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**Building the Wilderness: Power, Water and Recreation in the Central Sierra
Nevada Mountains**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy

in

Interdisciplinary Humanities

by

Christopher Caskey

Committee in Charge:

Professor David Rouff, Chair
Assistant Professor Jeffrey Jenkins
Professor Ruth Mostern
Professor Anne Zanzucchi

2023

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The dissertation of Christopher Caskey is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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DEDICATION

To Catherine. The only unicorn I need to catch.

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The completion of this project would not be possible without the support of my dissertation committee, who gifted me with patience throughout a long, and at times difficult, process. Also important were all of the people who helped and guided me as I conducted the necessary research. They include the staff and librarians at UC Merced, as well as those at the California State Library, Bancroft Library special collections, UC Davis library special collections, Tuolumne County public library, Calaveras County Historical Society and Columbia College. Kathy Strain at the Stanislaus National Forest opened the doors for my access to valuable material in the forest's history collection. That same collection was clearly compiled through years of work by forest historian Pam Conners, who leaves a mark on this project despite the fact I've never met her. Brad Fisher, Bettie, Billie and others at the Tuolumne County Historical Society also helped me locate much of the images and data in this study. The late Martin Blake was also instrumental in this project's earliest stages, before it expanded beyond the Stanislaus River canyon. His personal collection is one of the richest and most extensive reconstructions of a lost landscape, though it remains alive both in the collections at Columbia College and digitally on the Stanislaus River Archive (stanislausriver.org). Finally, the UC Merced Graduate Division's Central Valley Graduate Fellowship and a research fellowship through UC Merced Center for Humanities both contributed to this research. Thank you to all who helped make this possible.

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ABSTRACT

Building the Wilderness: Power, Water and Recreation in the Central Sierra Nevada Mountains

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy in Interdisciplinary Humanities

by Christopher Caskey

Professor David Rouff, committee chair

This project explores the shared history of the Stanislaus River canyon and the Emigrant Wilderness, two places in the mountains of central California that changed the way Americans manage the country's preserved wilderness. In both places, the environmental conditions that made them popular destinations for outdoor recreation – and, in turn, made them subjects of wilderness preservation campaigns – existed thanks to human artifice and engineering. And in both cases, that engineered infrastructure was connected to a single hydroelectric project in the heart of the Sierra Nevada mountains completed shortly after the turn of the 20th Century. With predictable and controlled water flows, the stretch of canyon downstream from the project's main power plant became in the 1970s the most popular rafting whitewater in the American West and remains today a national symbol for river preservation. Fifty years prior, the Emigrant Wilderness became a backcountry fisherman's paradise thanks to a collection of small, hand-built dams constructed by a former employee of the company that built and maintained the electric power system. Both the canyon and the wilderness were accessible largely due to roads, reservoirs and other infrastructure built during the system's initial construction and which remained over decades for its maintenance. In both cases, the human origins of these wild places took center stage in legal, political and regulatory contests over their preservation with one question driving the conflicts – are dams compatible with the wilderness? In telling this story, *Building the Wilderness* will cover approximately a century of people, places and events in central California, beginning in its industrial landscape during the 1890s and ending in its high-country wildlands in the early 2000s.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTIONS AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This project is one story about two wild places: the Stanislaus River canyon and the Emigrant Wilderness. These two places are geographically close on a map, and they share many significant similarities. Both places during their histories existed roughly in the central Sierra Nevada mountains of California. Flowing water has defined both environments. And both have influenced the foundations of American wilderness preservation.

But these two places also diverge in their matter and meanings. They have existed mostly in separate watersheds, with the uppermost stretches of the Stanislaus River originating in the Emigrant Wilderness but only draining a minor part of the 120,000-acre area. Also, the Stanislaus canyon does not exist anymore, at least in the way it did when it was a popular destination in the 1960s and 1970s. During normal and high precipitation years, the river today is inundated beneath hundreds of feet of still water from a massive federal reservoir called New Melones. Before New Melones, prized white water cutting through the rugged and dusty foothills defined the Stanislaus canyon. Young, adventurous boaters and guides frequented the canyon, much of which they could only access with a raft or kayak. Onlookers and outsiders often viewed these people as counter-culture thrill seekers, floating down the waterway to commune with their ideal version of unspoiled nature. On the other hand, the Emigrant Wilderness still exists today, accessible through the Stanislaus National Forest for anyone willing to take the drive and then the ride or hike. Alpine lakes, lush meadows, towering peaks, webs of sapphire streams and groves of conifers punctuate the landscape, which is otherwise dominated by open and glaciated granite expanses along the Sierra Nevada crest. And yet, the Emigrant is currently undergoing material changes thanks to similar processes that drowned the Stanislaus canyon.

Around the same time that back-to-nature river runners found heaven on the Stanislaus, cowboys and backcountry campers on trains of pack animals sought frontier-style experiences in the Emigrant, complete with dinnertime vittles on cast iron, horseback riding, roaming cattle and high-country fishing. Visitors came to both places mostly during summers, when the river canyon was dry and dusty, and the chilly rushing water and sheer cliff faces insulated them from the oppressive heat of the foothills. The high-country climate of the Emigrant Wilderness was cooler and crisper thanks to thousands more feet of elevation, and low-country heat created mid-summer downpours from the warm air rising over the peaks. Though only separated by a relatively short drive, the Stanislaus and the Emigrant could seem worlds apart in terms of scenery, climate, and populations.

But the story of these two distinct wild places should not be told separately, as they share in many ways both a singular history and similar fates. The construction of a complex hydroelectric system on the Stanislaus River in the early 20th Century enabled the development of both the Stanislaus River canyon and Emigrant Wilderness as popular wild places only decades later. Crews of laborers, technicians

and capitalists built modern infrastructure in the form of roads, dams, flumes, ditches, towers, power lines and generators to construct and run the Stanislaus system and connect it to growing markets elsewhere in the state. Later, both wild places were sites of political, legal and regulatory contests between preservation-minded environmentalists and development-friendly conservationists. In both instances, the same question drove the conflicts – whether the presence of dams, and the human history tied to their construction, could be compatible with wilderness preservation. For the Stanislaus River, the dams in question were irrigation and hydroelectric facilities upriver from the popular rapids. Those dams complicated a decade-long campaign to prevent the filling of the New Melones reservoir that sought to protect the waterway as a wild and scenic river. In the Emigrant Wilderness, the question focused on a collection of small masonry structures, often called check dams, built by hand on high-country creeks and ponds to create small lakes and meadows for recreation and grazing. Though considered by lawmakers, land managers and recreationists to be compatible with the Emigrant Wilderness when it was officially established in 1975, these check dams would become increasingly controversial as regulators and activists debated the proper character of wild landscapes.

This project, then, is not just a look at how wilderness is constructed through intellectual, ideological, regulatory and discursive processes. These wilderness places were constructed physically through modern processes – capital, rationalized labor, and engineering – tied to industrial uses. This project also explores the relationships between those physical works on the waterways of the central Sierra mountains and new approaches and ethics about nature preservation that emerged in the late 20th Century with the American environmental movement. By providing predictable and controlled flows of water through both the Stanislaus River canyon and the Emigrant Wilderness, the dams at the heart of these controversies helped create the conditions for popular wilderness recreation. While the later contests over the Stanislaus and the Emigrant would look on the surface to be legal and political battles over *preserving* the wild, these were also – and perhaps, more centrally – discursive contests over *what makes a place wild* as the environments in question were so clearly and thoroughly engineered by modern, rationalistic interventions.

Through these controversies, groups seeking protection for both places would mythologize these wilderness conditions facilitated by that human engineering. River preservationists would transform the Stanislaus canyon into a symbol for wild rivers everywhere, and conservationist sportsmen would point to the Emigrant as an example of how to improve the environment through rationality. Though they were often at the opposite sides of environmental conflicts and similarly at odds with each other in these cases, these groups consecutively utilized the same argument to protect their favored wild place. They maintained, at different moments, that wilderness protection was compatible with the presence of human engineering and traces of its history. In doing so, they demonstrated how wilderness values could be associated in practice as much with social values, cultural identity and ideology – performed through their preferred forms of nature recreation – as with notions of natural purity or ecological integrity.

Environmental academics (historians, theorists, geographers, or scholars of resource management) have not discussed these two wild places as characters in the same story, despite the central Sierra Nevada mountains and the Stanislaus River having long been objects of interest by scholars of California, water and the environment. To fill that absence, this project explores how one hydroelectric system not only influenced the formation of two wild places but also influenced the very debate over what constitutes wilderness in the eyes of the law, the state, the people who imagine it and those who play in it. In doing so, this project engages with existing critiques of wilderness from environmental scholars while exploring the material construction of environmental conditions that would be deemed wild for the recreationists in those landscapes. Highlighting the naturalization of landscapes shaped by human hands, this project takes a constructivist approach to environmental studies and explores these landscapes not as wild spaces but as wild places – built environments with meanings produced by social and political actors that reproduce and reinforce values held by those who use them.

Bringing these places into the same story also connects two important topics in the history of California: the history of nature preservation and the history of hydroelectric power development. Scholars largely discuss these either as unrelated phenomena or as one phenomenon emerging as a reaction to another when environmentalists sought to preserve unique, natural places to protect them from such development. But in this case, two popular wilderness destinations in the Sierra Nevada mountains were first utilized and accessed thanks to the development and completion of hydroelectric facilities. Here, environmental protection and hydroelectric power generation share a mutually beneficial and mutually constitutive relationship, and the widespread embrace of environmental protection for recreation purposes has close ties to modern development. This industrial infrastructure was also environmental infrastructure for those who used it as their backcountry playground. As was the case with many of the environmental conflicts in this state's history, these were not contests over whether to protect nature but over the very meaning of nature. In both places, activists, legal actors, public agencies, voters, and influential groups clashed over the question of what would be considered natural on the public's wild waterways.

“Shooting the rapids is a natural thing:” An introduction to the Stanislaus River canyon

People who visited the wild Stanislaus River canyon almost always did so to escape the hustle and stress of modern life. Those things were usually associated with the “workaday world” – “job tensions, money worries, standard domestic problems, and traffic congestion.” They wanted to forget “free-ways during rush hour,” and “overdue bills,”¹ as well as the “tax assessor, the supermarket checkout counter,

¹ Dick Harlow, “White Water Rafting Story,” *Our Public Lands*, Winter 1975, 15, Box 18, Folder 4, Thorne B. Gray Collection, D-310, Department of Special Collections, University of California, Davis, California.

Cynthia Lou's orthodontist and little Delbert's report card."² The majority of them came from major population centers like the greater San Francisco Bay Area, the Sacramento region or Southern California, by way of the state's expansive network of freeways.

Whichever route they took, these visitors would have to cross the fruit and nut orchards, milk dairies and beef ranchlands of the northern San Joaquin Valley before their gradual ascents into the golden-brown foothills of the Sierra Nevada. They would take this ascent mostly via rural and scenic routes that connect the fertile valley with the high mountain passes north of Yosemite National Park and south of the Lake Tahoe basin. No matter the exact route, all canyon goers would eventually head either north or south on a small, windy way known as Parrotts³ Ferry Road that runs along steep, rugged hills covered with oak, manzanita, and pine woodlands before turning onto an even smaller, windier route. (See Figure 1)

The last turn onto the Camp Nine Road was easy to miss from here and remains easy to miss today. A more audacious marker known as Parrotts Ferry could tell travelers if they had either passed it or were about to come upon it depending on their direction. Settled at the bottom of a steep river canyon, the old crossing site was probably the most popular and bustling spot on the entire Stanislaus River. The ferry boasted recreation facilities and a large parking lot that could resemble during busy summer weekends, "a football stadium parking lot half an hour before a sellout game."⁴ People would be playing, fishing, swimming and boating along the river, likely hundreds of them. From here, visitors needed to head briefly north before turning onto Camp Nine Road. Those with the skills and logistics might have done it on their own, but most took shuttles run by one of a dozen or so whitewater rafting companies moving customers who paid between \$40 or \$50 per person for two-day trips down the river. Large and maintained enough for shuttle buses and four-wheel trucks, the narrow road could still seem treacherous with vertical walls of rock and dirt stretching upwards hundreds of feet on the left and a vast expanse following an almost immediate drop-off on the right. Though it transported people to a point about nine miles upriver, the road's actual length was difficult to ascertain as the bumpiness, curviness and overall dangerous conditions required cautiously slow speeds. But even with all these landscapes and roadways to cover, visitors would most likely arrive at Camp Nine before mid-morning. Not as densely populated as the Parrotts Ferry area, Camp Nine was still likely to be bustling with people filling rafts and corralling supplies, waiting to be told what to do or where to go, and generally making final preparations for their rafts. (See Figure 2) This was the put-in point for the trip down the Stanislaus River, with a small dam just upstream hinting at the presence of a large hydroelectric plant and sounds of rapids burbling closely below.

² Jim Gallagher, "Why Do They Want to Drown the Stanislaus?" *Palo Alto Times / Redwood Tribune*, June 2, 1973, Box 20, Folder 6, Thorne B. Gray Collection.

³ This is both the name of a road and a place discussed at length in this project. It is spelled both Parrotts and Parrott's, as it was named for an early owner of the ferry crossing. This project uses the former spelling, as that style is used by the local newspaper of the area, *The Union Democrat*.

⁴ Harlow, "White Water Rafting Story."

