

Wawona Hotel
Wawona
Mariposa County, California

HABS NO. Cal-1805

HABS
CAL.
22-WAWO

1-

PHOTOGRAPH

ADDENDUM
FOLLOWS...

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Western Office, Division of Design and Construction
1000 Geary Street
San Francisco, California

Wawona Hotel Complex
Yosemite National Park
Wawona
Mariposa County
California

HABS No. CA-1805

Addendum to
Wawona Hotel
Wawona
Mariposa County
California

HABS
CAL,
22-WAWO,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Western Region
Department of the Interior
San Francisco, California 94102

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

WAWONA HOTEL COMPLEX

HABS NO. CA-1805

HABS
CAL.
22-WAWO,
1-

Location: Approximately four miles northwest of the south entrance to Yosemite National Park along California State Highway 41, Mariposa County, California

Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates:
U.S.G.S. Yosemite Quadrangle (15 minute)
Zone 12, Easting: 265370, Northing: 4157120

Present Owner: National Park Service, Department of the Interior
Yosemite National Park
P.O. Box 577
Yosemite National Park, CA 95389

Present Occupant: Managed by the Yosemite Park and Curry Company

Present Use: Overnight accommodations and food services for guests and housing for employees

Significance: The Wawona Hotel complex was established on the homestead of Galen Clark, one of the Yosemite region's earliest settlers and pioneers. Clark was appointed the first protector of the Yosemite State Park in 1864. He and his successors built many of the first roads in the region and operated a stagecoach line in conjunction with the hotel. The Wawona has served as a major California resort hotel for over a century and has housed thousands of guests visiting the Yosemite Valley. The hotel complex was also the summer home of the nationally known American landscape artist, Thomas Hill, between 1886 and 1908.

The information contained in the following report comprises the first chapter of the Historic Structure Report, Design and Installation of a Fire Detection and Suppression System for the Wawona Hotel, by Anthony Crosby and Nick Scratfish, published by the Denver Service Center, National Park Service, Department of the Interior, 1983. A copy of the report and field notes for the measured drawings are contained in the field records for this entry.

DESCRIPTION OF THE WAWONA HOTEL GROUP

A. INTRODUCTION

1. Present Appearance, Siting, and the National Register
Boundary

On most California maps, State Route 41 is a near-straight black line, running north/northeast from Fresno to Fish Camp. This line represents the sixty-two miles between the former, a booming city of a quarter-million in the San Joaquin Valley, and the latter, a rustic mountain hamlet, population thirty-six. Along those sixty-two miles, drivers notice a dramatic change of environment. On its north, Fresno's commercial strip gives way to sprawling development. All of these are new and all of them are stark against the valley's tan, dusty soil. The development, in turn, gives way to orchards--first the more mature and then the fledgling trees, all totally dependent upon irrigation for survival. Before ascending into the foothills proper, one can see a few cattle standing impassively in meadows baked yellow by the summer sun. Soon after, undulating foothills feature crowns of rock outcroppings. Occasionally these are softened by one or more dense copses of scrub oak. Thirty-two miles from Fresno, Coarsegold is reached at 2,200 feet in altitude. From Coarsegold seven miles north to Oakhurst, a variety of native trees, some of which are perched on craggy foothills, dot the landscape. A few miles south of Fish Camp evergreens crowd in toward the road and bring with them the coolness of the High Sierra country. Once in Fish Camp the eager tourist is only 1.8 miles from the south entrance to Yosemite National Park.

At this portal to Yosemite the road forks. A turn to the right leads quickly to the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoia. Route 41 continues to the left. After approximately five pleasant miles along this route, the view straight ahead reveals what first appears to be a verdant meadow. A closer inspection brings into focus a golf course to the road's left--the first golf course in the High Sierras. Even at thirty-five miles an hour the descent into the Wawona Basin is rapid. Within a minute, the white outlines of venerable buildings to the right quietly advertise the location of the Wawona Hotel.

And when General Grant stood on the terrace of the Wawona Hotel October 1879, after having nearly completed his tour of the world . . . and looking up over the vast embroidery of giant pines at Signal Peak, exclaimed, 'This is one of the most beautiful spots I have ever visited, and may be justly termed one of the gems of the world,' he truthfully voiced the opinions of many other distinguished travelers.

Notwithstanding Grant's hyperbole, the Wawona Hotel still qualifies as a truly beautiful place more than a century after his visit. Despite the presence of automobiles, golf carts, mo-peds, and other modern distractions, the willing visitor can easily conjure up a vision of a past age. Why not pick a remote evening in August 1902? In those halcyon times guests lounged on the hotel's verandas, digesting a heavy evening meal. Until darkness, the younger and more active frolicked about the fountains and trees. Looking out from the second-floor veranda, guests might discern the faint thumping of a piano in the Dance Hall--a building some distance away at a right diagonal. As evening descended, the elderly were wont to trade countless tales of rattlesnakes, coyotes and bears, and of trout that would rise and of trout that would not rise.²

Since 1932 the Wawona Hotel and more than 8,000 acres surrounding it have been in the possession of the National Park Service. Two of the hotel buildings are now more than a century old and another three are fast approaching the century mark. Most of the buildings need substantial repair. All of them require more adequate protection against the threat of fire. In accordance with the National Historic Preservation

1. Ben C. Truman, "Wawona and its Environment," in D. J. Foley Foley's Yosemite Souvenir & Guide, 4th ed. (Yosemite, Ca.: Foley's Studio, [1908]). A copy of this rare book is located in the San Francisco History Room on the third floor of the San Francisco City and County Library.

2. There is a great deal of new material in the several boxes of uncatalogued Washburn Papers, Yosemite Research Library and Records Center. Hereafter cited as YOSE RL & RC. I am indebted to Park Librarian Mary Vocelka for taking the time to retrieve these boxes.

Act of 1966 and subsequent Acts of Congress, Federal Regulations, policy, and guidelines, this historic structures report has been prepared to provide basic architectural and historical data on the surviving buildings in order to guide installation of a fire protection system as well as to guide maintenance and various other measures of preservation and restoration. One of its secondary contributions will be to provide a description of non-extant buildings and structures in the hotel group's environs. The boundary for this description will be termed the National Register Boundary.³ It is a rectangle measuring 925 feet east-west, 825 feet north-south. The rectangle's center is essentially the northeast corner of the swimming pool (Illustration 1).

