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One Yosemite, Two Yosemite, Three Yosemite, Four [Place Debate: Yosemite National Park - Perceptions]

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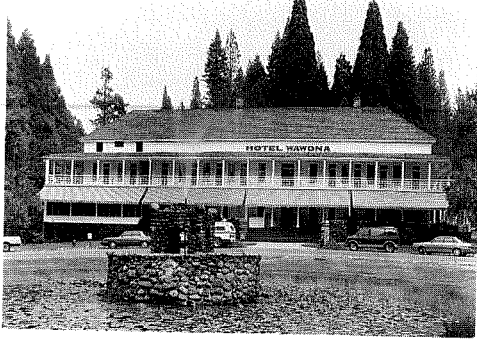
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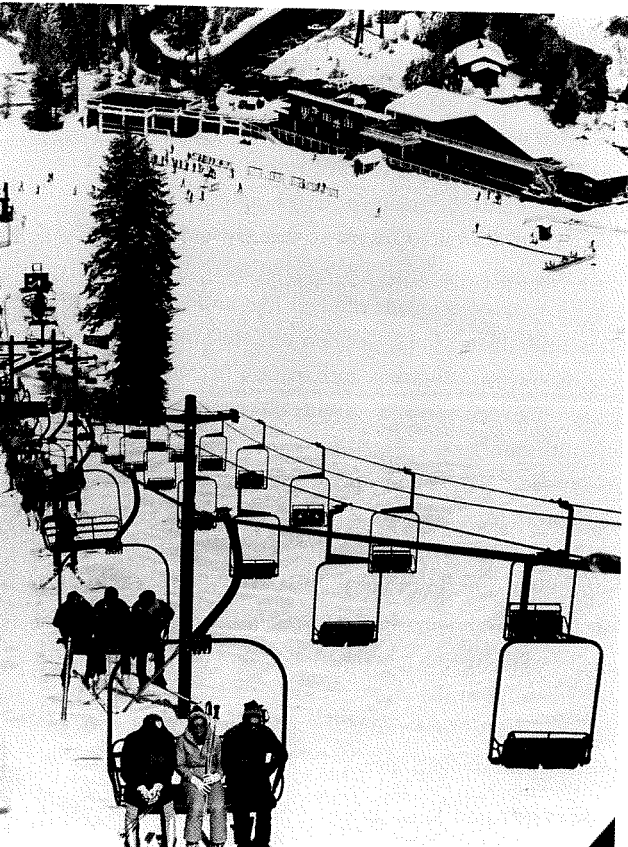


Courtesy Yosemite Park and Curry Co.

"Experience all the beauty and majesty of America's greatest national parks—Grand Canyon, Yosemite, and Yellowstone. Each video is a personal tour complete with sights, sounds and spectacular moments....Superb photography, tightly narrative, and specially scored stereo music. \$69.95, the set."

—Advertisement for "Reader's Digest Great National Parks Video Collection" in National Public Radio catalog, 1989.

Badger Pass Ski Area.
Courtesy Yosemite Park and Curry Co.



David Scofield Wilson

One Yosemite, Two Yosemite, Three Yosemite, Four

In discussing Yosemite, I often fall back upon words that belong in quotation marks, words like "sacred" and "presence." Once, a friend countered, "Do you really think it's a sacred place? When we were in high school, it was the place we went to get laid."

This was a Yosemite I had never known, since I grew up in Minnesota, but the geography of license to which he confessed is familiar to our culture. This staple of American masculine fantasy stretches as far back as the seventeenth-century, when one Pilgrim erected a Maypole and frolicked around it with Indian "lasses" until Miles Standish cut it down and sent him packing.

There is a dark side to the Yosemite dream, which the hospital, police dispatchers, enforcement rangers and federal court personnel know but keep largely hidden from the law-abiding public. "We experience the same rapes, robberies and assaults," I was told by a ranger, "as any city of 30,000 in California."

David Brower is fond of claiming that escape from civilization in Yosemite increases as the square of the distance from the road. He means to urge people to explore beyond their cars and paths. But many women feel their vulnerability increases in a similar ratio and is doubled at night. I have felt aggression from campers and day trippers who take over space, either literally by sprawling across walkways and clogging up bridges or figuratively by playing car radios loudly or by drinking and carousing next door.

Whose freedom does this landscape of liberty most empower? Another's liberty may function as my risk, and by promising a kind of licence to all, Yosemite equally facilitates a threat to all.

There are many Yosemites. Some people come for the traditional, exclusive Christmas feast and masque. Others inhabit the canvas-roofed, cement-block-walled "housekeeping cabins," which have electricity and stoves, and bring TVs, bikes, rafts and lawn chairs. Still others are more sedentary, wearing white loafers and polyester leisure suits and frequenting Yosemite Lodge. To many young families, Yosemite is an inexpensive, safe and entertaining vacation, with hikes, lectures and campfires.

Yosemite is an arena in which alternative visions of liberty and justice, of nature and culture, of sacred and profane are contested. This Yosemite is not objective nor subjective so much as dialogic and semiotic, more an occasion than a place. Yosemite is the sort of cultural and natural edifice and occasion the anthropologist Victor Turner saw as "multivocal, multivalent and polysemous."

Yosemite speaks to different people in different voices, it matters to diverse populations in divergent ways and it signifies contrasting, competing values and beliefs held by different groups.

