Tenaya lashed out at Boling, expressing all the frustration he and his band felt in the disruption of their lives:

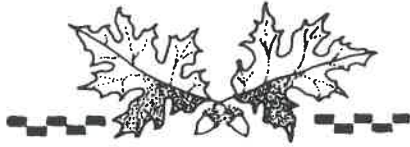
"Kill me, sir captain! Yes kill me, as you killed my son; as you would kill my people if they were to come to you! You would kill all my race if you had the power. You have made me sorrowful, my life dark; you killed

the child of my heart, why not kill the father? You may kill me, sir captain, but you shall not live in peace, I will follow in your footsteps, I will not leave my home but be with the spirits among the rocks, the waterfalls, in the rivers and in the wind; wheresoever you go I will be with you. You will not see me, but you will fear the spirit of the old chief, and grow cold."¹⁶



Three Brothers, named for sons of Chief Tenaya.

Captain Boling continued his pursuit of the remainder of the Yosemite Indians into the snow-clad high country. His soldiers surprised them in their camp on the shores of Tenaya Lake. Hungry and tired from their efforts, the Yosemite Indians gave up. "Are you ready now to go to the Fresno reservation?" Boling asked the young leader of this last band of Yosemite Indians. "Not only willing, but anxious," he replied. "Where can we now go that the Americans will not follow us?" The young man stretched his arms out toward the east: "Where can we make our homes that you will not find us?" And then they began the long move out of the mountains.¹⁷



FOOD

The food supply furnished by native plants, animals, birds, and insects afforded the Yosemite a varied diet. For meat they killed deer, small animals, birds, and caught fish. The seasonal cycle for gathering plants began with mushrooms in winter, then clover in spring, seeds in summer, and acorns in the fall. They gathered various kinds of berries between the seed harvest and the acorn harvest. Bulbs were gathered in the spring. In winter the diet consisted largely of meat which had been dried and stored along with the acorns and pine nuts for the months of snow. In addition, the Yosemite Indians traded with other bands for salt, pine nuts, and insect foods.

The acorns of the black oak constituted the staff of life. Gathering the acorns, storing them in the **chuck-ah** granary, and preparing acorn mush and bread were the laborious tasks of Yosemite Indian women.

The **chuck-ahs** in the Museum garden "Indian Village," originally constructed by Ta-bu-ce (Maggie Howard), are typical of the granaries employed for storing the acorns. The frame support is made of four

slender poles of incense cedar about eight feet high around a center log or rock two feet high for the bottom of the **chuck-ah**. The basket-like interior is of interwoven branches of deerbrush tied at the ends with willow stems and fastened together



Chuck-ah used for acorn storage
(Harwell photo)

with grapevine. This receptacle is lined with dry pine needles and wormwood, the latter to discourage the invasion of insects and rodents. After the **chuck-ah** has been filled with acorns gathered in the fall, it is topped with pine needles, wormwood, and sections of incense cedar



The stages of acorn food preparation required these tools and procedures. From top left to right: pestle, winnowing tray, cooking baskets, heating stones, leaching basin for the acorn meal, acorn meal patties.

The mush was cooked in a large cooking basket, using the proportion of two quarts of newly leached acorn meal to six or seven quarts of water. Lowering hot stones into the cooking basket with wooden tongs boiled the water and cooked the mush. When the mush was done, the stones were removed with the tongs and dropped into cold water so that the mush adhering to them would congeal and could be eaten. At meal time, the family gathered around the basket of acorn mush, and, using the two front fingers as a spoon, all dipped into the same basket.

Insects

One of the most important articles of trade between the Mono

Lake Paiutes and the Yosemite, besides obsidian and pine nuts, was the insect delicacy **ka-cha-vee**, which came from the saline waters of Mono Lake in the form of insect pupae. The waves cast upon the shores of the lake great windrows composed of millions of these undeveloped flies. The women scooped up the pupae in large baskets. When they were dry, the women rubbed them to remove their skins. After further drying, the pupae were packed for winter use. The final product had a flavor similar to shrimp but not as strong.