The historical significance of the Wawona Hotel is evident on three levels: national, regional, and local. In the field of art, the group is of national significance because it includes Thomas Hill's studio. Thomas Hill, a nationally--and perhaps internationally--famous landscape artist, used this studio for many summers between 1886 and his death in 1908. Appendix D of this report includes a biographical sketch of Hill that emphasizes the Wawona years, as well as an annotated bibliography for the period. On the regional level, the Wawona Hotel is significant in the areas of transportation, commerce, and conservation. As will be shown, the Wawona Hotel was closely associated with the development of transportation routes into Yosemite from the south. Because of its location and as a result of good management, the Wawona became a major California resort hotel. In the words of Gordon Chappell,

It catered to vacationing Los Angelenos and San Franciscans, as well as to citizens from the smaller cities and towns in the state

3. Gordon Chappell is the National Park Service's Western Regional Historian. In March 1975 he prepared National Register Nomination Forms for the eight buildings then in the hotel group. To make clearer the location of the Wawona Hotel and its relation to other buildings in the area, Chappell included a map titled "Wawona and Vicinity" in the nomination forms. It must be pointed out that for his purpose Chappell used a map drawn for Shirley Sargent's early publication on Wawona titled Wawona's Yesterdays (1961), pp. 22-23. Chappell added only the perimeter. Forms hereafter cited as Chappell, NRRF (Wawona).

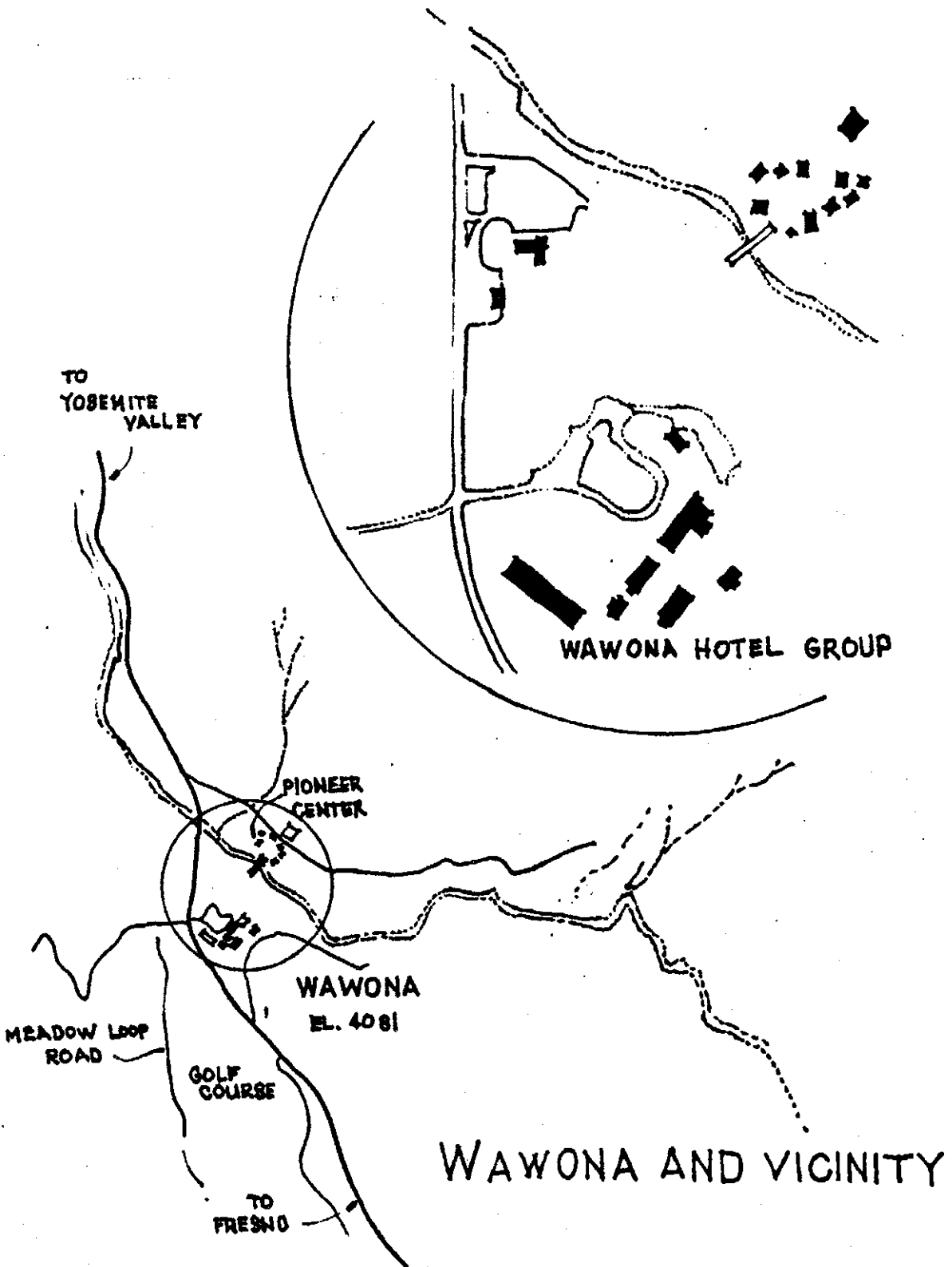


Illustration 1: The Wawona Hotel and National Register boundary. Map adapted from Shirley Sargent's Wawona Yesterdays (1961).

and some vacationers from outside the state and from other countries. Its more famous visitors and guests included former U.S. presidents Ulysses Grant and Rutherford B. Hayes and President Theodore Roosevelt, as well as perennial presidential contender William Jennings Bryan. . . .

The hotel is of regional significance to conservation because its founder, Galen Clark, was appointed the Guardian of Yosemite, the state park, in 1864. By extension, the Wawona Hotel is of local significance in terms of exploration and settlement because it was begun by Galen Clark, one of the Yosemite area's earliest pioneers.⁴

2. Commercial Activity that Spawned the Birth and Growth of the Wawona Hotel

There would have been no Wawona Hotel without the development of transportation into what is now the national park from the south. Yosemite Valley is undoubtedly the most spectacular sector of the Merced River Canyon. Yet it is only one of several deep river valleys in the High Sierras. In prehistoric times, Indian "trails"⁵ connected the San Joaquin Valley with all of these valleys. Between the San Joaquin and Yosemite valleys the most direct routes followed the south side of the Merced River into the narrow, boulder-strewn gorge of the Merced River Canyon. These aboriginal trails were passable only on foot. By the middle of the nineteenth century, those routes leading through the

4. Material pertaining to the historical significance of the Wawona Hotel has been abstracted from the "Statement of Significance" sheet in Chappell, NRNF (Wawona). A complete set of the forms is on file in the YOSE RL & RC.