The river guides did a lot of their hardest work early on, with the bulk of the rapids on the river's first half-day stretch. Guides were typically young men in their late teens or early 20s, lean and tanned generally with scraggly beards and unkempt hair, often students or recent college graduates working between semesters at a Bay Area university. However, women guides were more common along the Stanislaus than many of the country's wild places, often fitting similar descriptions as the men except for the beards. The inflated boats varied in size, but generally were 10 or 14 feet long holding a half dozen or more rafters inside the oblong neoprene and rubber craft derived from the designs of bridge pontoons or rescue rafts used by the military. Visitors' ages and experiences varied, from families with five-year-olds, to dentists and bureaucrats, executives, students and boat guides in training. (See Figure 3) The first rapid would be Cadillac Charlie, named for the fact that a car was lodged in the rapid for years before someone named Charlie finally pulled it out with a winch. This was one of the most mild rapids of the river run, and newcomers could literally get their feet wet without much risk while the guide got a sense of the group before facing another dozen or so rapids that fell like a long staircase with more menacing names: Death Rock, Devil's Staircase, the Widow Maker and others.⁵

Surrounded by limestone, granite, riparian woodland and surging, churning, ice-cold water of emerald hue, these initial rapids would quickly transform visitors into rafters, with the activity serving as an embodied introduction to wild nature that they sought in earnest. (See Figure 4) Noting the dynamism of this introduction, one rafter would write, "We float quietly through languid pools, but slowly the pull of the whitewater draws us forward with increasing speed until suddenly the raft erupts into plunging motion that shoots you through the rapids at a mad gallop. It is this contrast of easy drifting and violent action that gives the trip its appeal to old and young alike."⁶ Later, quoting a guide, the same writer would comment on the ways in which the trip was indeed an introduction to an experience over which they had little control. "Once a raft is making its approach to a rapid, it's almost impossible to abort the run. The river provides the thrust. We steer the raft into the chute, then pull the oars in and let the river take it. No amount of strength can brake a raft after it's headed into a Stanislaus River rapid."⁷

Rafters stopped typically at the river's confluence with Rose Creek almost three miles downstream from Camp Nine. The perennial brook often fell quickly from the surrounding cliffs during the wet season but generally was a string of pleasant, bathtub-like pools connected by gurgling water in the summer. The creek on a summer weekend was a busy place, with other rafters, hikers and swimmers taking dips to escape the early-afternoon heat that often settled into the foothills as the hot, low-country air started moving up the canyon. From the creek, rafters continued through more rapids, with contemplative and serene names like Mother and White Fang and Otter Bar punctuating the more intimidating names like Deadman's Pool or

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Razorback. The afternoon of the first day's trip included three or so miles that boasted especially charismatic scenery, as the canyon felt vertical and deep in this area. (See Figure 5) The jagged limestone peaks around Mother and Razorback rapids would tower hundreds of feet over the river like massive cathedral spires, making it some of the most beloved and photographed scenery of the entire run. The sheer cliffs on either side of the area around Dubois Pool and Duck Bar would stand tall like massive walls blocking out the afternoon sun and reflecting sharply against the calmer waters. The vertical scenery drew gazes upward when not focused on the churning whitewater, which for many would have obscured some of the evidence of the very long and impactful human history of the canyon: mining equipment, old pipes in the waterway that gave the Pipeline rapid its name, the steam engine remains at Otter Bar, or other reminders of an industrial past. A nearby cave known as Coral Cave held striking stalactites and stalagmites as well as traces of indigenous Miwok who lived and labored along the waterway, including mortar holes and remnants of a quarry for calcium deposits and stones used in jewelry.⁸

Arriving at Chinese Camp for dinner and an overnight stay, about five miles into the trip, rafters could find more traces of past humans as they explored the areas around the campsites by foot. The large, open flat at the base of the cliffs hosted waves of temporary and more permanent tenants dating back thousands of years. Those included the Chinese miners for whom the site was named, and rafters and guides pointed to the terraced walls, stone passageways and hanging gardens as traces of these immigrant laborers who often found success in claims that were abandoned or ignored by the white miners who forced them out of much of the gold fields.

This linking of the human and the natural would continue, as a working marble quarry – in operation for around a century – would be visible from the river the next day, as might be for the sharp eye an old powerhouse that supposedly held the first high-head hydroelectric generation plant in the region.⁹ Rafters explored the area at a more leisurely pace now, swimming in serene spots on the river or jumping from an old rope swing while guides prepared simple and hearty food like steaks, chops, chicken, beans or vegetables on cast iron over open flames. The meals might also

⁸ Unless otherwise noted, the description details of the canyon in this paragraph and rest of section are drawn from: Bureau of Land Management, Stanislaus River Recreation Map [map], Washington, D.C.: Department of the Interior, 1978, The Stanislaus Notebook, Folder 1, Stanislaus River Archive, Sonora, CA, and Stanislaus (digital) Archive, stanislausriver.org; John Cassidy, Maureen Daley-Hutter, Carol Nelson, Larry Shepherd, *A Guide to Three Rivers: the Stanislaus, Tuolumne, and South Fork of the American* (San Francisco: Friends of the River Books. 1981), 90-152; Jim Gallagher, "Why Do They Want to Drown the Stanislaus," *Palo Alto Times / Redwood Tribune*, June 2, 1973, Box 20, Folder 6, Thorne B. Gray Collection; Thorne Gray, "Nostalgia is a Passenger as Rafts Run Doomed," *Modesto Bee*, May 24, 1970, Box 20, Folder 9, Thorne B. Gray Collection; Dick Harlow, "White Water Rafting Story," *Our Public Lands*, Winter 1975, 15, Box 18, Folder 4, Thorne B. Gray Collection; Ronald S. Supinski, "Shooting Down the Stanislaus," *San Francisco Sunday Examiner & Chronicle*, July 22, 1973, Box 21 Folder 1, Thorne B. Gray Collection.

⁹ Roberta S. Greenwood and Vance G. Bente, "Evaluation of Historic Resources, New Melones Lake Project," Department of the Army, Report completed for Corps of Engineers, Sacramento, July 1977, 83, History Research Center, Tuolumne County Museum, Sonora.

include fresh figs in salads or desserts, some of which – depending on the season – came off an old fig tree hidden in the canyon near Duck Bar. This second day involved fewer rapids and moderate riparian terrain, allowing for more improvisational activities and exploring. Rafts would pass the confluence with the river's southern fork and meander to the last major rapid, named for the famed Sierra Club, which also happened to be the most treacherous of the entire trip. Ideally, guides would say, all the practice the day before had prepared the adventurers for the task at hand. That task required them to use all senses to understand how and where to push against the natural forces which forged the canyon – when to paddle or turn, and when to let the forces do the work for you. “Shooting the rapids is a natural thing. You have to understand the laws of nature to survive. Riding a motorcycle is thrilling, too. But it's not the same,” one guide would say.¹⁰

Upon arriving about nine miles downriver from Camp Nine, rafters would take one of two courses of action at Parrotts Ferry. Those who came with a commercial group (as well as many of the private parties following the same, popular course) would pull out around mid or late afternoon. With no need for a shuttle this time, they would say their farewells, promise to be back to see their guides and new rafting compatriots, return to navigate the labyrinthine highways and face the job tensions, money worries and rush-hour traffic they sought to escape in the canyon just a day earlier. Another nine miles of river remained in front of those who had the time, resources, rafting expertise and will to continue. This final stretch of the Stanislaus was less popular for contemporary recreationists and thus less populated at the time, while also holding more traces and evidence of the river's human and industrial past. Such sites included Horseshoe Bend, with its hundreds of Miwok mortar holes, ancient cliffside petroglyphs and remnants of indigenous villages, as well as trestles further down from the old Sierra Railroad which ran until 1939 through the Gold Country and connected the historic towns of Jamestown and Angels Camp with freight and passenger services. Add two more ferry sites, at times difficult to discern from the river, and rafters would be forced to end their trips with still reservoir waters at Melones near the mining town of Carson Hill. They would pull out in the shadow of an old hard rock mine, the remnants of which still remained as foundations made bare from a fire decades earlier.

From Camp Nine to Carson Hill, all of these features – natural rapids, picturesque beauty, human history, fanciful oddity – helped make the Stanislaus by the 1970s the most popular river for rafting in the American West. The Stanislaus was more popular than iconic sites on the Colorado, Salmon and Snake rivers, with people coming from around the world to experience what was at once described as a geological and scenic wonder, hydrologic playground and outdoor museum. Many of them would go on to become river and wilderness guides both along the Stanislaus and around the country. And during most of that decade, the specter of the New Melones Dam hung ominously over the canyon for guides and recreators alike. (See Figure 12) Said one rafter and advocate of the Stanislaus, “Varieties of wilderness experience on

¹⁰ Harlow, “White Water Rafting Story.”

the Stanislaus blend together to create an absolute social value without substitute in California."¹¹

“Where the boss does not bite, but the trout do:” An introduction to the Emigrant Wilderness

The motivations for escaping further up the hill to the wild highlands of the Emigrant Wilderness were likely similar for those who sought respite from modern struggles on the Stanislaus. Drivers leaving the state’s major metropolitan areas would slowly converge on rural Highway 108 just west of the city of Sonora, which is an approximately 20-minute drive to the southeast of Parrotts Ferry. From Sonora, which represented the last incorporated city on the trip and generally caused a lengthy backup at its single major intersection, drivers seeking an escape to nature would head eastward up the mountains. (See Figure 6) The transition from the dry, oak-strewn foothills to the conifer forests and granite peaks of the Sierra would begin soon after traffic flowed, just minutes east of Sonora, signified by sudden drops in air temperature and the smell of pine and bear clover, which resembled boiling artichokes. Further ascent into the high Sierras would reveal that the route ran along a ridge dividing the watersheds of the Tuolumne River to the right and the Stanislaus to the left, and a deep, pine-covered canyon opening on either side. This was the old Sonora-Mono Road and led to Sonora pass, the second-highest elevation route over the Sierra Nevada crest. While a handful of folks might turn off to enter the Emigrant Wilderness just before Strawberry, about a half-hour past Sonora, most continued to Kennedy Meadows to being their excursion.¹²

Wilderness goers would reach Kennedy Meadows just before the throughway ascended steeply to the more-than-9,600 foot elevation pass. The view in the meadow would resemble many of the other famous high-Sierra scenes that by now had become famous. Visitors would see a lush, green meadow running narrow and flat, surrounded on either side by steep granite peaks and bisected by a shallow, serpentine waterway known as the Stanislaus River’s middle fork. Glaciers cut the scenic valley, smaller than the more famous Yosemite or now-lost Hetch Hetchy valleys, eons prior when they moved slowly along the ancient granite before melting away after the last ice age. Named for a homesteader, the meadow and adjacent land was privately owned but also used by many as a public site for mountain and river play with camping, fishing, and

¹¹ Gallagher, “Why Do They Want to Drown the Stanislaus?”

¹² Unless otherwise noted, the description details of the Emigrant Wilderness in this paragraph and rest of section are drawn from: Lloyd T. Damin, “Week-ending in the High Sierras,” *All Outdoors*, July, 1932, Folder 1, Container 356, Fred Leighton Papers, History Research Center, Tuolumne County Museum, Sonora; Thorne Gray, “Sierra Solitude – Getting there is a Footman’s Feat,” *Modesto Bee*, Sept. 17, 1975, Folder 1, Container 356, Fred Leighton Papers; Scott Matthews, “‘Cowboy’ is Dying Out – But Packing in Campers is ‘Grand’,” *Stockton Record*, n.d., Folder 1, Container 356, Fred Leighton Papers; Scott Matthews, “Now In July, Gigantic Peaks – this is Rugged High Sierra,” *Stockton Record*, n.d., Folder 1, Container 356, Fred Leighton Papers; *Union Democrat*, “Pack Party Researches Sierra Emigrant Trail,” July 31, 1963, Folder 1, Container 356, Fred Leighton Papers; Fred Leighton, Trip to View Ck Dams, in Check Dams Time Book, n.d., Folder 1, Container 356, Fred Leighton Papers.

picnicking all serving as popular options on the area's recreational menu. With a store and lodge operating since 1917, this was the best-known access point for wilderness trips into the Emigrant basin, a go-to spot for travelers who sought an outdoor, Sierra Nevada experience outside of the region's national parks. It was especially popular for sportsmen, as its many lakes and streams boasted plentiful rainbow, brook and brown trout within its remote stretches north of the Yosemite wilderness.

The local pack station held horses and other stock animals available for guided trips, making it an ideal stop before entering the wilds of the Sierra well into the 1960s. With tens of thousands of acres of land, and as many as 25 miles to cover to reach its center, a fishing and camping trip into the Emigrant Wilderness almost certainly meant a multi-day excursion – the kind of trip previously taken mostly by ranchers and mountain men. Achieving such a thing required logistics and materials beyond a picnic or an overnight camp: sleeping gear, shelter for rain, food for multiple days, cooking equipment mostly made of metal, fishing gear, utensils, first aid and more. Such materials required pack animals, which in turn required handlers and guides, and sightings of cross-country hikers armed only with packs and know-how were rare until the later part of the 20th Century. (See Figure 9) Kennedy Meadows served as a gateway to the wilderness for people who wanted to fish in the high Sierra, but who did not own or know how to handle pack animals, could not read a map with a compass, or did not know the sprawling terrain of the Emigrant basin.

As the drive up to the meadows would be long, taking hours from the Bay Area at the minimum, visitors often slept overnight in or around the meadow either in a cabin at the pack station and resort or at a campsite. In the meadow, they could hike along the grasses, aspens and firs, sip on some beer and eat in the lodge restaurant, or fish for trout in the icy waters of the Stanislaus. The trip out the next morning would begin with a rise as early as 6:00 am, wherein the budding backcountry adventurers would meet their guide, most likely a former or working cowboy with a name like Charley or Smokey, or perhaps the proprietor, dressing the part in a Stetson hat, jeans, boots and grubby collared shirt, and boasting years of experience rustling cows in places like Montana, Nevada or Arizona.¹³ Once packed early in the morning, wilderness visitors would mount up, cross the less-than-mile-long meadow and begin the ascent higher into the Sierra. Traversing the conifer forest of fir and pine, with the rustling of the waters and the cool high-Sierra breeze through the boughs serving as a white-noise soundtrack, a visitor would cross a wood bridge at a sharp turn at the far end of the valley, taking another turn and then beginning a steep but steady climb along the granite. Sometimes like a staircase, with small shelves of cut granite seemingly stacked on one another, and other times like a steady ramp, the ascent wound toward the top of the tree line. The early trail would rise above both the Stanislaus and Relief creeks, two waterways that were otherwise indistinguishable from the precipice of the trail above the gorges if not for the fact that one could see them converge hundreds of feet below. At one point, the trail sidled up against a sheer granite cliff, with a small crevice cut into the face for those using it and a sheer drop to

¹³ Matthews, "'Cowboy' is Dying Out – But Packing in Campers is 'Grand.'"

the left. This fortuitous notch in an otherwise impenetrable granite bulge would seem like an act of providence for those who didn't look too close at the cliff walls. But those with a keen eye might have seen scars and notches left in the rock by the work and tools that made such a pass possible.