Another prized food product which the Monos traded to the Yosemite was the harvest of cater-

of bulbs came next, then alternate layers of leaves, hot stones, leaves, and bulbs until the pit was filled. Over the top a layer of earth sealed

the oven. The Indians built a fire over the whole, allowing the bulbs to bake all night or for about twelve hours.



Ta-bu-ce (Maggie Howard) gathering acorns during the autumn harvest, wearing burden basket and holding a winnowing basket.



HUNTING AND FISHING

Hunting depended as much on knowing the habits of the game as it did upon the weapon one used. Special cleansing ceremonies preceded a hunt in order to remove human body odors that would give the hunter away. Hunters disguised in deerskins stalked deer, and by mimicking the actions of the deer, a hunter could approach near enough to make a successful shot. Once in a while, when many deer were needed, deer were herded into a trap or net and killed by Indians lying in wait. The Yosemite Indians also sometimes built deer blinds near the springs where deer came to drink; this camouflage permitted them to take deliberate aim at close range.

The most common and abundant native fish in the Merced River and Yosemite Valley was rainbow trout. The Indians speared these fish with a wooden shaft fitted with a bone point. One end of a small cord was attached to the point and the other end was held in the fisherman's hand. The struggles of the impaled fish freed the point from the shaft, and the fisherman landed it by pulling in the cord.

Fish were also caught with weir traps made of long willow sprouts woven together and closed at the



Fish spear

pointed, lower end. The weirs were ingeniously placed in a specially constructed dam and elevated above the surface of the water below the dam, so that the fish ran into this trap as they went downstream and found themselves at the lower end of it out of the water.

When the water was low in late summer, the Yosemite Indians stupefied fish with pulverized soaproot mixed with soil and water. This mixture, rubbed on rocks out in the stream, roiled the water and made it foamy. For the fish, it was a form of strangulation, causing them to rise to the surface where they could be easily captured by Indians with scoop baskets.

large, deep family mushbowl basket around which the family gathered to dip into the acorn mush; a small, closely-woven basket used to serve food; a tightly woven, disc-shaped basket for winnowing wild oats and other seed plants; a seed beater used for beating seeds into a carrying basket; a dipper basket, small and tightly woven for drinking water or manzanita cider; a cradle of open-work basketry, sometimes covered with deerskin, for carrying babies; special baskets used in wedding and dance ceremonies; and basket weirs for catching fish.

Yosemite Indian women used the twining and coiling methods of weaving baskets. In the twined basket, the heavy foundation, called the warp, is vertical from the center to the rim, and the horizontally twined woof is of lighter material. In the coiled basket, the heavy foundation warp is laid in horizontal coils around the basket with the vertical woof running spirally in turns

around or through the foundation coils, fastening them together. Practically the only twined baskets the Miwok made were the burden baskets, the triangular scoop-shaped basket for winnowing, the elliptical seed-beater, and the baby-carrier or "hickey." An application of soaproot, which hardened in a thin, brittle sheet, made burden baskets seed-tight. A scrubbing brush for cleaning the cooking baskets was also made of fibers from the dry, outer layers of the soaproot.

Indian women made their baskets according to tradition rather than by written guides. The designs, colors, and the mathematical accuracy of their baskets represent natural artistry. Before beginning a basket, a weaver had to know exactly where to place the first stitch of each figure of the design, and as the bowl of the basket continued to flare, the size of each figure had to be correspondingly increased.

finished bow was three or four feet long, sinew-backed, and often had recurved ends. Glue used for applying the sinew to the back of the bow was made by boiling deer bones—or horse bones after the Yosemite got horses from the ranchers and gold seekers—and combining the product with pitch. A plain bow without sinew backing sufficed for hunting small game at relatively close range. The best bowstrings were made of twisted sinew.