5. "To dignify these routes of travel by calling them trails is far too liberal. Indians were careful not to make trails. Their routes took advantage of the natural contour of the land but there were no trails in the sense in which we now use the word." Hazel M. Whedon, "The History of the Roads, Trails, and Hotels in and near Yosemite National Park" (MA thesis, University of Southern California, June 1934), p. 11 (hereafter cited as Whedon, MA thesis (1934)). The writer has abstracted material for the introduction to this report from Chapter Two of the Whedon thesis, which is titled the "Wawona Road" (pp. 10-21).

mountains along the South Fork of the Merced River converged at or near the "Nuchu" camp--the present site of Wawona (Illustration 2).

After reaching the Nuchu camp, Indians chose one of two general routes into the Yosemite Valley. The easier followed Alder Creek to its source on the plateau south of the valley. It then continued across the plateau to the valley's rim. The alternate trail followed the Merced's South Fork. It was more passable during the winter and early spring than the Alder Creek trail, but was otherwise more difficult and less used.⁶

The Mariposa Battalion in March 1851 and J.M. Hutchings's touring party of June 1855 were the first known white groups to enter this area. Both used Indian trails and Indian guides.⁷ Several weeks after Hutchings's first trip, the brothers Milton and Houston Mann followed Hutchings's route into Yosemite Valley. In spirit the Manns were true entrepreneurs. To smooth the way for the hordes of visitors the Manns envisioned flocking to the valley, the brothers began to construct a horse toll road. This fifty-mile project, running from the South Fork of the Merced to the Yosemite Valley, was finished in 1856.⁸ The toll road was unprofitable, and in 1857 the Mann brothers sold it at a loss to Mariposa County for \$200. Immediately thereafter the county made it a free road.⁹

Galen Clark was also a participant in one of Hutchings's 1855 tours. Clark, then a forty-two-year-old New Englander, later proved

6. J.D. Whitney, Geological Survey of California (1868), p. 47. Cited by Whedon, MA thesis (1934), p. II.

7. Whedon, MA thesis (1934), p. II.

8. Russell, Carl P., (title unknown), Yosemite Nature Notes 5, n. 6 (June 30, 1926): 43; and Russell, 100 Years in Yosemite. The Story of a Great National Park (Yosemite National Park: Yosemite Natural History Association, 1957), pp. 50-51 (hereafter cited as Russell, 100 Years).

9. Whedon, MA thesis (1934), p. II. See also Russell, 100 Years, p. 51.

DISCOVERY OF YOSEMITE FIRST EXPEDITION — MARIPOSA INDIAN WAR

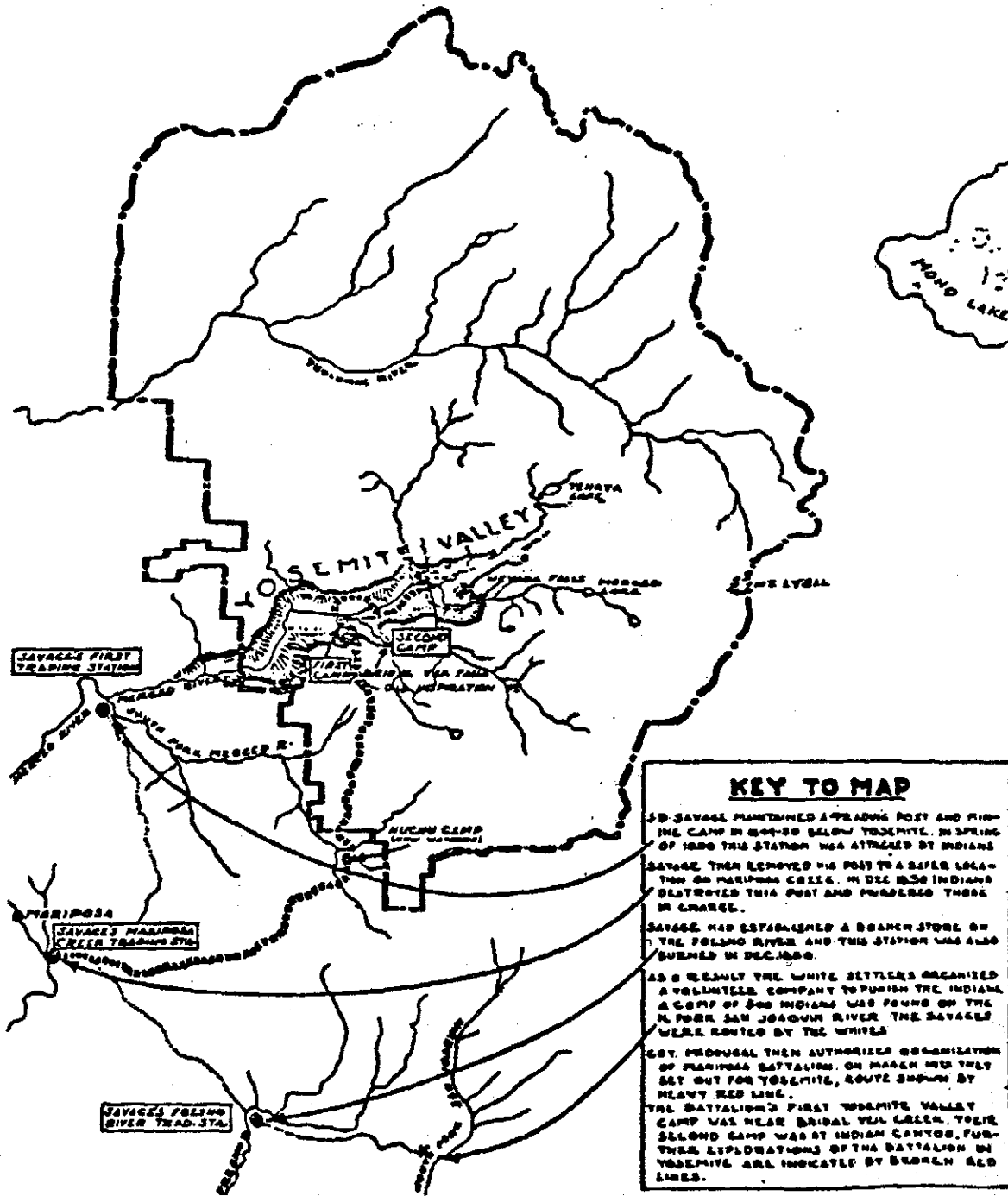


Illustration 2: The Nuchu Camp in the High Sierras. Adapted from Carl P. Russell's "Seventy-Five Years in the Yosemite Valley" (1926).

himself a man of vision.¹⁰ But in the spring of 1856 it was mainly Clark's fragile health that induced him to set up a camp on the Merced's South Fork where the Mann brothers' road began. Clark selected the site where his party had camped in 1855. During March 1856, Clark filed a claim with Mariposa County for a quarter-section on the South Fork. Eleven months later he built a 12-by-16-foot cabin on the west end of Wawona meadow.¹¹ This area is now part of the golf course's seventh fairway. Because of the structure's proximity to the Mann road, Clark attracted a sprinkling of travelers. He soon got into the habit of provisioning them with fresh meat and fish--especially on their return trip from the Yosemite Valley. These travelers referred to the camp as "Clark's Station." In one sense this camp was the predecessor of the Wawona Hotel; in another it was not. It was in spirit, because Clark was the first to successfully establish commercial activity in the Wawona Basin. It was not, by virtue of location, because at an unknown date--but before June 1859--Clark relocated to the eastern side of the meadow, where the Wawona Hotel now stands.