Climbing further away from the lush forest and into the craggy granite landscape, the place would feel to many an inhospitable, unlivable landscape. But much like with other wilderness escapes, that was the whole point. "There is such a place, O city dweller, dreaming at your desk... a place where the boss does not bite but the trout do, and where the only lights in the sky are stars. And it is not far away. There is snow in July and granite peaks that make the tallest skyscrapers look miniature. There are deer on the trail and birds on the wing, and the wild canaries' song is sweet,"¹⁴ one account offered declared in the 1960s. (See Figure 7) Still, the traces of human engineering and work in this wild place were also unavoidable. Relief Reservoir was a dominant feature along the entrance to the wilderness, with the long body of water which filled a river valley below the trail seeming out of place even for those who had never visited. Not only would the conspicuously linear granite and concrete dam at its end betray its human origins, but even the moderately observant could see additional traces of its construction along the way. Rusted and mangled metal machinery had been left behind by the hundreds of men who built and maintained the dam in the first decade of the 20th Century. Most of that material seemed like unrecognizable and unidentifiable scrap metal cast aside next to the granite and manzanitas.

Those man-made materials were not the sole reminders that the border between human and natural landscapes could be difficult to discern. Even the names on the backcountry map betrayed such a history – the Emigrant basin was named for the handful of travelers who had passed through as they headed from the east to California, and both creeks and reservoir were named for the nearby Relief Valley those emigrants used for shelter as they tried to survive the brutal weather of the high Sierra. "In the clear, light air of this altitude, Lower Relief seems but a stone's throw away as one gazes across the gorge from Saucer Meadow, yet those seamed, granite cliffs, so ragged and beautiful, in reality, are several miles away in a 'bee-line.' One cannot but marvel and wonder at the courage and determination displayed by those early pioneers in attempting such hazardous undertakings with their wagons and oxen," observed one horseback visitor in 1932.¹⁵

Eventually, the trees would largely recede and reveal what seemed like an alien landscape of craggy, rugged granite punctuated by dozens of small meadows, tree groves and small glacial lakes. (See Figure 8) Among the first meadows reached would be Saucer, nestled next to the 10,788-foot Relief peak which stood overlooking the upper and lower valleys of the same name. Two things might begin to impress upon the wilderness-goers at this point, depending on the time of day, the month, or the severity of the previous winter's weather. First was the sheer brightness of the

¹⁴ Matthews, "Now In July, Gigantic Peaks – this is Rugged High Sierra ."

¹⁵ Damin, "Week-ending in the High Sierras."

landscape, between the fields of bare granite and the patches of unmelt snow reflecting against the sun. The other would be the mosquitos, typically emerging from the Emigrant Basin's many lakes when the weather was warm enough and taking out their ravenous vengeance on any warm-blooded creatures visiting their territory. But these surefooted animals would still keep a steady pace along the powdery trail lined with crumbly granite before a break with sandwiches and water would take place at the aptly named Lunch Meadow.

Wilderness goers would spend the remainder of the day continuing to the south. They would move along the feet of five-figure peaks with names like Foresythe and Grizzly that referenced people and animals long gone from the landscape. (See Figure 10) After passing an increasingly frequent number of meadows and small lakes, they would reach the final destination usually late in the day – one of the many alpine lakes situated in the heart of the wilderness. Some of the more popular locations for setting up camp included Emigrant Lake, Huckleberry Lake or Buck Lake, all of which offered flat sites under groves of conifers. In the most likely case of a guided trip, the wilderness-goers would not need to worry about the animals as the guides and hired help could unload the camp materials and bring the animals back to the stables at Kennedy Meadows with a set day and time to return for the trip back.

The destination was often described as a fisherman's paradise for good reason. In every direction stretched miles and miles of productive and pristine trout water in this high-Sierra landscape. The lakes themselves – dozens in the entire basin, and multiple choices within a morning's hike from one another – would be easy to access and circumnavigate via connecting trails. Hikers could also spot and reach them easily off trail with a map and compass, as off-trail, cross-country access was simple with much of the country an open expanse of granite boulders and crags. Perhaps more enticing for anglers would be the network of cold mountain streams sprawling across the landscape, running from lake to lake as the larger water sources would feed the riparian ecosystems even during the dry summer and early fall. These lakes and streams held healthy populations of rainbow, brook and brown trout of varying sizes, with the larger bodies of water tending to yield regular catches over a foot and the smaller ones still supporting catchable fish. (See Figure 11) The landscapes and hydrology lent themselves to fly fishing and other forms of light tackle, promising fierce fights from the wild fish that hit flies and spinners hard after growing up on resident populations of flying insects and aquatic larvae.¹⁶ Trips lasted as long as the visitors' desires and materials allowed, anywhere from a single day on the lakes to multiple weeks traversing the entire basin. And in all, the return back past Lunch Meadow or through separate trails along the lower and upper Relief valleys would end the backcountry visitors back at Kennedy Meadows for afternoon beers, meals, and potentially a final night camping before they headed back down the mountain.

¹⁶ P.R. Needham, "A Brief Report of Observation Made on Trip to Cherry Creek Stream Improvement Project, September 20th-24th, 1933," Folder 1, Container 356, Fred Leighton Papers.

Merging California historiography, wilderness critiques, and the tensions between places and systems: Literature and theory

In tracking the connections between the Stanislaus River electric power system and these two wild places, this project brings together a broad, interdisciplinary collection of literature drawn from California's historiography, wilderness critiques from environmental scholars, studies of the meaning of place and various approaches to socio-ecological systems. The California historiography in which this material is situated itself is broad and diverse, with the state's water and environmental histories interfacing here with its energy and economic history, its social and labor history, and its evolving tradition of resource management. Those histories themselves inform an ongoing critique and debate over the meaning and management of wilderness, a social construct that is both itself an artifact of history and a force for obscuring certain facets of that same history. In exploring as one story these two contests over the preservation and character of California wilderness, this study also engages with wilderness scholarship by interrogating the idealization of purity in the state's wild spaces and exploring the complex and ambivalent ways in which that ideal was utilized and imposed in these case studies. Finally, this project explores a tension between two theoretical frameworks that are integral to the history of California's waterways and environments yet rarely in conversation – the study of places and the study of complex, environmental systems in which the human and the ecological components are intertwined. The histories of the Stanislaus River, hydroelectric generation in and around its popular canyon, and the formation wild places along its headwaters and adjacent watersheds function simultaneously as industrial histories and wilderness histories, as a collection of places and nodes in a larger system, hopefully in ways that will inform ongoing conversations about water's meaning and management in California as the climate changes in an arid land.

Environmental historians have long focused attention on water development in California for good reasons. The ability to store and move water for irrigation, flood protection and other instrumental uses was key for successful settlement by Europeans and Americans of arid and precarious environments in the region. This was especially true during the expansion of mining and agriculture during the 19th and 20th centuries, which both involved intensive water development for economic production. But water has also hindered development due to the state's capricious weather patterns that oscillate both seasonally and over lengthier periods of time between extreme dry and extreme wet. The Stanislaus River is part of that story, as various scholars and authors identify the New Melones Dam as the end to what has been called America's hydraulic society,¹⁷ the age of dams¹⁸ in America, or the country's big dam era.¹⁹ The

¹⁷ Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity and the Growth of the American West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 7, 22-30; Norris Hundley, Jr., *The Great Thirst: Californians and Water: A History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 203.

¹⁸ Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and its Disappearing Water* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 158, 165.

stories of the Stanislaus River and wilderness preservation already have their places in this literature, typically marking the end of an era of dam building in the region and signifying the emergence of new environmental ethics and approaches to resource management. Yet, tying them together as part of a single history offers a subtle but important shift in cause and effect and suggests some of the area's most popular wildlands were as much constructed through these projects as they were preserved as a reaction to them.

According to the existing literature, the late 19th and early 20th centuries saw relatively small, private and public actors dam and divert rivers throughout California and the West for mining, hydroelectricity, agriculture, and other industrial purposes. These actors – companies, cooperatives, speculators, local state entities – found mixed levels of success before they began to call for larger state entities to invest in major reclamation projects for successful settlement and cultivation of what was seen by many Americans as otherwise barren and unproductive landscapes.²⁰ The federal government formed the Reclamation Service in 1902, with the service coalescing through a Progressive Era movement that called for public conservation of landscapes and natural resources as part of a social project to reform perceived corporate greed, collective decadence and a national culture that was widely assumed to be at risk from urban industrialization. The service transformed into the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation in 1923, and for the next half century became along with the federal Army Corps of Engineers the prime movers of the big dam era. During this era, the federal government and some other major state actors dramatically transformed America's western waterways through the construction of large dams and regional water projects in ways that economically benefited mostly corporate agricultural and industrial interests and excluded indigenous people, communities of color, the working class and other marginalized groups. These projects also ecologically devastated the rivers themselves, blocking spawning routes for native species, pulling water out of the systems to spread across thirsty crops, and choking those systems with chemicals and sediments from the newly productive farmlands in the watersheds.²¹

In this era, dam building enjoyed widespread support from the voting American public and government, which pursued an instrumental approach to water and other natural resources as part of a modernist ideology that saw the value of those resources solely in the context of how they could benefit society as salable commodities. However, this ideology faced increasing scrutiny after an environmentalist social movement grew in the United States questioning its logic in

¹⁹ David P. Billington, Donald C. Jackson, Martin V. Melosi, *The History of Large Federal Dams: Planning, Design and Construction in the Era of Big Dams* (Denver: U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Reclamation, 2005).

²⁰ Hundley, *The Great Thirst*, 65-120; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 61-126; W. Turrentine Jackson and Stephen D. Mikesell, *The Stanislaus River Drainage Basin and the New Melones Dam: Historical Evolution of Water Use Priorities* (Davis: California Water Resources Center, 1979), 11-26. The Turrentine/Mikesell report focuses entirely on the Stanislaus River, and yet also establishes a similar pattern beginning with an era local and private development before progressing similarly.

²¹ Hundley, *The Great Thirst*; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*; Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*.

the 1960s. Environmentalists critiqued the environmental damage caused by the corporatist collusion between capitalism and big government, arguing that this instrumental approach to natural resources resulted in great social and environmental harm. Out of this critique came a reform movement that would result in a new wave of environmental laws and regulations seeking to protect waterways, landscapes, animals, plant species, and other aspects of nature from destruction through development. This movement also fostered new discourses about nature itself, suggesting it had a right to exist, operate and thrive outside of human use and centering around a preservationist ethic that sought to eliminate human presence and control in wild places.²² These wild places included rivers, which environmental activists sought to protect from dams and diversions through the 1968 federal Wild and Scenic River Act as well as similar state-level legislation.²³

These two ideologies – the modernism of the hydraulic empire and environmentalism’s nature exceptionalism — came to a high-profile confrontation along the Stanislaus River in the 1970s and early 1980s. Officials with the Central Valley Project, a federal network of dams and canals built primarily to provide irrigation and flood protection to California farmers, were in the process of planning and constructing the New Melones Dam on the Stanislaus. Between the reservoir’s initial approval in 1944 and the 1976 completion of its main construction, a stretch of river set to be inundated by the dam became the most popular whitewater rafting site in the American West. The river in this particular area flowed through a deep limestone canyon of unique scenic beauty, and whitewater rafting during the 1960s and 1970s became a popular outdoor adventure for environmentalists. Thus, the recreational enthusiasts and river rafting guides leveraged the focus of the environmental movement from 1973 through 1983 to prevent inundation of the river through legal and political means. The ensuing, decade-long campaign to save the Stanislaus²⁴ became one of the biggest and most intense river preservation campaigns in American history, involving at various points state and federal legislation, multiple voter propositions, input by governors and presidents, and even intervention by the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1979, a young guide named Mark Dubois chained himself to a boulder beneath the reservoir’s fill-line attempting to prevent the filling of the lake, an act which became the enduring symbol of the struggle to save the river. (See Figure 13) Though the move was temporarily successful, Dubois and the preservationists ultimately lost the battle and New Melones filled in 1983.

Despite the defeat, the Stanislaus became an organizing force for river preservationists moving forward. The central organization, Friends of the River, branched out and continued a multi-faceted operation dedicated to restoring, protecting, and preserving rivers from development in California and throughout the country. The New Melones Dam was the last major dam completed in the region, with popular and scholarly voices now suggesting that the New Melones campaign

²² Hundley, *The Great Thirst*, 303-542; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 308-326.

²³ Tim Palmer, *The Wild and Scenic Rivers of America* (Washington: Island Press, 1993), 1-30; Tim Palmer, *Stanislaus: The Struggle for a River* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

²⁴ Palmer, *Stanislaus*.

energized and organized a river preservation movement that ultimately won in the long term despite that particular loss. Drawing comparisons to the Sierra Club strengthening its preservationist resolve after the loss of Hetch Hetchy, this narrative suggests that through the New Melones campaign, environmental activists developed networks and tactical, legal and political knowledge that led to more successful future campaigns.