Arrows for large game often had two parts. The detachable foreshaft remained in the wound, preventing



Arrow point was attached to shaft by use of sinew.

t from closing and hastening the animal's death from loss of blood. Arrow shafts were made of syringa or wild rosebush by removing the bark, stripping and trimming the pieces to an even thickness, and then straightening them with stone poles. Finally, the shafts were polished with scouring rush. When the shaft was ready, obsidian point and

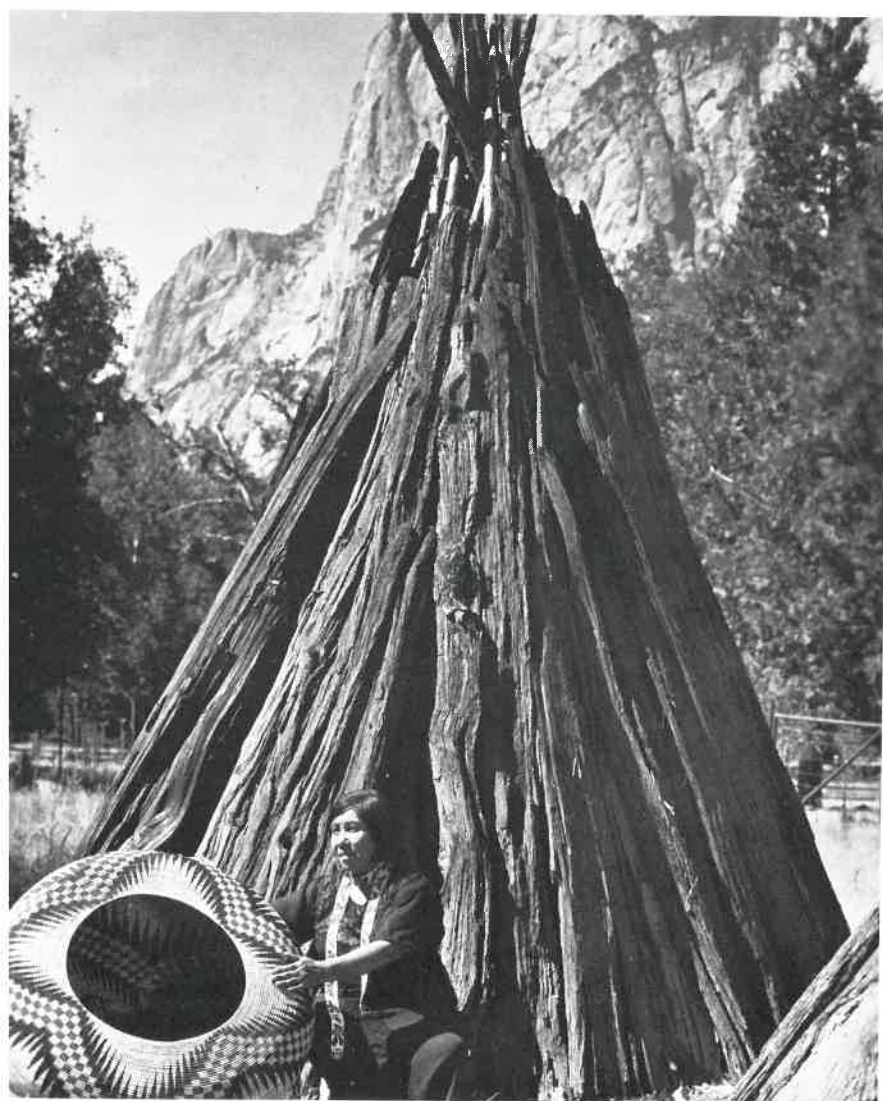
feathers were attached, each feather split down the middle so that three half-feathers could be attached to the shaft with wrapping. Obsidian arrowheads fitted into a slot in the end of the shaft, held in place by sinew wrapping and pitch.

The great obsidian quarries near Mono Lake supplied material for arrowheads and other implements. Mono Lake Paiutes brought chunks of the stone up to the large trading sites near the crest of the Sierra where the Yosemite met them. The Yosemite bartered acorns and other goods for the obsidian they needed, hammering off pieces of suitable size for tools and arrowheads from the larger chunks, and then carrying these "blanks" back to their villages in deerskin sacks. The trade with the Mono Lake Paiutes for obsidian, salt, rabbit skins, and pine nuts was probably the most important trade connection for the Yosemite. It was certainly a large factor in the alliances and family ties the Yosemite had with their eastern neighbors.