The next historical reference to Clark's Station is in 1862, when a traveler described it as being made up of two tents, a log cabin, and Indian bark lodges. From a photograph of the station taken ca. 1870 it can be inferred the cabin later had two structures added--one on either end--as well as a shed-roof porch on the front or west side.

In 1864 a visitor wrote that there was "dust everywhere and buildings for the kitchen . . . no grass anywhere."¹²

Once Clark gained the guardianship of Yosemite in April 1866, his time-consuming duties left little time to manage Clark's Station. This

10. This is demonstrated well in Shirley Sargent's recent book, titled Galen Clark (Yosemite, California: Flying Spur Press, 1979).

11. Unless otherwise noted, the remainder of this section has been abstracted from Shirley Sargent's Yosemite's Historic Wawona (Yosemite, California: Flying Spur Press, 1979), pp. 12-26 (hereafter cited as Sargent, Historic Wawona).

12. Ibid., p. 13.

situation forced him to lease it in 1868 and 1869. Apparently Clark used money he earned from the station to augment his business with improvements, additions of land, and the construction of access roads.

As stated, Clark was a man of vision. He knew very early on that the development of roads for stage travel would be the underpinning for widespread tourist trade. This seemed all the more true with respect to the Mann brothers' trail from Mariposa, because Clark also knew the Central Pacific Railroad planned to construct a north-south line through the San Joaquin Valley. Clark saw that better access to Yosemite was inevitable and that the first completed stage route would likely be the most heavily trafficked. Clark proceeded accordingly. With the help of Mariposa businessmen, he pumped effort and money into a road through the Mariposa Grove. Additionally, by 1866 he pushed a stage road toward the valley to a point about twelve miles west of his station.

Assiduous if not well financed, Clark organized a turnpike company in 1869. Its principal aim was to open a stage route from Mariposa to the Yosemite Valley. The pressing need to shore this enterprise up financially led Clark to organize a stronger company in February 1870. Participants included Mariposa and Stockton businessmen such as Mariposan John Wilcox, who became president. Edwin Moore, then Mariposa County's recorder, assumed the duties of secretary. Galen Clark was treasurer. Construction began quickly under the direction of John Conway, a competent, aggressive engineer.

In the winter of 1869, Clark sold Edwin Moore half-interest in the buildings, land, and South Fork toll bridge. He used the \$2,000 Moore gave him to pay for part of his share of road construction costs. The balance Clark obtained by mortgaging his half of the station, which, in 1870, became known as Clark & Moore's. From May 1870 through December 1874 Moore and his wife Huldah managed the station.

Clark's enthusiasm for the toll road and the station dependent upon it waned when the California State Legislature refused to buy the road. Clark's financial problems compounded, because the state only

erratically paid his salary as Guardian. Given this shaky state of affairs, Clark worsened matters by obligating himself to buy more land and by dabbling in mining investments. Incredibly, between 1867 and 1872, Clark was able to mortgage his interest in Clark & Moore's four times, raising a total of \$10,700.

Galen Clark's and Edwin Moore's business interests suffered a telling blow when, in June and July 1874, both the Coulterville and Big Oak Flat roads opened east from Coulterville and Stockton respectively. Few tourists now were willing to contend with the twenty-four-mile gap on the South Fork Trail. Conway's survey for a road through the gap had been made in 1873, but the state legislature refused to finance road construction over it. The unprofitable summer of 1874 at Clark & Moore's increased the partners' debts. On December 26, 1874, they were forced to sell to the firm of Washburn, Coffman & Chapman for the cancellation of a \$20,000 debt and a mere \$1,000 in cash. When Clark moved to the Yosemite Valley to become a full-time Guardian, he left behind an undetermined number of buildings within the present National Register Boundary a sawmill and blacksmith shop north of it, and a water ditch east of it.¹³

In 1875 Albert Henry Washburn--the dominant partner in Washburn, Coffman & Chapman--was a thirty-nine-year-old New Englander on the move. Like Galen Clark he was a man of vision, but his business acumen was vastly superior to Clark's. Before the December 1874 sale, Washburn visited Clark & Moore's frequently. He believed a finished road between the South Fork and Yosemite Valley would turn Clark & Moore's, soon to be known as Big Tree Station, into a successful enterprise, given a better accounting system, aggressive management, and the addition of

13. The sale of Clark's & Moore's interests to Washburn, Chapman & Coffman was recorded on p. 467, Book 2, Deeds for Mariposa County, dated Jan. 6, 1875. It included a "hotel, lodging houses, barn, blacksmith shop, sawmill, bridge across South Fork of the Merced river, and all other improvements." Researched by Park Naturalist Homer Robinson on Dec. 2, 1951, and filed in the YOSE RL & RC as 979.447y-16d.

new buildings. Washburn and his partners made the toll road their first priority. Between November 2 and December 12, 1874, they filed an application with Mariposa County to build the road and contracted with Conway and Moore to construct sixteen miles of it for \$10,000.

Two-score Chinese succeeded in pushing the road four miles past South Fork to Alder Creek by mid-December 1874. From Alder Creek the road ran south on the mountain ridges' western flank. The altitude of its roadbed varied from 4,000 to over 7,000 feet until it turned east for the precipitous descent into Yosemite Valley. The road's official opening took place on July 22, 1875, but the first stage had used it nearly a month earlier. Galen Clark's dream became reality, but only because Washburn, Chapman & Coffman had been willing to spend more than \$35,000 to build it.¹⁴ And there really was much more to the accomplishment than just financing. In Shirley Sargent's words,

The trio who did finance it must share credit with John Conway, James and Joe Ridgway, and the 300 Chinese workers as road builders. Although they were forgotten, their road was an enduring monument to vision and hard work, and not replaced for 56 years.¹⁵

It is probable that once the route into Yosemite from the south had been completed, Washburn, Chapman & Coffman decided to dissolve their partnership. On March 8, 1877, Chapman and Coffman sold their half-interest in the firm to Washburn for \$21,000. Nearly seven months later, Washburn filed incorporation papers for the Yosemite Stage & Turnpike Co. Its purpose was to maintain a stage line for passengers and freight from Merced to Big Tree Station, the Yosemite Valley, Glacier Point, Nevada Fall, Mariposa Grove, the Fresno Grove, Fresno Flats (now Oakhurst), and Madera. This system once totaled 165 miles of stage

14. See also C. Frank Brockman, "Development of Transportation to Yosemite. Part II--The Era of Wheels," YNN, v. 22, n. 7 (July 1943), pp. 60-61.