Various environmental and river historians have pointed to the New Melones Dam as the end of big dam building in America. The dam was “the last of its kind,” and “no structure as large or significant has since been built on an American River.”²⁵ Dubois was one of the “impassioned friends of the western rivers past,” the act was in protest of “the flooding of (the river’s) wildness,” and offering a new way of “valuing nature.”²⁶ Dubois’ act to protect this stretch of river was a step toward “liberating nature” as an actor or presence with its own autonomy, both legally and morally.²⁷ The “notable” and “hard-fought”²⁸ struggle over the lost stretch of river became “a new rallying cry and source of inspiration across the United States”²⁹ Stretches like these were needed, “not to eat, not to turn turbines, but to restore our spirits.”³⁰ Thus, the literature on the Stanislaus river largely focuses on the New Melones Dam campaign’s role in strengthening and popularizing the environmental and river preservationist movements as a national symbol for lost wildness. Though these environmentalists led by Dubois “really had no chance” in the fight, and a river “that had flowed wild for hundreds of thousands of years was a memory,” their loss “brought the first Age of Dams to a close – at least in the American West.”³¹

While this story is largely accurate, it also has a handful of problems. First, it essentializes the river canyon as a uniquely wild place, one that is set apart from the modern development of the hydraulic era and thus one that needed to be protected from its most powerful agents. Second, it suggests that the river protection movement was a reaction to, and thus emerged and functioned in opposition to, the water development that defined the American hydraulic empire. Third, it limits the scope of the Stanislaus’ history both spatially and temporally, focusing almost entirely on the rise of environmentalism and nature recreation on a particular stretch of the river, and ignoring the place’s connections to larger histories. In telling the story of the Stanislaus with those of the Emigrant Wilderness and hydroelectricity, this project seeks to expand and complicate the existing water historiography which remains often tied to narratives of decline informed by a development-versus-preservation binary. Instead of identifying the battle over the Stanislaus River canyon as one event in one

²⁵ William R. Lowry, *Dam Politics: Restoring America's Rivers* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2003), 40-42.

²⁶ Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 325.

²⁷ Roderick Frazier Nash, *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 191-192.

²⁸ Patrick McCully, *Silenced Rivers: The Ecology and Politics of Large Dams* (London: Zed Books, 1996) 282.

²⁹ Hundley, *The Great Thirst*, 373.

³⁰ Palmer, *Stanislaus*, 171.

³¹ Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 510.

place that occurred as a reaction to one era of water development, this project looks at the event as part of a larger spatial and temporal history, one tied to the hydroelectric movement of the early 20th Century, a greater wilderness movement which spanned decades, and the environmental conflicts of the late 20th Century.

In expanding the Stanislaus River's historical impact, this project seeks to complicate a persistent assumption found in much of California's water historiography. This assumption is perhaps most famously asserted by historian Donald Worster, who suggested engineered infrastructure to be the binary opposite of nature, or "a work of advanced artifice, not of nature but of technology," which "is simplified and abstracted water, rigidly separated from the earth and firmly directed to raise food, fill pipes and make money." Further, the infrastructure, symbolized by Worster in the modern irrigation canal, "is lined along its entire length with concrete to prevent the seepage of water onto the soil; consequently, nothing green can take root along its banks, no trees, no sedges and reeds, no grassy meadows, no seeds of blossoms dropping lazily into a side-eddy. Nor can one find an egret stalking frogs and salamanders." and again, the "contrived world of the irrigation canal is not a place where living things ... are welcome."³²

But in both the cases of the Stanislaus River canyon and the Emigrant Wilderness, that engineered infrastructure is compatible with life and ecological vibrancy. Further, for those seeking to protect them in particular forms, these waterways became symbols of nature's very essence. What is the difference between the lifeless canals in the water historiography and the free-flowing waterways of these wild places? This project will suggest the answer is more complicated than the existing literature on water in California and the West would suggest. Perhaps that answer is better explored when pursuing questions posed elsewhere in environmental and water scholarship that seek to repudiate the modernity-nature binary: "We might want to look for the natural in the dams and the unnatural in the salmon. The boundaries between the human and the natural have existed only to be crossed on the river."³³

Yet, these stories do not end with water development and wild rivers, and this study as it unfolds seeks to connect these well-trodden topics with other aspects of California historiography. It offers a focused slice of the state's energy history, exploring a hydroelectric boom driven by the flow of capital into the canyons of the Sierra Nevada mountains along the same hydraulic infrastructure built during the Gold Rush 50 years prior. That energy development intersected with labor and economic histories, as teams of largely immigrant men also flowed into the region's rugged backcountry to tame and modernize the capricious landscape while themselves being subject to exploitative and discriminatory labor systems. Also imbedded in this story of environmental change and industrial infrastructure were stories of changing social systems tied to both domestic and recreational spaces, especially those that helped define gender ideals inside and outside of the home. Thus, while this study at its heart

³² Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 4-6.

³³ Richard White *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), xi.

may remain a water history, informed heavily by that associated literature, individual chapters will further engage with scholarship concerned with other social changes in California during the early 20th Century.

Along with California's historiography, this project engages with an ongoing critique that environmental scholars have levied at wilderness as a symbol of purity in nature. Perhaps initiated most forcefully by William Cronon in an essay about the problems with wilderness,³⁴ and less directly by Richard White in his writings on both the Columbia River³⁵ and on human work in nature,³⁶ this critique involves two main arguments. First, it suggests wilderness to be a mythical construct, one that was created as part of the modern Western (especially American) imagination and the product of historical forces. This construct, according to the critique, fetishizes purity, reifies a nature-human binary onto the landscape, and undermines other movements to improve and protect the environment. Second, the creation and reinforcement of this binary construct wildernesses as spaces outside of time and without histories of human habitation, work or cultural production. These two case studies of the Stanislaus River and the Emigrant Wilderness can deepen and complicate these existing critiques, because they both focus on wilderness areas that were engineered by human hands and human minds. Furthermore, exploring their shared history can illuminate how the very notion of wilderness has changed over time through contests and negotiations, clarifying how wilderness as a construct can be both material and social. The Stanislaus canyon and the Emigrant Wilderness also complicate the critique because the binaries and absolutes these scholars admonished are not as present in these negotiations as their critiques might suggest. During these negotiations, history and human presence were ceded at least some space in these wildernesses. And in many cases, these contests functioned less as debates over whether mankind had a place in the wild but what that presence could and should look like.

For both Cronon and White, wilderness and a pure, non-human river are both imagined concepts. Wilderness, Cronon states, is "quite profoundly a human creation – indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history."³⁷ White's similar reading of river purity narratives on the Columbia suggests, "there is no clear line between us and nature." The river, "is at once our creation and retains a life of its own beyond our control." Attempts to re-recreate the original conditions of the river, even for tourists, is "not nature" but "an artifact of human technology."³⁸ In both cases, they argue that notions of a wild landscape's or

³⁴ William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 69-90.

³⁵ White, *The Organic Machine*.

³⁶ Richard White, "'Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?': Work and Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 171-185.

³⁷ Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 69.

³⁸ White, *The Organic Machine*, 110-111.

wild river's primordial state are largely imagined, unobtainable ideals that ceased to exist once the first peoples started to manipulate the environments and ecologies of these places millennia ago. When preservationists avoid or ignore these realities, both scholars have claimed, they weaken legitimate pleas for environmental protection, reforms or ethical considerations. As such pleas are often pitched in moments of debate or contestation, private and anti-environmental interests can build their own claims for development on historical foundations by pointing out these very problems with wilderness purity myths.³⁹ As a solution to these problems, both scholars call on readers and others participating in environmental discourse to engage with more realistic conceptions of natural rivers or wilderness. Along with White's above-quoted call to find nature in dams, Cronon pointed in his writings to a Wisconsin farm, restored in the past by preservationist Aldo Leopold, who carefully tended the grounds in ways that didn't exclude a place for human intervention and agency in nature. "What I celebrate about such places is not just their wildness. ... they remind us of the wildness in our own backyards, of the nature that is all around us if only we have eyes to see it."⁴⁰

This critique of purity also focuses on how the purity ideal does or doesn't allow for people to be historical agents on the landscape. In both cases, Cronon and White suggest that purity myths require the erasure of people from a place's past and present. Cronon's allegations relate specifically to human history in wilderness, as such a place under this construction exists outside of time as part of a kind of Western origin myth before some transcendental fall. Cronon calls this an "escape from history," and a "flight from history,"⁴¹ arguing that the creation of the myth of virgin wilderness erases all sorts of human histories including indigenous agency and the later, ugly removal of indigenous peoples from the landscape. White, in multiple works, focused the purity-in-nature critique on human work and labor. "One of the great shortcomings – intellectual and political – of modern environmentalism is its failure to grasp how human beings have historically known nature through work. Environmentalists, for all their love of nature, tend to distance humans from it. ... They call for human connections to nature while disparaging all those who claim to have known and appreciated nature through work and labor,"⁴² White stated in one piece. He also argued elsewhere that, "work that has changed nature has simultaneously produced much of our knowledge of nature. ... Those first white men are fascinating and sympathetic historical figures in their own right, but my concern with them is as cultural figures constructed by environmentalism. They are made into viewers of a natural world 'as ... it existed outside of human history.' But it is not nature that existed outside of human history; it is the first white men who do so. For

³⁹ Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 81-86; White, "Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?" 173-174. Both refer to "wise use," a private property-based approach to conservation as an anti-environmentalist movement potentially empowered by purity discourse in wilderness preservation.

⁴⁰ Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 86.

⁴¹ Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 80.

⁴² White, *The Organic Machine*, x.

environmentalist writers depict not how these travelers actually saw the natural world, but instead how we would have seen it in their place.”⁴³

In these critiques, the idealization of wilderness as pure nature creates two main problems. It is first ahistorical, as there are few if any environments in the world that don't have relationships with human history and that haven't experienced change through human agency. This critique deeply informs environmental humanities, as scholars in fields like environmental history have long attempted to find the natural history in human history and find the human history in natural history. Landscapes and waterways begin to see human impacts and changes as soon as people arrive in them. Such impacts can take place from afar, especially along waterways, which serve as routes of connection for environmental impact between places and populations. Even places imagined as wild or pure are cultural landscapes, shaped by values, labor and technology over time. Second, this erasure of history disproportionately impacts populations already written out of many histories of the West and United States. This is true especially for indigenous histories, wherein the humans who shaped the landscapes and waterways before colonization later would face one or more of the following rhetorical outcomes. They were erased from history through discourses that required the removal of human agency and labor. They were romanticized in ways that removed their humanity and marked them as part of nature itself. Or their labor and work in nature was suggested to be more primitive, more natural and less problematic than modern analogues. The purity discourses of recent environmental movements either remove or erase indigenous histories from the wild spaces of the West, or they offer romanticized caricatures of indigenous peoples that equate them with nature in ways that undermine their humanity and environmental agency. Often, it's somehow both.

Through this project, the Stanislaus River canyon and the Emigrant Wilderness offer case studies that both reinforce and complicate these critiques. On one hand, the shared history of these places reveals activists arguing for a pure form of wilderness and a purity-based definition of wild places to direct management decisions. In both cases, these activists worked in earnest to bend legal, political and regulatory regimes that would codify values around the notion that human agency and history were incompatible with purity. In the Stanislaus canyon, a major focus was whether dams could be present in a wild river system. Opponents to wilderness preservation in the canyon regularly called the entire notion of wild river a hoax, pointing to the place's close connection to hydraulic development. Similarly, the legal battle over the Emigrant Wilderness centered around the question of whether historical structures were compatible with the wilderness designation placed on the landscape in the 1970s. Those structures were mainly hand-built masonry dams, but also included some backcountry cabins and planted trout. In both the canyon and the Emigrant, the regulatory and cultural baggage attached to the purity-in-nature ideal undercut some preservation efforts by refusing to reconcile human history with a public imaginary that associated wilderness with empty and sterile space. Also, in both cases indigenous

⁴³ White, “Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?” 172, 176.

histories were erased or minimized in service to the purity ideal, with Stanislaus canyon enthusiasts memorializing the regional native American peoples as part of a static, romanticized past and Emigrant Wilderness proponents associating the landscape with frontier myths in the form of wild-west ranching imagery and early emigrant mythos. These two debates over purity in the central Sierra Nevada reinforce the critique that the purity-in-nature myth makes no room for human history, and in turn preservation efforts that seek such purity require the erasure of those place's histories.

Yet, some aspects of these debates also complicate that critique. In both the Stanislaus River canyon and the Emigrant Wilderness, activists and preservationists defended and publicly valued the very history supposedly erased through such purity discourses. In both cases, these wildlands also functioned as archives and museums holding the collective memories associated with the modern human activities of the past: ranching, dam building, fishing, mining, emigrant trails, hydroelectricity, commerce and indigenous lifeways. At times, these debates ceded space for history in wilderness preservation, regularly suggesting not only that such history was compatible with these places' wildness, but at times very much part of the reasons for preserving them. Perhaps more significantly, supporters of preservation strategically utilized historical aspects of both places as part of the preservation project. In the case of the Stanislaus canyon, wild river activists called the place an outdoor classroom and living museum, attempting to use preservation regulations to leverage the canyon's human history against development interests. Similarly, defenders of the Emigrant's wilderness conditions have regularly described the rides and hikes into to the backcountry as trips back in time, while also using historic preservation processes to try and keep human structures in the wild landscape. In both cases, defenders of engineered waterways both reenforced and complicated the critique of wilderness as an escape from history. Advocates for these wild places at times drew their images of nature from a pure-or-not-pure binary, while at other times allowing rhetorical, political and regulatory space for history in the wilderness.

Along with engaging critiques on water history and wilderness, this project will use the notion of place and its construction to consider the history of the Stanislaus River canyon and the Emigrant Wilderness. An idea that seems both simple and ubiquitous in discussions of nature preservation, place is both a sticky and slippery word in the English language and that can be as complex and problematic as the word nature. Places are physical environments infused with meaning and values that come from the experiences of the people living, working and acting in them. Place itself has a tricky and varied meaning, as scholar of social landscapes Dolores Hayden described the concept as "a suitcase so overfilled that one can never shut the lid" but also one that drives concrete concepts that people can understand like "sense of place" and "personality of place."⁴⁴ Places are material, whether urban or wild, and their sense or personality is informed by the physiological, sensory or phenomenological responses

⁴⁴ Dolores Hayden. *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1997), 15.

to the bodies and minds of the people within them.⁴⁵ But they are also culturally created, especially a place's meaning, purpose or function in particular social systems, making places semiotic or discursive systems as much as they are geographic locations or material constructions. Those meanings can be intensely personal, tied to particular experiences or moments. But they are also highly social, as places and their meanings are produced by communities as depositories of history, collective memory and identity, and thus reflect and reinforce the ideologies, hierarchies and values of those societies. Such is true in urban landscapes like truck gardens and produce markets in Los Angeles studied in Hayden's work, which inform the collective memories and historic identities of Japanese, Russian, Italian and Chinese farming communities.⁴⁶ It is also true for mountains in a vast landscape, which can function as chronotopes for Western Apache peoples in the American Southwest for whom seemingly natural places inform their collective identities and serve as "repositories" of wisdom, history and tradition.⁴⁷ As cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan wrote, those meanings, values and human experience become the difference between places and open spaces. "Open space has no trodden paths and signposts. It has no fixed pattern of established human meaning; it is like a blank sheet on which meaning may be imposed. Enclosed and humanized space is place. Compared to space, place is a calm center of established values."⁴⁸ This project will explore how people constructed new places with their bodies, technologies and imaginations in the central Sierra wilderness by projecting values, ideologies and systems of meaning onto the physical environments.