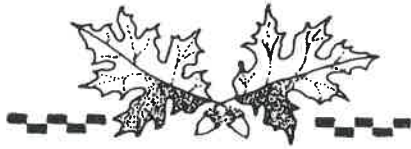
Small pieces of obsidian were roughly shaped with an antler tool and finished with a smaller antler implement. The Yosemite grasped the obsidian in the palm of the hand, protected by a buckskin pad, and exerted pressure on it with the sharp end of an antler tool. The skilled maker of arrowheads could break off chips of varying sizes and depths by knowing just how much pressure to use at a given point, so that he could control shape and sharpness.

id constructed of poles and a
atch of brush over a shallow pit,
or ceremonial usage. The
eathouse was a low, earth
covered structure heated by fire
id used for cleanliness and
rative purposes. The sweathouse
as regularly used for deer-hunting

preparations, because sweating
followed by a dip in the cold river
would bring luck and make the
hunter's legs strong enough to walk
far without aching, as well as
remove human smells from the
hunter. Men with rheumatism and
headache also made use of it.



r Telles with a large basket made for the Golden Gate International Exposition in 1939. This
et won 1st prize and was 4 years in the making.



CEREMONIES & CUSTOMS

Social Life

More than thirty village sites had been established in Yosemite Valley over its centuries of human occupation. Never were they occupied all at once. Some were very old, some recent; many were only summer sites, and a few were permanent, year-round locations. The villages, as the people of the band itself, divided themselves into two halves or moieties, which corresponded to the division in nature between land and water. Villages on the north side of the Merced River belonged to the land side, and that moiety took as its totemic symbol the grizzly bear, from which the name "Yosemite" originated.⁴ South of the river, the people of the water side moiety used the symbol of the coyote. Nearly all the phenomena of nature were divided into these two categories, land and water. Marriage ordinarily occurred outside one's moiety, so that relatives and possible mates were easily defined. Parents gave children names relating to the totems of their particular side. The moieties competed with each other

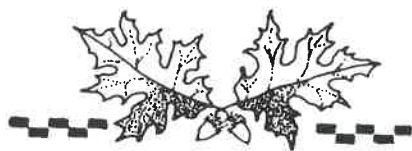
in games and divided the responsibilities of funeral ceremonies, puberty rites, and other rituals. This division of the band worked throughout the lives of the Yosemite people, providing a way of organizing their economic and social activities, and the world of the mountains in which they lived.

Medicine

The Yosemite people assumed that most ailments were caused by supernatural forces and could therefore be cured only with the aid of the supernatural. Theoretically, disease occurred with the intrusion into the body of a foreign object or spirit. The sufferer or his family called the shaman, or medicine man, believed to have acquired his powers from spirits, to remove the cause. After dancing, singing, and manipulating the patient, the shaman declared what he believed the cause to be and began sucking the affected part of the patient's body to remove the poison. Eventually, the shaman removed a dead grasshopper, lizard, pieces of straw, or some other ob-



-mee (Chris Brown) wearing ceremonial dance costume. (R. H. Anderson Photo)



YOSEMITE INDIAN LEGENDS

The stories about "Ahwahnee" told by the Yosemitees were their means of explaining and ordering their world. They told stories for enjoyment during the cold winter months, but the tales also embodied the history of the band and lent a continuity to its past as they passed from generation to generation by word of mouth. Value systems, behavioral guides, explanations of creation and custom, life philosophies—all of these were elements of legends which not only

outlined a view of the universe but defined the relationship of the band and its members to that universe. The three legends which follow tell of the origin of several of the most prominent features of Yosemite Valley—El Capitan, the massive cliff at the lower end of the valley; the Lost Arrow, a spectacular shaft of rock jutting out from the cliff just to the east of Yosemite Falls; and Half Dome, Royal Arches, Washington Column, and Basket Dome at the upper end of the valley.

Legend of El Capitan

Long, long ago there lived in the valley of Ahwahnee two cub bears. One hot day they slipped away from their mother and went down to the river for a swim. When they came out of the water, they were so tired that they lay down to rest on an immense, flat boulder and fell fast asleep. While they slumbered, the huge rock began to rise slowly until, at length, it towered into the blue sky far above the tree tops, and woolly, white clouds fell over the sleeping cubs like fleecy coverlets.