15. Historic Wawona, p. 26. See also Whedon, MA thesis (1934), p. 14.

road--73 of which generated tolls. Washburn incorporated with four Bay Area businessmen, but he owned 2,300 shares while they controlled only 50 shares apiece. Not surprisingly, Washburn became the company's "Superintendent," and San Francisco was chosen as company headquarters. The Yosemite Stage & Turnpike Co. was to play a prominent role in the development of the Wawona Hotel. Its horse-drawn stages operated through the Wawona Basin until about 1914.¹⁶

On March 9, 1877, Washburn provided for the maintenance of the Big Tree Station by entering into a partnership with John B. Bruce, his wife's nephew. Bruce paid \$20,000 for an undivided half of the station. Until his untimely death in March 1882, Bruce managed the station's business affairs, and his wife, Catherine Nichols Bruce, did a fine job of accommodating guests.

B. Physical Growth of the Wawona Hotel

I. Origins

During the fall of 1876, Washburn, Coffman & Chapman borrowed \$15,450, for which they mortgaged the Big Tree Station. The partners used an undisclosed amount of the loan to construct a "large trail" to the Mariposa Grove. The remainder they invested in a new building at the station.¹⁷ This single-story building, called "Long White," contained sixteen rooms. It was of frame construction with a surrounding veranda on all four sides. Joseph Shelly, "a first-class mechanic," built Long White¹⁸ using local pine from a

16. C. Frank Brockman, "Development of Transportation to Yosemite. Part II--The Era of Wheels (continued from last month's issue). YNN, v. 22, n. 8 (August 1943), p. 70.

17. Sargent, Historic Wawona, page 28.

18. "Mr. Joseph Shelly . . . was the architect and builder of the hotel complete at that place [Big Tree Station] about two years since." Mariposa Ca. Gazette, Dec. 7, 1878, 3/3. There is some evidence, based on Washburn family tradition, that Long White burned down in 1876 and was immediately rebuilt. Wawona Washburn Hartwig, interview with Nick Scrattish, August 25, 1981. Wawona Washburn Hartwig is the daughter of Clarence A. Washburn, who played a prominent role in the history of the hotel group. See also Clarence A. Washburn to Shirley Sargent, Mar. 20, 1961. This letter is located in Ms. Sargent's Wawona File.

water-powered sawmill Clark and Moore had had constructed in 1869-1870.¹⁹ Shelly himself had been living at Big Tree Station at least as early as January 1874, when he used Big Tree wood from the Mariposa Grove to construct "picture frames and things."²⁰

The earliest known description of Big Tree Station, inclusive of Long White, dates from Sunday evening, April 28, 1878. Constance F. Gordon-Cumming, a Scotswoman then touring the West, commented in her diary that she had found "Clark's Ranch [sic] , Near the Mariposa Big Trees,"

comfortable quarters awaiting us here in a cosy group of one-storeyed houses, with separate cottages for bedrooms--everything clean and pleasant, kind people, and none of the stiffness and insouciance of a regular hotel.²¹

The "cosy group" Constance Gordon-Cumming commented upon was not destined to remain long in existence. On the Saturday morning of November 30, 1878, a fire began in a defective stovepipe in the kitchen of the Old Lodge--the building that appears at the left in Illustration 4. The fire was not discovered until "the roof was all ablaze."²² Most likely, the fire spread to buildings east of the Old Lodge because of a prevailing wind across the meadow from the west. One building, "located a short distance from those burned . . . and used as a lodging house, and the stables, were saved."²³ This lodging house was Long

19. Sargent, Historic Wawona, p. 16.

20. Mariposa (Ca.) Gazette, Jan. 23, 1874, 3/3.

21. Constance F. Gordon-Cumming, Granite Crags (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood & Sons, 1884), page 54.

22. Mariposa (Ca.) Gazette, Dec. 7, 1878, 3/3.

23. Ibid.

White.²⁴ It survived the 1878 fire and became the nucleus building for the future Wawona Hotel group.

Henry Washburn and John Bruce were undaunted by the disastrous fire. Within a week they had hired Joseph Shelly to construct a two-story hotel building north of Long White. Al Bruce and W.R. Knight helped Shelly with the carpentry; J.S. French made shakes for the roof.²⁵ On December 21 1878, the San Joaquin Valley Argus reported that

Four large teams left Merced one day during the week for Big Tree Station heavily loaded . . . for the rebuilding of the hotel, lately destroyed by fire. The proprietors, Messers Washburn and Bruce,²⁶ have also set up a planing machine of 16 horsepower.

Notwithstanding harsh working conditions, construction on the hotel got off to a brisk start. On December 28, 1878, the Mariposa Gazette included this item from Big Tree Station:

Work on the new hotel building . . . is progressing rapidly. The planing machine which is to smooth the lumber is ready for operation, and the foundations are laid. The weather has been very cold, ice forming seven inches thick--so says a young man who came down from there last Monday.²⁷

The next known reference to the building is on March 8, 1879, when the Gazette touted

24. William and Mary Hood to Shirley Sargent, undated. The Hoods, called "Park Collaborators," conducted some careful research on the hotel group in the early 1960s. See also Wawona Washburn Hartwig to Shirley Sargent, Oct. 28, 1976. Both letters are located in Ms. Sargent's Wawona File.

25. "Ledger accounts show that Shelly, Al Bruce, and W.R. Knight, the carpenters, were paid \$764, \$507 and \$230 respectively, while J.S. French was paid \$130 for making 20,775 shakes." Sargent, Historic Wawona, p. 33.

26. Cited by Sargent, ibid., p. 33.

27. 3/1.