Historians of urban places also regularly examine the social production of spaces when analyzing the meanings of places and how they change. This approach discusses not just how places function in society, but also explores the ways in which the material makeup of those places – or the spaces themselves – are both shaped by society's values and relations, and also social actors that help shape and reinforce those values and relations. In these approaches, one must keep a few considerations. First, there is a relationship between space and economic production that can be seen in the material production the building and the economic production for which the space is built. Second, there is a relationship between space and social reproduction, or the ways in which those spaces were shaped by, reflect, reinforce and reproduce social relations, values and ideologies. Finally, there is a mutually constitutive relationship between space, economic production and social reproduction. Spaces are built and designed for specific purposes, but they also are imbued with social values. Those values and the people who hold them shape and re-shape the spaces in complex ways that are directly related to those values. While environmental and river historians often assume the concept of a natural or wild space to be socially produced concepts, they spend less time and energy exploring the ways in which wild spaces themselves are

⁴⁵ Ibid, 16, 250.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 112-118

⁴⁷ Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque, UNM Press, 1996), 62-63.

⁴⁸ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), ProQuest Ebook Central, 54.

the product of economic production and social reproduction.⁴⁹ Thus, this project seeks to use a concept often pursued in urban history to consider the production of wild places along the Stanislaus River and in the Emigrant Basin of the Sierra Nevada mountains.

But inserting the notion of place into historical analysis of the environment can create a kind of problem when discussing rivers. Among the most successful historical studies of rivers are those that approach the waterways as instrumental systems. This system-based approach represents a collection of frameworks in the humanities and social sciences to study the environment in relation to the people who use and change it. These concepts frame the environment as a complex system or network of systems made up of both human and nonhuman actors, with change in those systems driven both by social and ecological processes fulfilling the needs, wants and purposes of those actors. Through labor, capital, science, engineering and technology, societies control non-human nature for instrumental purposes, while nature at the same time retains some agency to influence those social processes that shape it and the people acting within them. The environment under these frameworks includes ecological and human components connected and functioning in ways that make it difficult or impossible to disentangle. Such an approach can simultaneously identify the transformative power of human technology, industrialization and global capitalism, while at the same time critiquing and undermining other theories that reinforce man-vs-nature dualism.

These approaches often suggest the environment is more of a process or collection of connected processes marked by complexity and unpredictability than a self-contained thing at all, with these frameworks focusing heavily on connections and flows of energy. When the environment is a collection of processes, exchanges, and flows between human and ecological entities, people are not simply controlling the environment nor is the environment dictating social structures and norms. These approaches can frame both environmental and social change as a kind of non-linear, mutually constitutive process that does not fall into either the reductionist trap of declension narratives or into the kind of environmental determinism that removes and absolves people from their own historical agency.

There are many approaches and frameworks that analyze environments as systems. Perhaps the most influential in historical river studies is White's *Organic Machine*, the term he used to title his book and describe the Columbia River's intermingled human and social past. Another is the notion of complex adaptive systems called *Panarchy*, a heuristic device used by Lance Gunderson and C.S. Holling to demonstrate similarities between complex systems to suggest how and why they adapt or collapse in the face of changes and stressors. Though the model is

⁴⁹ Hayden, *The Power of Place*, 14-41. See also: Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); David Torres-Rouff, *Before L.A. : Race, Space, and Municipal Power in Los Angeles, 1781-1894*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013). Both Hayden and Rouff draw from Lefebvre's theory of space as a social product. Rouff's study of Los Angeles specifically considers the relationship between the production of space, place and racial construction, in part applying this idea to the city's water system.

designed to study resilience, the theory recognizes particular differences between social and ecological forces in a system while exploring the ways in which those forces can be enmeshed and inseparable.⁵⁰ River scholars have also used concepts like “socio-natural hybrids,” and an “evolving, hybrid space” to acknowledge socio-ecological system,⁵¹ while some have followed scholarly approaches to urban environments as entities that consume and produce energy and materials, framing rivers as either metabolic systems themselves or functioning as an ultimate sink for larger metabolic systems.⁵² In other studies, rivers have been “hyperobjects,” large socio-environmental systems that are “part artifacts in the sense that humans have played a role in bringing them into being,” but also something that “never could be entirely under human control” and that acts “independently and unpredictably.”⁵³ They have been compared to cyborgs, drawing on feminist theorist Donna Haraway’s critique of subjectivity, “composed of an interconnected and interdependent web of natural and artificial parts.”⁵⁴ And Matthew Gandy shared a concept with cultural geographer Swyngedouw when he referred to water flows utilized by urban centers as “socio-nature,” or “a multiple entity: it possesses its own biophysical laws and properties, but in its interaction with human societies it is simultaneously shaped by political, cultural, and scientific factors.”⁵⁵ All of these ideas help build a collection of approaches to studying the environment, science and technology from a social and humanistic position that has been described as an emphasis on socio-environmental hybridity. Within this hybridity, “reality must be conceptualized as co-shaped and co-produced by all manner of social, material and ecological processes”,⁵⁶ with the approach intending to “open up innovative and inviting lines of research that can explore and illustrate in innumerable ways how specific aspects of these worlds are entangled.”⁵⁷

As frameworks for environmental studies, systems and place-based approaches overlap and influence one another. This is especially true with rivers, which are often

⁵⁰ Lance H. Gunderson and C. S. Holling, *Panarchy: Understanding Transformations in Human and Natural Systems* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2002), 103-119.

⁵¹ Matthew Evenden, “Beyond the Organic Machine? New Approaches in River Historiography,” *Environmental History*, 23:4 (2018): 698-720, 711.

⁵² Craig E. Colten, “Fluid Geographies: Urbanizing River Basins,” in *Urban Rivers: Remaking Rivers, Cities, and Space in Europe and North America*, eds. Stéphane Castonguay and Matthew Evenden (Philadelphia: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), ProQuest Ebook Central, 201-218; Sabine Barles, “The Seine and Parisian Metabolism: Growth of Capital Dependencies in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” in *Urban Rivers*, 95-112.

⁵³ Matt Edgeworth and Jeff Benjamin, “What Is a River? The Chicago River as Hyperobject,” in *Rivers of the Anthropocene*, ed. Jason M. Kelly (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017) 163.

⁵⁴ Edgeworth and Benjamin, “What is a River?” 162.

⁵⁵ Shane Ewen, *What Is Urban History?* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2015) Accessed March 8, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central, 76; E. Swyngedouw, *Social Power and the Urbanization of Water: Flows of Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Matthew Gandy, *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

⁵⁶ Damian F. White, Alan P. Rudy, Brian J. Gareau, *Environments, Natures and Social Theory: Towards a Critical Hybridity* (New York: Palgrave, 2016), 117.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 130.

studied as either distinct places or as systems that connect places to larger systems through biographical approaches to historical studies. The river biography itself has become a particularly popular genre in river historiography,⁵⁸ with river biographies analyzing the human and ecological pasts of a singular entity and often attempting to capture the character or personality of the river. While systems approaches analyze rivers as instrumental systems of exchange between human and ecological components, those systems themselves function in places that have meaning for the people within them. The processes contribute to the meaning of the places, while the places impact the way people understand the processes.

The hydroelectric system and associated infrastructure along and around the Stanislaus River, which function as both a socio-ecological system and as a collection of places, is a good example of this overlap. For instance, the power plant at Camp Nine located on the river's middle fork was both a place and was part of a process. It is a single site of connection between backcountry forests (where wood was harvested to build the system), regional energy markets, national copper mines and global flows of capital, while also being a site of labor, identity, meaning, values and ideology for the people who worked on the plant and lived in the communities that it supported. The plant's role as part of an instrumental system both influences and is influenced by the relationships the people in and around that mill have with their environment as a place and collection of places, and the relationships between those environmental values and the ideological and hierarchical makeup of their communities. Similarly, the nearby reservoirs upstream on the same river functioned as both part of the same instrumental system and significant places. Those reservoirs were components in the system as a process of flows and exchanges, maintaining flows in the river to generate electricity to power the surrounding community and distant markets and storing water supply for agricultural lands outside of town that would generate products to be shipped to other cities and countries. But the reservoirs also functioned as places of respite and recreation for the people working along the power and water system and living in nearby communities, who retreat to the placid waters upstream from the impacts of the dams and the farms on the river for leisure and relaxation, and to experience outdoor recreation like fishing, swimming and camping with their families and friends. The processes and the places on the river system are related and often enmeshed themselves, especially as they are experienced by the people who utilize the instrumental systems.

But despite their mutuality, these place-based and system-based frameworks create constant tensions. Social scientists, including those in fields that utilize socio-ecological systems approaches, have at times avoided the concept of place in their studies, "and thus have sidetracked the sensory, aesthetic, and environmental components of the urbanized world in favor of more quantifiable research with fewer epistemological problems."⁵⁹ Even in river histories, where scholars have consciously

⁵⁸ Paula Maarika Schönach, "River Histories: A Thematic Review," *Water History*, 9:3 (2017), 233-257.

⁵⁹ Hayden, *The Power of Place*, 18.

tried to reconcile these two approaches, challenges remain in “trying to understand rivers as flows that crossed borders and that drew from, and were related to, wider global processes,” demonstrating a “necessary tension between human and environmental change at the intersection of different spatial scales, while also sensitively treating the many cultural associations of place.”⁶⁰

Often, a process-based approach to environmental systems like rivers will draw attention and focus away from the rivers as places or collections of places, while place-based approaches can center defined locations while backgrounding the connective processes between them. When approached as instrumental systems, environments have clear functions for the people who utilize and instrumentalize them: power, transportation, food source, waste disposal site, irrigation source. But the spatial boundaries become more nebulous, and in many cases the analysis is meant to make people rethink their assumptions about divisions like city and hinterlands,⁶¹ river and dams.⁶² Because an instrumental systems approach functions at various temporal and spatial scales, a place or places and their meanings can be secondary to the process they’re connected to. However, the place-based approach has the opposite problem. Places are typically location-specific, with either definable and definitive boundaries or at least features that are part of the place and its significance. You are in a neighborhood or you are not, and you are in a city or you are not. You are standing in a river or you are not. On the other hand, the meanings, significance and functions of those places are often varied and contradictory, dependent on who is experiencing them. Those functions shift over time depending on the ideological and hierarchical values of the society that constructs and uses the place, and the meanings are not grounded in any essential form of truth. A river as a process can be both functionally definitive and spatially nebulous, with the function informing the space that is necessary in the analysis. A river as a place can be spatially definitive and functionally nebulous, with the space informing the function. While the two approaches inform one another, they are also constantly in states of tension and struggle.

A different, and perhaps more direct, tension exists between this notion of place and systems frameworks when considered with the critique of wilderness as pure nature discussed above. While not explicitly explored in the literature that asserts these critiques, arguments about purity as the absence of nature suggest these wild places defined by their purity to be almost placeless. A place is both meaning and matter, and as environmental historians often clarify, meaning and matter can have a dialectical relationship through the process of history, one which results in the formation of places. If traces of human history and work are erased from the landscape, a particular sense of place and the collective memories tied to that sense are obscured or lost. The critiques of wilderness suggest that the imposition of purity as the dominant value to define a wild place is ultimately problematic because it creates a kind of paradox

⁶⁰ Evenden, “Beyond the Organic Machine?” 699.

⁶¹ Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis*.

⁶² White, *Organic Machine*.

where these places are separated from the things that give them their value and identity as places at all.

This paradox is today debated by scholars of natural resources and restoration ecology, who identify it as one born of the dual mandates to preserve natural places for public use.⁶³ For them, the preservation paradox is one wherein a mandate to protect or restore the landscape's ecology and natural environment exists in constant conflict with a mandate to facilitate public access or public use. That paradox is also an expression of the tensions between places and systems on multiple levels. The mandate to protect nature is one to maintain the resilience of an ecological system, free of harmful impacts from people and social systems. The mandate to facilitate access is one to maintain the landscape as a place, one where people come to have experiences that help define and reinforce values. And it gets more complex, as the place's identity and popularity connect it to larger social systems of commerce and ideological systems of identity, while the maintenance and improvement of those ecological systems inform the identity of that place as the system is managed to adhere to human values. These tensions become even more complex in wilderness restoration, where a "paradox of wilderness management" requires agencies managing a wilderness to simultaneously "maintain wild landscape and to manage for natural conditions."⁶⁴ The wild and natural character of the landscape refers to the placeless place of wilderness, one where human systems or processes either do not exist or are invisible. Yet the maintenance and management of those conditions require human intervention, with such a deliberate act of environmental change implying the imposition of human values onto the landscape and thus an attempt to construct a place – even if it is a natural place, free of the traces of the placemakers.