The distracted mother bear searched in vain for her two cubs

and, although she questioned every animal in the valley, not one could give her a clue about what had happened to them. At last To-tah-kan, the sharp-eyed crane, discovered them still asleep on top of the great rock. Then the mother bear became more anxious than ever lest her cubs should awaken and feel so frightened upon finding themselves up near the blue sky that they would jump off and be killed.

All the other animals in the valley felt very sorry for the mother bear and promised to help rescue the cubs. Gathering together, each attempted to climb the great rock, but it was slippery as glass, and their

As they parted, Kos-soo-kah said, "We go to hunt now, but at the end of the day, I will shoot an arrow from the cliff between Cho-look, the high fall, and Le-hamite, the canyon of the arrow-wood, and by the number of feathers you will know what kill has been made."

Tee-hee-neh happily assisted the women preparing acorn bread and other food for the marriage celebration until the appointed time when she was to wait at the foot of the high fall for the arrow message from Kos-soo-kah. Hour after hour she waited until gradually the joy she had known was replaced with fear and concern for her lover's safety. At last, unable to bear her anguish any longer, she decided to climb the rugged and difficult trail that led to the top of the cliff.

"Kos-soo-kah," she called again and again, but the only answer was the faint echoing of her own voice. Breathless, frightened, and her heart heavy with dreaded fear that Kos-soo-kah had met with harm, she reached the summit. Seeing footprints in the direction of the cliff, she moved toward the edge, alarmed not for her own safety but for what she might behold. As she leaned over and looked down, she gave a piercing cry of despair, for in the starlight she beheld the still form of her loved one lying on a ledge below with the spent bow in his hand. She remembered that at the hour of sunset, while she had stood waiting for Kos-soo-kah's arrow to fall, she had heard the distant, thunderlike



Lost Arrow

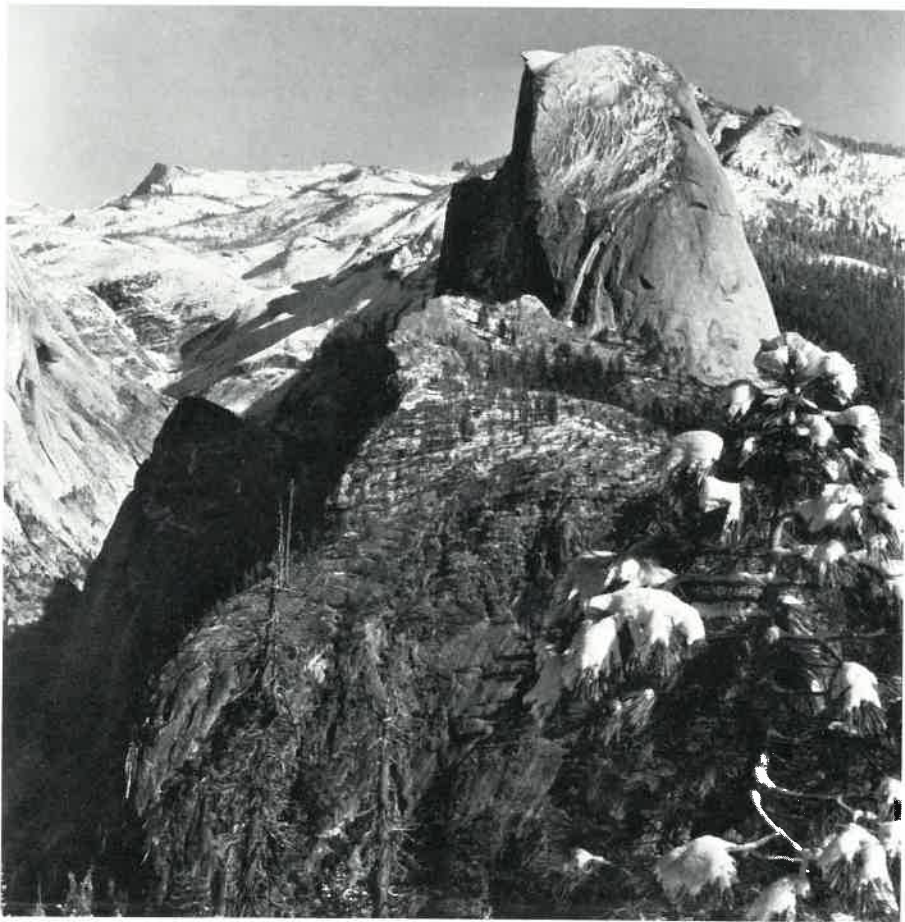
rumble of a rockslide. Her despair was almost overwhelming as she realized that, while her faithful Kos-soo-kah had stood on the edge of the cliff to draw his bow, he had been caught in the unexpected slide of earth that had hurled him to his doom.