The large building now in the course of construction at the Big Tree Station . . . as being . . . 140 north-south by 32 feet east-west and two stories high, and when completed will be the grandest hotel in the mountains of California.²⁸

When the new hotel opened on April 1, 1879,²⁹ it far surpassed Long White in terms of quality and quantity of accommodations. The building's ground floor included a lobby, sitting room, dining room, kitchen, and office. The second story contained twenty-five guest rooms. Covered porches, or verandas, surrounded both stories of the L-shaped structure. As evidenced in the following excerpt from the Gazette, dated June 28, 1879, the new hotel opened before it was completely finished: "Joseph Shelly--great fisherman--is at present engaged at carpentering & milling for Washburn & Bruce at the BTS [Big Tree Station]."³⁰

A perusal of the Gazette for the year 1883 reveals the hotel had by that time won acclaim as the best "outside of San Francisco for comfort

28. 3/1.

29. Mariposa (Ca.) Gazette, Apr. 5, 1879, 3/1.

30. 3/1.

and accommodations."³¹ The Messers. Washburn³² offered "pleasant rooms, comfortable beds . . . cheerful fireplaces," and appetizing food.³³ Inclusive of the last day of April 1883 and the first two days of May, 150 guests had registered at the hotel.³⁴

2. Subsequent Stages

Available evidence suggests the Wawona Hotel remained a two-building complex until sometime in 1884. Washburn family tradition holds that it was then augmented with the addition of "Little White."³⁵ This wood-frame structure, erected due south of Long White, was only a third of its predecessor's size.

Wood for Little White--renamed the Manager's Cottage in 1952--undoubtedly came from the Wawona Hotel sawmill, located north of

31. Apr. 21, 1883, 3/1.

32. After John Bruce's sudden death in March 1882, the Washburn brothers--Henry, John and Edward--took over the hotel's management. From 1882 on, Edward spent most of his time at the station. Henry and John were more involved with the stage line. Sargent, Historic Wawona, p. 35.

33. Mariposa (Ca.) Gazette, Apr. 21, 1883, 3/1.

34. Ibid., May 5, 1883, 3/1.

35. I have resorted to two sources for the construction dates of individual buildings at Wawona: 1) In January 1933 the National Park Service compiled an inventory of fixed equipment in the Wawona buildings prior to government takeover. Chief Clerk Sprinkel and Mr. Ackles of the Yosemite National Park warehouse conducted the inventory. In November 1932, to prepare the inventory, Sprinkel and Ackles solicited information from Clarence A. Washburn. "Inventory of Fixed Equipment . . . at Wawona," File 900-01, Part 4. "Yosemite Public Utility Operators. Yos. Park & Curry Co. Bldgs," Box 541, Record Group 79, Records of the National Park Service, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as January 1933 Inventory); 2) interview with Wawona Washburn Hartwig, Aug. 25, 1981.

the hotel. At least as early as August 1881, this mill produced sugar-pine plank, tongue and groove flooring, and "rustic weather boarding."³⁶ To augment the hotel's larder, the Washburns willingly exchanged lumber for barley, wheat, corn, flour, poultry, eggs, and "beef cattle."³⁷ South of the group, an orchard, garden, and chicken coops furnished guests with plenty of apples, vegetables, strawberries, and eggs. Most of the meadow west of the group was fenced in to corral cattle, horses, sheep, and hogs. Some fields in this locale also produced hay, barley, and potatoes.³⁸ Obviously, as part of their management philosophy, the Washburn brothers intended to make the Wawona Hotel as self-sufficient as possible.

It was also in the mid-1880s that the name "Big Tree Station" gave way to "Wawona"--the local Indian term for Big Tree.³⁹

In 1886 the hotel group acquired another addition, when landscape artist Thomas Hill transferred his summer operations from Yosemite Valley⁴⁰ to the Wawona Basin. John Washburn had all the more reason to accommodate Hill because about this time he began courting Estella Louise Hill, one of the artist's nine children.⁴¹ From 1885 Hill lived off and on in the new hotel. The studio the Washburns erected for him north and west of the main building was to serve Hill

36. Mariposa (Ca.) Gazette, Aug. 27, 1881, 3/2.

37. Notwithstanding barter, Washburn and Bruce began marketing lumber in August 1881 at "\$20 per 1,000 ft. of dressed tongue & groove" and "\$12 per 1,000 ft. undressed." Ibid.

38. Sargent, Historic Wawona, p. 37.

39. This is evident from a perusal of the Mariposa (Ca.) Gazette. After 1886 'Wawona' supplanted "Big Tree Station."

40. See Mariposa (Ca.) Gazette, Apr. 28, 1883, 3/2, and June 13, 1885, 3/2.

41. Sargent, Historic Wawona, page 39.

only as a workshop and place to display his paintings.⁴²

Early in 1891 the three Washburn brothers and J.J. Cook and his son formed a corporation called the Wawona Hotel Co. The five partners subscribed to 100,000 shares of stock at \$5 per share. Henry Washburn bought 50,000 of these, John and Edward 12,500 each. Cook took 24,900 shares, and his son the final 100. From January 17, 1890, on, the Wawona Hotel Co. managed all of the hotel business, farming, bartering, and commercial interests carried on, in, and around the Wawona Hotel Group.⁴³

Until the early 1890s, the Washburns added no further buildings to the Wawona group. Certainly before 1894, however, the Wawona Hotel Co. did finance the construction of a two-story cottage with a cupola due east of the main hotel.

That the building existed earlier than park records indicate⁴⁴ is proven by a photograph of it on page nineteen of J.M. Hutchings's guidebook titled Yosemite Valley and the Big Trees. This edition of Hutchings's guidebook was copyrighted in 1894.

Regarding the origins of the seven extant buildings in the hotel group, that of Long Brown (now Washburn Cottage), built due east of Long White (Clark Cottage), is most problematic. Shirley Sargent affirms that "Late in 1899, carpenters began a new 42 x 96-foot porch-encircled one-story building with eleven bedrooms. After it was painted brown, it

42. Scratish, interview with Hartwig, Aug. 25, 1981.

43. Sargent, Historic Wawona, page 50.

44. Records for individual buildings in the Wawona Hotel date from Sept. 15, 1947. The 1947 building record for Little Brown (now Moore Cottage) lists a construction date of 1896. These records are on file in the YOSE RL & RC.

was called the Long Brown."⁴⁵ This information is essentially in agreement with the government inventory of January 1933.⁴⁶ Both the inventory and Sargent's later work, however, depended on Clarence A. Washburn's memory for the Long Brown construction date. The problem is that Mr. Washburn did not recall correctly the construction dates for at least two of the buildings within the eight-building group as of November 1932.⁴⁷

On July 26, 1917, the directors of the Wawona Hotel Co. met in San Francisco and decided to invest about \$40,000 in improvements to the Wawona Hotel.⁴⁸ These improvements resulted in the laying out of a nine-hole golf course and modifications of two structures within the National Register Boundary. These subjects are discussed in Chapter Two. When completed, the Annex--a large rectangular building--featured the latest conveniences, and the accommodations in it cost more than for any other building in the group. Illustration 11, looking east, shows the Annex shortly after its completion in the spring of 1918.