But this condition of placelessness in the wilderness was not necessarily inevitable or even intended in the Stanislaus River canyon or the Emigrant Wilderness. An American vision of wilderness emerged in the early 20th Century which allowed – at least in practice – for these human components of place to remain in the wilds. Furthermore, the legislative and bureaucratic definitions of wilderness which came later in the century would allow for them too – at least for a while. American historian Roderick Nash detailed this early-century definition of wilderness in his landmark study on the history of wilderness in the American consciousness, describing a three-pronged myth or "cult"⁶⁵ of wilderness. A product of the violent and traumatic arrival of industrial modernity onto the landscapes and peoples of the West, that cult envisioned the wilderness as a place that incorporated symbols of the country's

⁶³ Karen Mudar, "The Preservation Paradox: How to Manage Cultural Resources in Wilderness? An Example from the National Park Service," *International Journal of Wilderness*, 26:3 (December 2020), <https://ijw.org/preservation-paradox-cultural-resources-wilderness/>; Junyang Deng, Yaoqi Zhang and John Schelhas, (National Parks: The Paradise or Paradox," *ASEAN Journal on Hospitality and Tourism*, 6:20 (July-December 2007), 131-146.

⁶⁴ William Throop and Rebecca Purdom, "Wilderness Restoration: The Paradox of Public Participation," *Restoration Ecology*, 14: 4 (December 2006), 493–499.

⁶⁵ Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 141-160.

seemingly lost frontier past, its supposedly decaying primitive sensibilities, and a romantic aesthetic that combined a pristine grandeur with the spiritual or divine. This cult, Nash argued, emerged in the American imagination to replace what was previously a long-understood picture of wilderness as a place absent of the necessities of civilization – order, morality, control, humanity.⁶⁶

While useful to consider how and when the engineered landscapes covered in this dissertation emerged as wilderness places, Nash's framework has significant flaws as it also fails to consider the complex relationship between California's early wilderness movement and indigenous histories. The former required a violent rupture to the latter, as conquest and colonial violence made way for the very construction of these wild places as settings for largely white, middle-class leisure. Not only was this true for both the Emigrant and the Stanislaus River canyon, but the formation of their wilderness character required both an erasure of indigenous pasts at certain times and romantic appropriation of such pasts at others. Thus, the later chapters in this dissertation bring in additional scholarship on tourism, native erasure, and public lands to update and complicate Nash's framework.

Still, Nash identified and articulated a moment when American conservationists constructed the wilderness as a place with meaning and import, instead of an open vessel lacking such things.⁶⁷ The federal Wilderness Act of 1964 enshrined this idea into law, allowing for the preservation of American landscapes that boasted what the law referred to as the "character" of wilderness.⁶⁸ Only a few years later, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968 extended the same preservation powers to America's waterways, looking to save those "free-flowing" rivers that held the "values" that would make them wild and scenic.⁶⁹ In both cases, these wild attributes – whether they be character or values – were nebulously defined, and remain the object of legal, regulatory and political contestation. This project is the story of two of those contests, as preservationists and conservationists worked diligently, if not always successfully, to preserve wild places while allowing for at least some presence of human agency to remain along the Stanislaus River and in the Emigrant Wilderness.

Nash's contributions to understanding wilderness as a historical artifact are also important to this project in a more complicated way. Along with being a scholar of wilderness, Nash was an advocate specifically for protection of the Stanislaus River. In a 1979 contribution to the magazine *Sierra*, Nash argued that the dam which ultimately drowned the river's rapids was an "unnecessary lake that would take so much from so many."⁷⁰ One of those things it would take was the setting for Nash's own family memories, as the historian described a tradition of easter egg hunts along the banks of the canyon during early spring runs. These hunts took place long before

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 8-22.

⁶⁸ An Act to establish a National Wilderness Preservation System for the permanent good of the whole people, and for other purposes, Pub. L. No. 88-577, 78 Stat. 890 (1964).

⁶⁹ An Act to Provide for a National Wild and Scenic Rivers System, and for Other Purposes, Pub. L. No. 90-542, 82 Stat. 906 (1968).

⁷⁰ Roderick Nash, "Of Rivers, Dams and Easter Eggs," in *Sierra*, September/October 1979.

the Stanislaus was a national symbol, he wrote, though he suspected some of the candy eggs they used remained hidden. “We wonder if anyone will care,” Nash lamented of the loss of such places.⁷¹

The same may hold true for another historian of the American West whose work is perhaps becoming increasingly obscured by time. W. Turrentine Jackson co-authored a historical study in 1979 of the Stanislaus River’s development. This project cites Jackson’s study throughout, as it is a rare, deep dive into the river that looks beyond its role as a symbol for wild rivers. But with Nash, Jackson’s work may also function as a primary source, telling us something about his own side in this intellectual battle over the meaning of wildness. In the preface of his study, he declares the document to be an antidote to the kinds of headlines that can “obliterate our sense of history.”⁷² Here, those headlines included the ones atop Nash’s piece – seemingly non-scholarly, emotional appeals to an idea of wilderness that should not apply to cultural landscapes. Instead, he and co-author Stephen D. Mikesell attempted, “detachment of historical analysis to achieve a measure of the equanimity behind the passions of the day, to achieve a rational perspective on the debate over water use priorities for the Stanislaus River. Our fundamental goal was to lay out the facts objectively and dispassionately.”⁷³ So while Nash and Jackson provide this project with historiography and frameworks to think about the history of wilderness, they may also be considered participants in, and contributors to, the discourse hashing out what makes a place wild.

So along with binding California’s water history to its wilderness history, a goal of this project is to explore the messy tensions that exist between understanding, envisioning and imagining the Stanislaus River canyon and the Emigrant Wilderness simultaneously as systems, places and wildernesses. Both were themselves socio-ecological systems (and part of larger such systems) that enmeshed cultural, economic, social and ecological processes and components. As systems, they were products of human engineering, capital and the labor of those who physically built the infrastructure that would facilitate the construction of wilderness. Both were also places that held immense collective and individual meanings for those who lived, worked and played in them, making them larger symbols for ideal versions of nature. In later chapters, this study will engage further with scholarship specifically linking the creation and maintenance of identity, both personal and collective, and the kinds of activities popular in these wild places with recreationists. This is especially true with fishing and horse packing in the Emigrant Wilderness, which would help establish strong association between the basin and an idealized western past, as well as rafting and sightseeing in the Stanislaus River canyon, which would eventually function for its advocates and visitors as an outdoor museum and a kind of sacred respite from modern stresses. In both places, those identities drew heavily on idealized notions of a

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Jackson and Mikesell, *The Stanislaus River Drainage Basin and the New Melones Dam*, iii.

⁷³ Ibid.

mythic and static past, and thus scholarship on ritual, power and identity in both museums and outdoor spaces will inform the analysis.

Ultimately, wild nature as an idea in these two places was the product of discourse and contestation, where conflicting values, uses and ideologies clashed to produce a messy and contradictory vision for what exactly constitutes the proper character of a wilderness. These cases offer two examples of how the construction of wilderness was not just the imposition of placelessness onto previously human landscapes in the public imagination, but was also a physical effort to materially construct natural places through social processes. The construction of wilderness here was a process of naturalizing places, one blending matter and discourse, and one that – in two separate wildernesses – envisioned dams as part of nature in some moments and as incompatible with nature in others.

Building the Wilderness: Electric power and the construction of wilderness

The second chapter of this project tells the story of the Stanislaus Electric Power Company, its rise out of tragedy and controversy in the first decade of the 20th Century, and its eventual fall due to economic and environmental disasters. It begins with the mysterious disappearance of an unstable and unsavory miner named Windsor Keefer who was reportedly on the verge of expanding his personal interests into a larger, more diversified venture involving water, power, land, agriculture, timber and leisure in the central Sierra Nevada mountains. The chapter tells how his former business partner and additional successor would try to shake his precarious public persona while building on his vision to pursue one of the largest power and infrastructure projects in the state. The project was meant to include a large power plant on the Stanislaus River, fed by high-Sierra reservoirs and a network of flumes and canals to move the water across multiple forks in the watershed. By maneuvering to improve their public images, and by leveraging family connections to stabilize their financial position, leaders of the Stanislaus company would attract large infusions of eastern capital for the project after the disappearance. But the precarity of Keefer's personality would persist like a specter over the project, with capricious environmental and economic conditions of California's gold country in the early century creating instability. A series of calamities from 1906 to 1909 enabled controversial capitalists to buy out the Stanislaus project and leave its principals near financial and physical ruin.

This chapter tells a familiar story of capitalism in early California in the form of the state's early 20th Century hydroelectric boom. It is situated in existing historical scholarship that explores how this brief era of energy development temporally linked the disruptive Gold Rush of the previous generation to the irrigation boom of the coming decades. This brief era also saw the forging of infrastructural links between the growing markets in the state's urban centers, its developing agriculture industry and its mining hinterlands which had largely been forgotten for years. And with the economic and environmental change came social change, as boosters and investors associated new, modern approaches to settlement and farming with gendered and racialized visions of domesticity and home building.

Chapter two shares mythologized images of individual entrepreneurs setting out to pursue fortune and success through engineering and extraction of resources among capricious physical and economic environments. Those individuals could be impulsive, unscrupulous and improvisational in their approaches, leaving victims in the wake of their violent or underhanded tactics as they pursued their interests. But the story ends with the failure and near ruin of those individuals, as larger and more established capitalists with access to greater resources and international connections ultimately seized control of the resources and infrastructure necessary to extract them for the economic rewards. What started out in the imagination of a single, crooked miner would end up part of a regional water and power system monopolized by a behemoth utility company. This story of capital, development and monopoly would mirror in its arc similar stories of the Gold Rush before it and agribusiness after it. And the infrastructure itself would also serve as a physical and material connection between the two stages of California's history, building on the ditches and flumes of the hydraulickers and offering both inspiration and capital support to the irrigators who came after. In a sense, this chapter opens where many environmental stories along America's rivers end – with a river as an industrial place defined by production and extraction, a place clearly outside the gaze of the growing conservation movement at the century's turn.

Chapter three shifts the focus to roadways, built and improved by teams of laborers during the first decade of the 20th Century to facilitate completion of the Stanislaus hydroelectric power system. For business interests and boosters in the region, these roads were the initial steps toward modernity which could bring a wild and precarious environment to heel as men, machines and animals would work in otherwise precipitous and hazardous landscapes to tame their conditions and make them safer for travel, commerce and industry. Existing scholarship suggests this and other extractive and transformative industries in the region at this time utilized modern organizational systems to mobilize and control human labor through social and racial rationalization of the workplace. And observers of this effective and efficient work would predict ancillary benefits for the region, opening it up to other forms of economic development and even tourism by making some of its otherwise remote but scenic reaches more accessible to a wider public.

While these roadways gave capitalists along the Stanislaus the necessary footing to achieve their visions in such remote country, they also served as access for other, less-expected uses. Both the Emigrant Wilderness and the Stanislaus River canyon would have been otherwise detached and inaccessible locales without the roads to Camp Nine from Vallecito and to Relief Reservoir from the Sonora-Mono throughway. These roads were completed early in the project to allow people and materials to reach the construction sites for the main power plant and storage facility. Decades after their construction, outdoor enthusiasts with boats, horses, boots and other equipment would use these routes to explore the wilds of the central Sierra, helping to transform them from spaces of industrial extraction to places of serenity, recreation, scenic beauty and transcendental experiences with nature. Among the earliest to do this were the workers themselves, who with their families, neighbors and

occasional outsiders, regularly used the infrastructure for their own outdoor leisure and founded a longer tradition of recreational uses that would inform the later wilderness identities of the Stanislaus and Emigrant.

Chapter four shifts focus to the hydraulic and power infrastructure itself, exploring the completion of the dams, power plants, flumes, ditches and power lines that would make up the Stanislaus hydroelectric system. During and after construction of the system, local and regional supporters of the individual project and of the greater hydroelectricity movement lauded such development for its size and scope and as a symbol of modern progress. Not only would this system be itself state-of-the-art design, built with the latest technologies in power and work, but it would facilitate the growth and advancement in electricity and its uses in a region and state where that form of power was still spreading. These triumphalist discussions and descriptions of the system would reflect an ideology driving the hydroelectric movement that unquestionably celebrated rationalistic scientific management and application of recent technology to the water resources in California. Existing scholarship has connected this high modernism – explored in this chapter through a definition offered by James Scott – and water in the West. But those analyses are often focused on the later irrigation and reclamation movements of the oft-discussed Hydraulic Era. The Stanislaus project suggests the hydroelectric boom of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was a precursor to that era in its zeal in using scientific rationality for economic and social production to improve both human and wild natures.

And yet, that high-modernist zeal for the power of technology to positively transform society and nature would extend beyond the region's electrical grid. As the conservation and preservation movements of the 20th Century progressed, people who helped develop the Stanislaus River actively applied modernist ideas and methods to recreational development, constructing dams to improve and build natural habitat and improve ecological systems. In the Emigrant Basin, sportsmen would complete many small structures known as check dams along the alpine waterways to construct a self-sustaining trout fishery. And decades later, federal reclamation officials would compile a plan to use a massive, multi-purpose dam on the Stanislaus River to improve the quality and quantity of the lower river's fish habitat and boating environments. In both cases, people imagined human engineering as a legitimate way to build and improve upon ecological systems and habitats and construct ideal recreation zones to experience wilderness adventures and scenic beauty. These efforts suggest a close relationship between rationalistic modern development and wilderness preservation.

Chapter five moves from the construction of systems, roads and dams as the material components of the wilderness to the construction of very notion wilderness itself – its meaning more than its matter. The chapter uses the work of historian Roderick Nash – whose scholarship on nature, ethics and the environment in American history served as a precursor to environmental history – to consider what specific components of the Emigrant basin facilitated its transition from an industrial space and working landscape to a popular wilderness place. In his work on the historical underpinnings of wilderness preservation in 20th Century America, Nash identified what he called a cult of wilderness that detailed what wilderness meant to the

conservation-minded public of the United States near the turn of that century. According to Nash, wilderness simultaneously functioned as three things: a place to recapture man's primitive inclination; the embodiment of a lost life lived by those who peopled it; a place of aesthetic beauty and spiritual significance tied to the purity and grandeur of its scenery. All three symbols brought with them a kind of activity or expectation for those who visited and wished to preserve these wilderness places, be it rigorous sport and recreation to recapture the primitive spirit, rugged experiences and a sense of timelessness to bring a mythic past back to life, or cultivated scenes and visuals in the landscape to center its scenic grandeur.