A faint hope stirred in Tee-hee-neh's heart. Perhaps Kos-soo-kah was still alive. To summon assistance as quickly as possible, she frantically collected cones and dead limbs to light a signal fire for urgent help. Although numbed with grief, she kept the fire bright and high for several hours before men from the valley and others returning from the hunt in the high country were able to reach her. Quickly,

to quench his thirst. His anger then knew no bounds, and again he struck her with his staff. Tis-sa-ack ran from him, but he pursued her and continued to beat her.

Looking down on them, the gods were sorely displeased. "Tis-sa-ack and Nangas have broken the spell of peace," they said. "Let us transform them into cliffs of granite that face each other so that they will be forever parted."

As she fled, Tis-sa-ack tossed aside the heavy burden basket, which, landing upside down, immediately became Basket Dome. Next she threw the baby carrier to the north wall of the canyon, and it became Royal Arches. Nangas was then changed into Washington Column and Tis-sa-ack into Half Dome. The dark streaks that mar the face of this great cliff were the tears that Tis-sa-ack shed as she ran from her angry husband.



Half Dome from Glacier Point

FOOTNOTES

1. —While the translation "deep grassy valley" was accepted as authentic for approximately 100 years, recent linguistic studies indicate that "Ahwahnee" should probably be translated as meaning "place of a gaping mouth". The Miwok stemword AWA means "mouth" and it was the Miwok practice to name places after their fancied resemblance to a part of the human body. The earlier translation, "deep grassy valley," is from L.H. Bunnell's **Discovery of the Yosemite**, (Los Angeles: G.W. Gerlicher, 1911), and was communicated to Bunnell by signs, not by spoken word; thus, misinterpretation seems quite possible. Sylvia M. Broadbent, **The Southern Sierra Miwok Language**. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), p. 240.
2. —Bunnell, p. 72.
3. —Alfred L. Kroeber, "Indians of Yosemite," in Ansel F. Hall, ed., **Handbook of Yosemite National Park** (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1921), pp. 59-61.
4. —The translation of "Yosemite" is from Bunnell. In most Miwok dialects, "Uzumati" means grizzly bear; however, in the Ahwahneechee dialect, "husso" is grizzly bear. "Yosemite" in the Ahwahneechee dialect is probably a corruption of "Yo-che-ma-te", which translates as "some among them are killers."
5. —Bunnell, p. 40.
6. —Bunnell, p. 45.
7. —Bunnell, p. 55.
8. —Bunnell, p. 55.
9. —Discovery of Yosemite Valley by whites had occurred earlier. In the fall of 1833, a party of approximately forty men under Joseph Redford Walker passed through the area just north of Yosemite Valley. Unfamiliarity with the region, its rugged terrain, lack of supplies, and the lateness of the season combined to make their journey over the Sierra a long and extremely arduous one. While scouting for a suitable westward route through the mountains, members of Walker's party first saw the valley from the north rim. "On making several attempts (to enter the valley) we found it utterly impossible for a man to descend, to say nothing of our horses," wrote one of the party (Zenas Leonard, **Adventures of Zenas Leonard, Fur Trader**, edited by John C. Ewers [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959], p. 79) and they followed the ridge above the rim toward the San Joaquin Valley. Tenaya and the old Ahwahneechees remembered Walker's crossing, but thought he had not seen Yosemite Valley.