The 1917-1918 improvement program is particularly significant in the history of the hotel group. When the accommodation of stage passengers diminished after 1914, the directors of the Wawona Hotel Co. must have realized that times were changing rapidly. Seen in this perspective, the 1917-1918 improvement program represented the hotel company's energetic attempt to woo a new and more demanding class of

45. Sargent, Historic Wawona, page 52.

46. See footnote 36 sup.

47. It is not the author's intent to make too much of this. It is, however, his responsibility to furnish the most accurate information possible for the history of the Wawona Hotel. Mr. Washburn's assertions that Long White (Clark Cottage) was built in 1864 and Little Brown (Moore Cottage) in 1896 cannot be substantiated. In all likelihood, one or more of the elder Washburns passed these erroneous dates on to Clarence Washburn. See January 1933 Inventory, pp. 23 and 21, respectively.

visitors: those who traveled about in private automobiles. These moderns were more apt to take it for granted that the Wawona Hotel's pastoral setting did not preclude its responsibility to provide guests with up-to-date amenities--above all, private bathrooms.

On March 31, 1920, the directors of the Wawona Hotel Co. again convened in San Francisco. Their principal decision was to borrow \$40,000 for a number of further improvements to the Wawona group.⁴⁹ These improvements included the demolition of an old store and the construction of three buildings--one of which replaced the old store on its former site. None of the three buildings put up in 1920 is extant; only the "Girl's House" ever accommodated paying guests. Excerpts from Clarence Washburn's daily journal prove the Girl's House--later known as the Sequoia Building--was begun on April 23, 1920, and completed exactly two months later. A Mr. Carroll was the builder.⁵⁰ With the addition of the Sequoia, north and east of the main hotel, the Wawona Hotel attained its maximum number of buildings.

} In November 1977 an arsonist destroyed the Sequoia.

49. "Repairs--Improvements (Buildings & Grounds) 1920," Wawona Hotel in the excerpted "Clarence A. Washburn Diaries," compiled by Wawona Washburn Hartwig (hereafter cited as Washburn Diary). We are indebted to Wawona Washburn Hartwig for providing a copy of this excerpted material for the years 1914 to 1933.

50. Ibid.

51. Scratfish interview with Hartwig, Aug. 25, 1981.

3. The 1932 Buy-out and its Aftermath

It is beyond the scope of this report to present an exhaustive account of the negotiations that culminated in the National Park Service's acquisition of the Wawona Basin, inclusive of the Wawona Hotel. It is important, however, to chronicle the principal events and issues, because the character of the Wawona Hotel changed substantially shortly after the 1932 buy-out. From that time on, a parent organization--the Yosemite Park & Curry Co.--managed the hotel for the Park Service. The Yosemite Park & Curry Co.'s primary business interests were then--as now--associated with the Yosemite Valley proper. Running the Wawona Hotel was outside the mainstream of management thinking within the company. Despite his long and intimate involvement with the Wawona Hotel, Clarence A Washburn's departure in 1934 was a direct result of the Yosemite Park & Curry Co.'s takeover.

Active Participants in the 1932 Buy-out included Horace M. Albright, Director, National Park Service; John H. Edwards, Assistant Secretary of the Interior; F.J. Solinsky, Special Assistant (National Park Service land acquisition and purchasing expert); Superintendent Charles G. Thomson, Yosemite National Park; Dr. Donald Tresidder, President, Yosemite Park & Curry Co.; George Uhl, President, Wawona Hotel Co.; Clarence A. Washburn, Secretary, Wawona Hotel Co.; and Ray Lyman Wilbur, Secretary of the Interior.

In February 1925 the Yosemite National Park Co. and Curry Camping Co. merged forming the Yosemite Park and Curry Co. (YP & CC).⁵² A year later this company purchased the "Horseshoe Route" between Raymond, Wawona, Glacier Point, and the Yosemite Valley from the Yosemite Stage & Turnpike Co. for \$250,000. The agreement stipulated that the Wawona Hotel would be protected against unfair competition. To ensure this, the YP & CC granted the Wawona a

52. Tresidder to Albright, Mar. 1, 1925, File 610, "Yosemite Private Holdings," Box 515, RG 79, NA.

five-year contract, guaranteeing the hotel the lunch and overnight business from the Horseshoe Route.

In 1928 the San Joaquin Light and Power Co. considered construction of a dam on the South Fork of the Merced River. As envisioned, this dam would have significantly changed the Wawona Basin, possibly flooding the site of a federally-funded highway slated for the area. By 1930 negotiations between the National Park Service and the Wawona Hotel Co. for acquisition of the basin had increased in tempo, principally because of the dam proposal.⁵³ On November 21, 1930 of that year, negotiations broke down between the YP & CC and Wawona Hotel Co. for the former's purchase of the Wawona Hotel.⁵⁴ On February 14, 1931, Public Law 71-666 essentially authorized the addition of the Wawona Basin to Yosemite National Park provided that one-half of the purchase price was donated "from other sources."

In the spring of 1931 relations between the YP & CC and the National Park Service reached their nadir.⁵⁵ Solinsky stressed to Albright the importance of the Wawona acquisition.⁵⁶ In mid-summer Comptroller General of the United States, J.R. McCarl, ruled negatively on the proposal for the YP & CC to purchase the Wawona properties in return for a new twenty-year concessioner lease from the National Park

53. Shirley Sargent, "Report on the Wawona Basin Acquisition," unpublished essay, April 1976, p. 3. Ms. Sargent prepared this report at the request of Ed Hardy, the Chief Operating Officer of the YP & CC. She had unlimited access to YP & CC and National Park Service archival materials located in the park for the years 1928 to 1934. Copies of the report are located in the YP & CC Archives and in Ms. Sargent's Wawona File.

54. Ibid., p. 5.

55. "Memorandum of Wawona Negotiations," Apr. 6, 1931, "Wawona Related Correspondence File," YOSE RL & RC. See also Albright to Tresidder, Apr. 15, 1931, 610, Part I, Box 519, RG 79, NA.

56. 610, Part I, Box 519, RG 79, NA.