This fifth chapter then explores how the Emigrant Basin and its adjacent gateways fit within these categories decades before the backcountry was designated as official wilderness in the 1970s. Thanks to the completion of the check dams and a system of fish planting, the Emigrant Basin was lauded as early as the 1930s as a backcountry fishing paradise. Its popularity was largely connected to sportsmen conservation efforts in both the region and the state, where fishermen and hunters sought to locate, cultivate and preserve environments where men (mostly white) could reconnect with their more primordial instincts through intimate connections with the natural world achieved by physical struggles with animals in their wild habitats.

Pulling in existing literature on capitalist tourism, the relationship between fishing and identity, and the extermination and erasure of indigenous presence in the West's public lands, this chapter also explores how the Emigrant Basin and its popular gateway of Kennedy Meadows became commodified symbols of California's pioneer past and its place in the story of Westward expansion. The basin and later the wilderness was named for the American travelers of European descent who crossed the Sierra peaks in the 19th Century as part of their settlement of the West. Traces of these travelers, both in place names and in physical monuments left behind, marked the landscape and experiences within it. The trip into the basin also involved pack animals and horses, and the trails passed rudimentary cabins and structures built for high-country ranching and grazing in what remained a working landscape and symbol of an era of agriculture before California's modern, industrialized farming sector. Boosters and managers of the Emigrant later centered these emigrant and ranching histories in ways that marginalized and erased the landscape's indigenous past while romanticizing the westward emigrant. Finally, the dynamic landscape of bright, vertical granite, lush meadows and sparkling alpine waterways would combine with a country-and-western style popular in midcentury American culture to offer a unique aesthetic experience for its visitors and protectors. Long before the U.S. Congress deemed the place officially the Emigrant Wilderness, the basin and its adjacent gateways functioned for its enthusiasts and advocates as an idea place for recreation which fit Nash's notion of the wilderness cult.

Chapter six applies the same three-pronged concept of the wilderness cult to the Stanislaus River canyon, which emerged later in the 1960s and 1970s as not only a popular wilderness place but a nationwide symbol for wild river preservation. Like the Emigrant Basin, the river was closely tied to a seemingly pre-modern form of recreation as its canyon stretches became the most popular white water for rafters and

kayakers in the American West. While other forms of recreation were popular in the canyon – hiking, cave exploration, fishing, swimming – rafting would dominate both the management and the experiences for visitors. The Stanislaus River was also a place with an identity closely tied to a mythical American frontier past, with guides, visitors and other enthusiasts often referring to it as an outdoor museum for all the remains and artifacts left behind from its human history. Unlike the Emigrant, this lost past often placed indigenous peoples as central to its identity. But even when recognizing Miwok history, river advocates and enthusiasts utilized that history in ways that at times conflicted with and objectified indigenous communities. Pulling from scholarship on the ritual experience of waterways as well as heritage sites and museums, this chapter explores how river proponents would combine a generic sense of spirituality from this indigenous heritage with the vertical, scenic beauty of the river gorge to produce a unique aesthetic along the canyon that for rafters and visitors was spiritually transcendent. Despite the public failures on the part of river advocates and activists to preserve the Stanislaus officially as a wild river, it was clearly experienced and understood as not just a singular wilderness place but a symbol for wilderness everywhere.

Chapter seven explores how a different, singular notion – that of purity – came to be tied to the idea and identity of wilderness and wildness in both the Stanislaus River canyon and the Emigrant Wilderness. Different than a multifaceted vision of wilderness identified that potentially made room for human history and human traces in wild places, purity in wilderness suggests that nature in its primordial form be set apart from human use and modification. A pure wilderness is one in which no permanent traces exist or modern systems operate – a condition that was not consistent with the engineered and controlled waterways of the Stanislaus or Emigrant. In some ways, both examples serve as case studies to support the critiques environmental scholars have for this idea of purity in wilderness as both a myth and a problem for history and environmental ethics.

But these examples also can expand and complicate the critique, specifically considering that the purity ideals tied to these places came about through discourse and rhetorical contests between opposed interests. Purity emerged as a central ideal from contests over the meaning of nature in these cases more than it drove the contests over that meaning. This chapter will explore those contests, which in both cases centered the question of whether dams can be compatible with wilderness. In the Emigrant, those dams were the structures built to facilitate and sustain the wild trout fishery. On the Stanislaus, they were the structures above Camp Nine that kept the water level relatively steady, navigable and predictable. The chapter explores how environments in the Sierra Nevada could simultaneously be among the most developed, engineered and controlled while also inspiring some of the earliest and most successful efforts for preserving wilderness. And in concluding with the Stanislaus River canyon and its high-country infrastructure as integral parts of both symbolic and designated wilderness places, this project seeks to reverse the kind of declension narrative that has long been typical of environmental histories along America's rivers.

In pursuing these analyses, this dissertation draws on literature from various fields and disciplines: history, journalism, narrative non-fiction, sociology, political ecology, geography, natural resource management, anthropology, and others that use frameworks blending humanistic inquiry and natural sciences. It exclusively uses archival sources to tell stories and build arguments about the past. Though numerous individuals whose words and stories are quoted in the pages of this study are alive now or were alive at the time of this research, a central piece of this project's argument is that the events, people and places discussed here are all components in a single story. In telling that story, this project seeks to maintain narrative and methodological consistency by drawing from the same types of data sources. A comprehensive project to reconstruct any of these pieces through oral history or journalistic interviews – especially the Stanislaus Canyon and New Melones fight – is a project worthy of its own consideration. But applying such methods here would have given more weight to the perspectives of contemporary voices as they coexisted with the voices of the past that can no longer revise or reconsider.

Most of the primary source material cited in this project comes from a handful of archival collections located in California and visited between 2015 and 2023. The main administrative office for the Stanislaus National Forest in Sonora maintains extensive history files. Those files, many of which were organized and curated by past forest historian Pamela Conners, included data related to development along the Stanislaus River, the construction and maintenance of the Emigrant Wilderness check dams and other management issues in the national forest and wilderness. The local historical societies in both Tuolumne County and Calaveras County also maintain extensive archival collections, including the Fred Leighton Files, used for this project. The California State Library owns a collection of corporate records and other files related to the Stanislaus Electric Power Company. The Bancroft Library at U.C. Berkely houses two separate collections related to the Stanislaus River canyon and the fight to protect it: the personal papers of activism icon Mark Dubois and historical files of the preservation organization Friends of the River Foundation. The personal collection of Thorne B. Gray – a late journalist whose work mostly at the *Modesto Bee* newspaper focused heavily on environmental and water issues like New Melones – are kept among the special collections at U.C. Davis. Also important to this project were the private collections of Martin Blake, who for decades curated and maintained a museum and archive of material focusing on the Stanislaus River. Since Blake's passing, some of that material was handed over to the library at Columbia College in California. And this project also utilized a digital collection of images and sources known as the Stanislaus River Archive (StanislausRiver.org), which continues to build what could be a lasting presence for the memories of the lost canyon. Finally, articles from newspapers and other periodicals, and many of the government and literary sources cited throughout, were pulled from disparate archives, libraries and databases accessed both digitally and in-person. As many of these collections contain content focused on the same events and places, some of the sources can be found in multiple places.

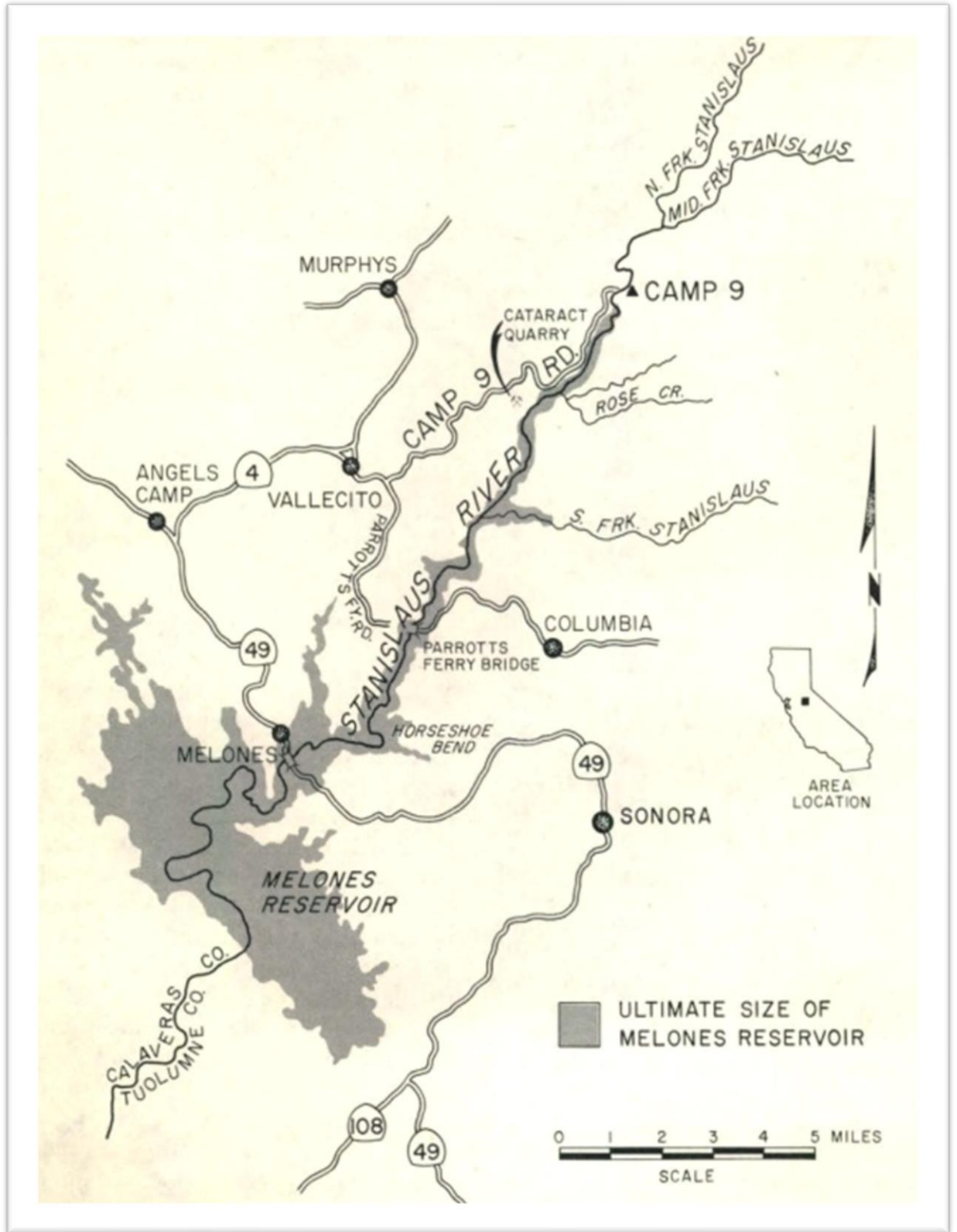


Figure 1: The Stanislaus River canyon and local access roads before completion of New Melones Reservoir. California Department of Conservation, 1979.



Figure 2: The Stanislaus River at Camp Nine, 1978. Martin Blake, courtesy of Columbia College Special Collections and Stanislaus River Archive (stanislausriver.org).



A Place to Learn Teamwork

Figure 3: A group rafting on a rapid along the Stanislaus River. Tyler Childress, courtesy of Columbia College Special Collections and Stanislaus River Archive (stanislausriver.org).

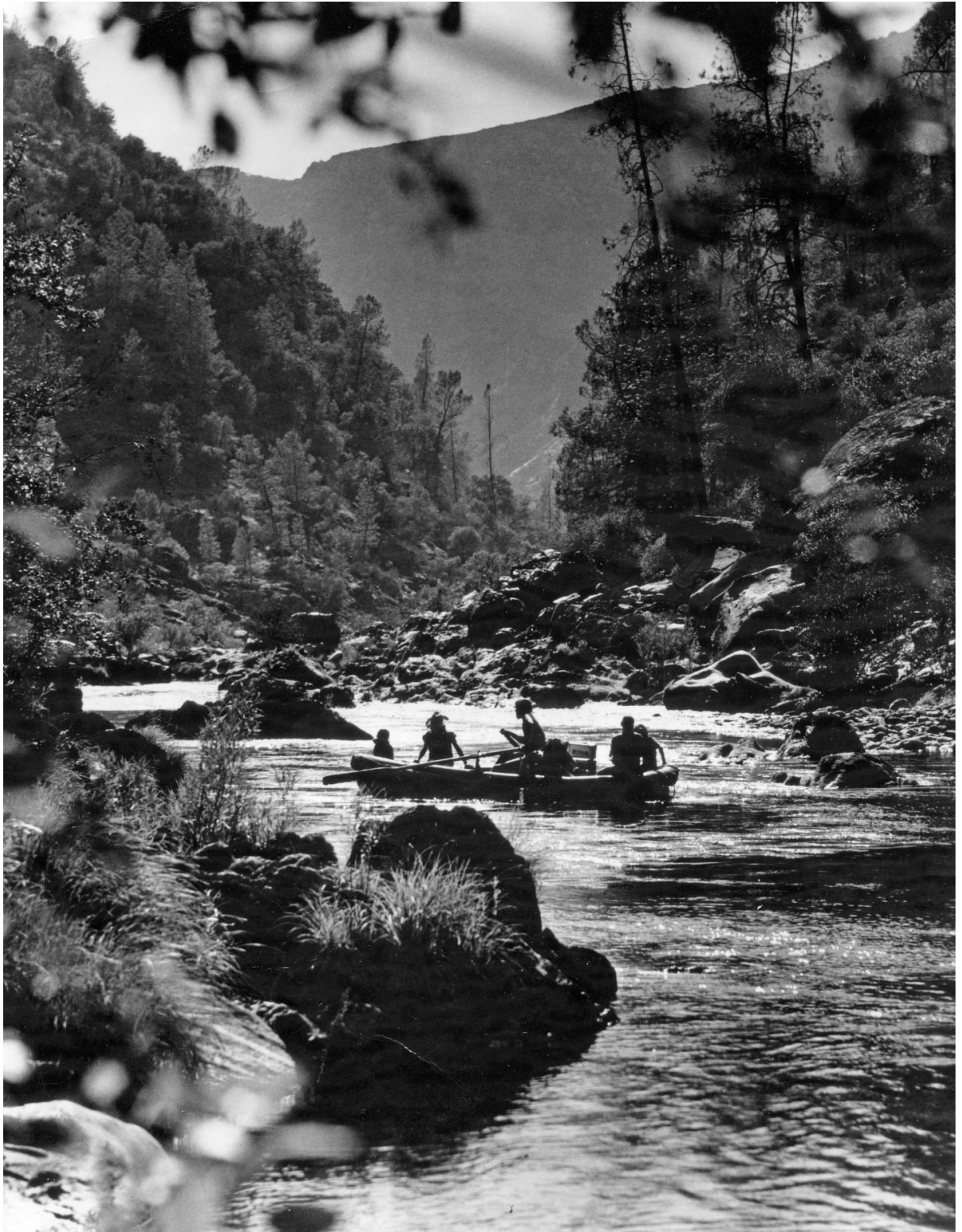


Figure 4: Rafting along the Stanislaus River canyon, 1971. ARTA, courtesy of Stanislaus River Archive (stanislausriver.org).