Service.⁵⁷ In August 1931 Tresidder informed Superintendent Thomson that the YP & CC would buy into Wawona only with a "government joint purchase."⁵⁸ In a letter to Director Albright, Thomson underlined the summary importance of the Wawona Basin to the future of Yosemite National Park:

Wawona is the key to almost one-third of the high country to Yosemite lying eastward of the South Fork canyon . . . the only practical solution appears to be the purchase of Wawona through the cooperation of the Government and Yosemite Park and Curry Company, and the granting to the Company of the operating rights in the Wawona area.⁵⁹

In November 1931 General Counsel Rudolph L. Golze of the General Accounting Office suggested to Albright and Tresidder that the principal involved in the Comptroller General's Wawona decision of July 20, 1931, be resubmitted. Golze stressed that the cancellation of the existing contract should ostensibly be proposed solely for the purpose of granting a new one for the full period of twenty years.⁶⁰ In April 1932 Comptroller General McCarl informed Secretary Wilbur that the Comptroller General's Office had no legal objection to the cancellation of an existing contract "and the execution of a new one covering a full period of twenty years . . . where the transaction is not a condition to the donation of one-half the purchase price for land to be added to a national park, as in the case . . . of July 20, 1931."⁶¹ In August Albright used a naval message to inform Assistant Secretary Edwards that:

57. 610, Part 2, "Yos. Pk. Curry & Co. & Wawona Hotel," Box 519, RG 79, NA.

58. Ibid.

59. Ibid.

60. Ibid.

61. "It is understood that in the case of Fred Harvey (a corporation), and similar cases, there is not involved the purchase of any land to be added to the park, or any condition attaching to the donation of private lands for the purchase thereof, but simply the granting to the concessioner of a new franchise for the maximum period of 20 years allowed by law for use by the contractor as additional security to procure the necessary funds in an expansion program to meet adequately the needs of the increasing traveling public, and/or to allow a necessary period within which the concessionaire might receive a proper return on the additional investments." Ibid.

Wawona project ready for completion at cost to government one hundred seventy five thousand dollars owners donating equal amount in property value stop Solinsky's appraisal three hundred sixty six thousand is regarded by all who know property as a low appraisal Stop Yosemite Company will buy all personal property at cost approximately seventy five thousand Stop Telephoned Secretary Wilbur and transaction has his approval Stop Only stumbling block is proclamation adding land to park Stop Please have tentative proclamation prepared and Secretary will wire President Thursday Stop. . . .⁶²

Secretary Wilbur urged President Hoover to expedite the signing of the Wawona Proclamation.⁶³ On August 13, 1932, President Hoover signed Proclamation 2005, placing the Wawona Basin within Yosemite National Park. Soon agreement was reached between the Wawona Hotel Co. and the U.S. Government. The latter was to receive the Wawona Hotel Co. properties, consisting of 3084.59 acres "together with all rights, easements, improvements, water rights," for \$376,000, but "with the understanding that it [the Wawona Hotel Co.] shall accept in full payment thereof one-half of said amount [\$188,300], thereby in effect donating to the United States of America the remaining one-half purchase price as herein set forth."⁶⁴ On October 8, 1932, Solinsky informed Director Albright that the sale had been finalized.⁶⁵ The way was now clear for the U.S. Government to grant the YP & CC a new twenty-year concessioner lease beginning on October 1, 1932.

On November 8, 1932, Tresidder formally appointed Clarence A. Washburn manager of the Wawona group. In one of two letters Tresidder addressed to Washburn on that date, the YP & CC's president told his appointee he expected a continuation of past policies:

62. Ibid.

63. Ibid.

64. Ibid.

65. Ibid.

Colonel Thomson has assured me that the Government will institute no regime in the Wawona area which will in any way alter or affect the fundamental character and atmosphere of the Wawona Hotel.

The raising of fresh vegetables, grazing of cattle, horses, etc., will continue as in the past. Rates and services for 1933 will remain the same, except as you yourself may see fit to modify them.

Our company has a deep appreciation of the goodwill built up by the Washburns through all the years they have occupied the Wawona basin. We have no intention of endangering their goodwill by failure to continue the policies that will retain its present delightful atmosphere.⁶⁶

Tresidder's assurances sounded good, but they did not reflect either his or Superintendent Thomson's real attitude toward Wawona. To exacerbate this state of affairs, Tresidder and Thomson did not get along very well.⁶⁷ As for the real situation at Wawona, Tresidder was perfectly aware the Wawona Hotel Co. had lost substantial sums during the five-year period preceding the 1932 buy-out.⁶⁸ There is plenty of documented evidence to prove Tresidder had little faith a positive reversal could be forged--especially given the deleterious effect the Great Depression was having on YP & CC hotel business in Yosemite Valley.⁶⁹ In a phrase, the 1932 buy-out represented, for Tresidder, the removal of a faltering competitor. It was the new twenty-year lease at Wawona, however, that forestalled the possibility that another company might come in to manage the Wawona to the detriment of the YP & CC.

66. Sargent, "Afterword," in Wawona Report.

67. Ibid.

68. Tresidder to Secretary Wilbur, Sept. 16, 1932, 610, Box 515, RG 79, NA.

69. Shirley Sargent, Yosemite & its Innkeepers (Yosemite, California: Flying Spur Press, ca. 1975), pp. 112-15.

Superintendent Thomson himself had no abiding interest in seeing Clarence Washburn continue past policies at Wawona. Shirley Sargent has documented that shortly after the buy-out

The Park Service quartered some horses in the hotel's barn. Next Chief Park Ranger Forrest Townsley, and then another ranger occupied a cottage, formerly used by Washburn's in-laws, behind the hotel. In the spring of 1933, all signs along the Wawona Road, advertising the hotel, were removed on Thomson's orders, and the housekeeping camp, run in connection with the hotel was closed. Tresidder was not consulted before these actions were taken . . . About the same time Thomson threatened . . . that the Park Service might operate the golf course if the⁷⁰ Company did not spend considerable money in improving it.

It is worth noting that Thomson was an avid golfer. Hil Oehlmann, Vice-President of the YP & CC in the late 1940s, on more than one occasion averred his belief that Thomson wanted the Wawona Basin incorporated into Yosemite National Park so the superintendent would have more control over the golf course.⁷¹

Clarence Washburn soon realized his position with Tresidder and Thomson was untenable. He made it through the 1933 season, but quit abruptly on August 8, 1934. Shortly afterward Clarence Washburn moved with his family to Indio, California, where he managed the Hotel Potter. With Clarence Washburn's departure, the half-century Washburn Era came to an inglorious end. Even so, it is a lasting tribute to the Washburn family that whatever extraordinary qualities the Wawona Hotel possesses today must be attributed to what occurred there between 1875 and 1932.

70. "Afterword," in Wawona Report. Sargent used information in Tresidder's letter to Assistant Secretary Edwards, dated May 18, 1933, as a source for this. Letter filed in the YP & CC Archives.

71. Oehlmann to Sargent, February 1976, Sargent's Wawona File.

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