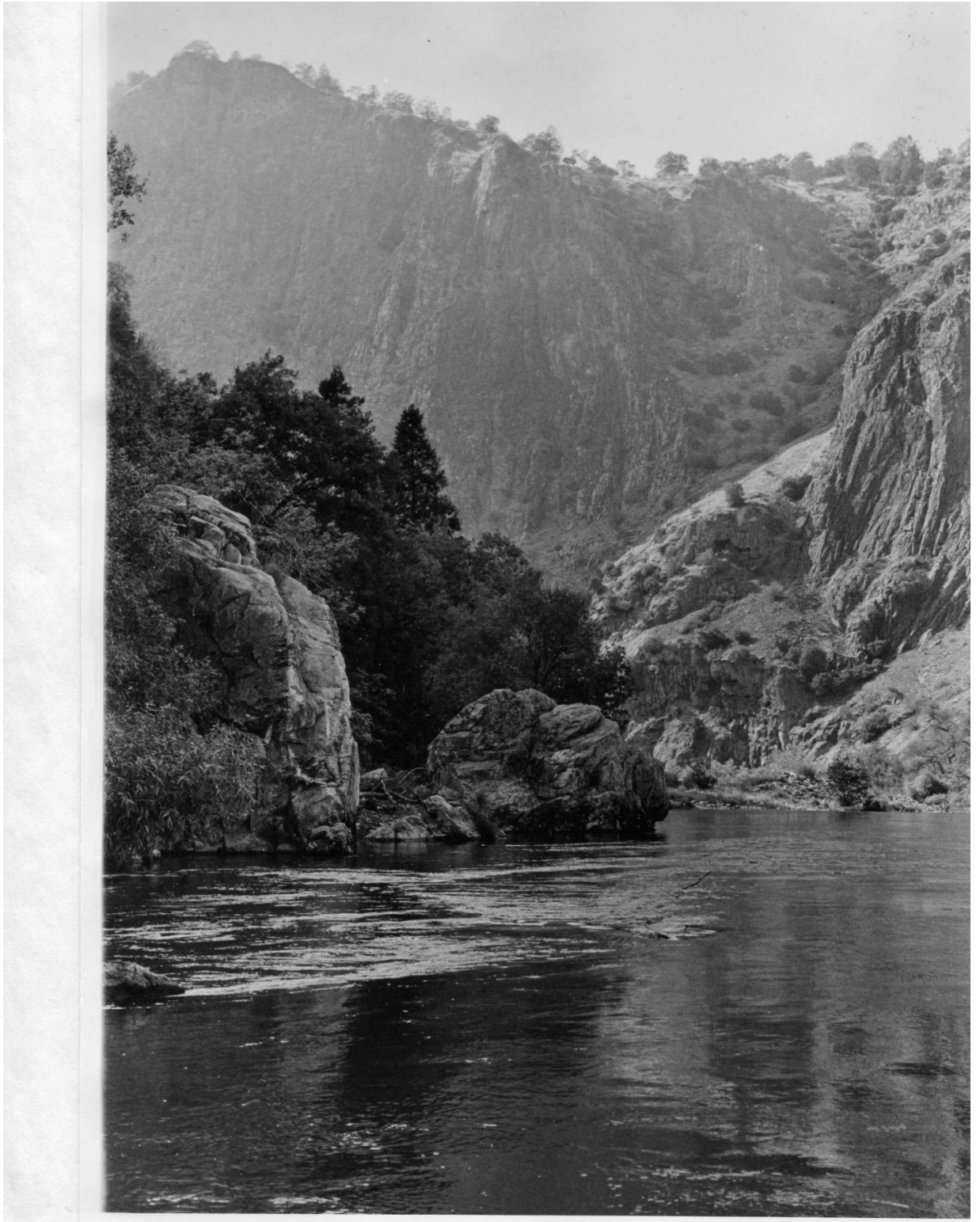


Figure 5: Vertical limestone walls of the Stanislaus River canyon. Courtesy of Columbia College Special Collections.

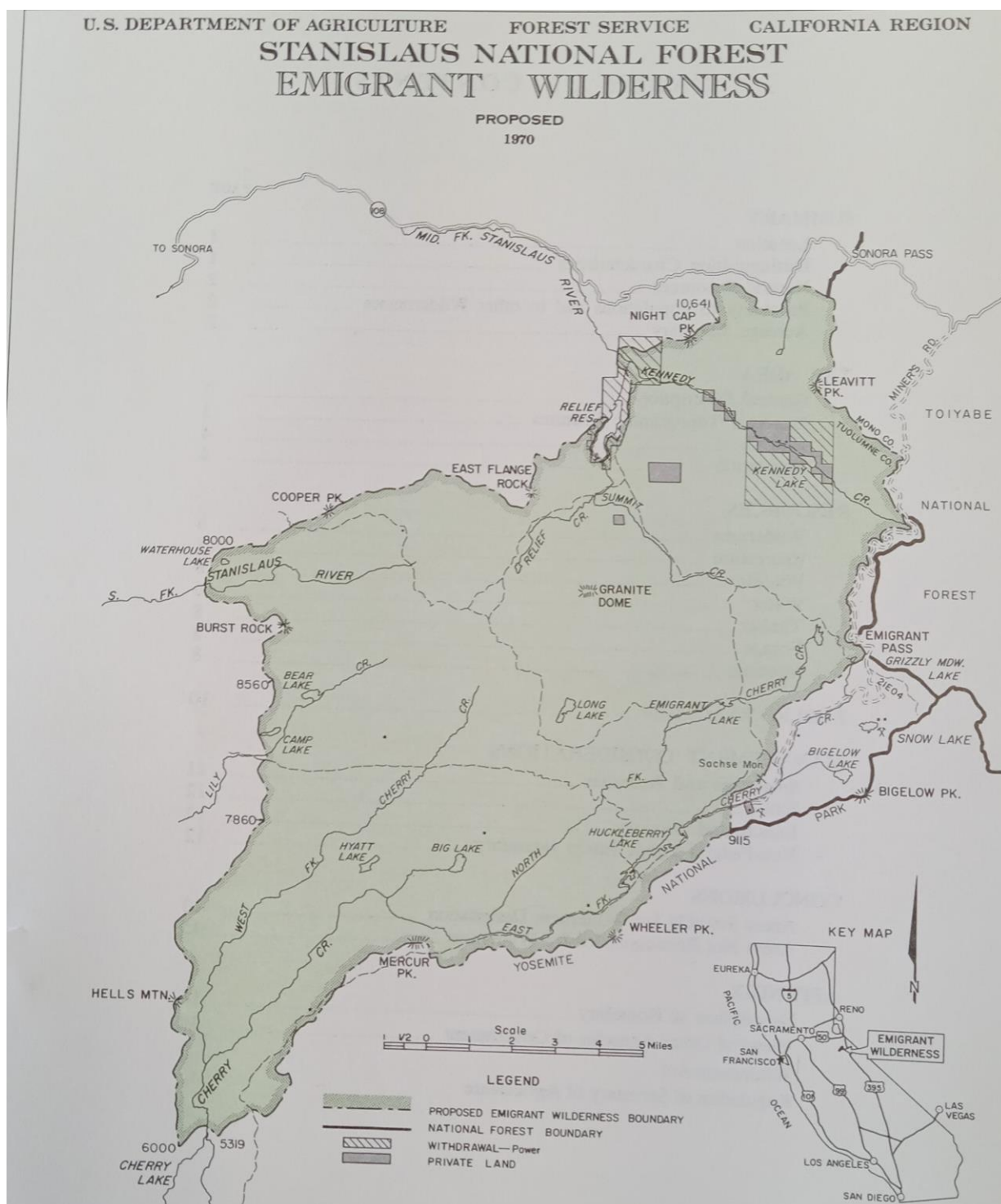


Figure 6: US Forest Service map of the Emigrant Wilderness, 1971. Courtesy of USDA Forest Service, Stanislaus National Forest.



Figure 7: Huckleberry Lake, 1936. Fred Leighton, courtesy of USDA Forest Service, Stanislaus National Forest.



Figure 8: Sachse Dome near Huckleberry Lake, 1936. Fred Leighton, USDA Forest Service, Stanislaus National Forest.

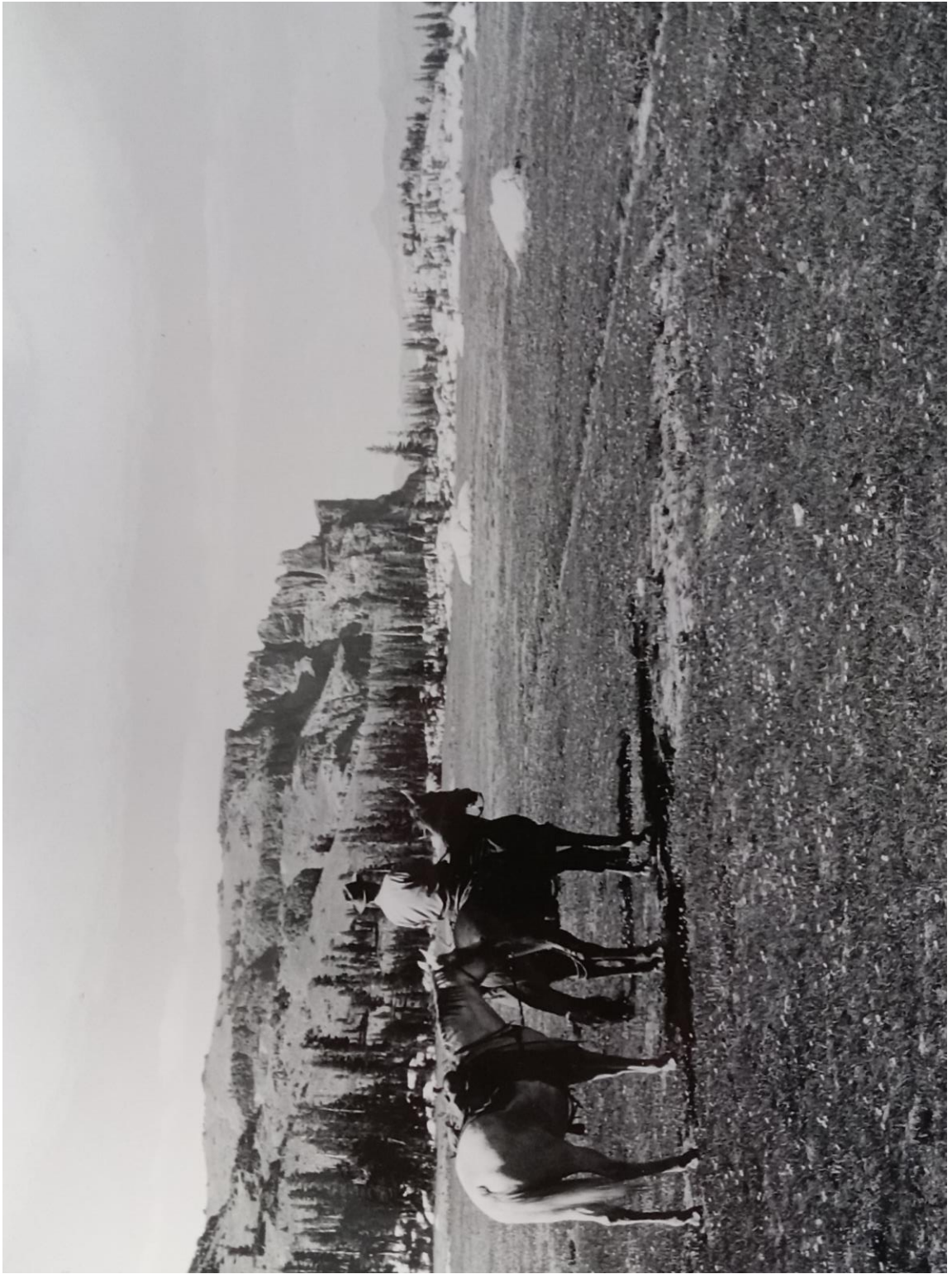


Figure 9: In an Emigrant Wilderness meadow, with horses. Courtesy of USDA Forest Service, Stanislaus National Forest.



Figure 10: Log Cabin and Horses at Kennedy Lake, date unknown. Courtesy of USDA Forest Service, Stanislaus National Forest.

L. N. Plane
 RECREATION
 RECREATION SURVEY
 INVENTORY

FIELD RECONNAISSANCE SHEET

EMIGRANT BASIN
PRIMITIVE AREA

FOREST STANISLAUS RANGER DISTRICT SUMMIT SITE NO 43

SITE NAME LOWER EMIGRANT LAKE PHOTO NO Me 21: 6-7; SITE SYMBOL ○
FAM. 412

DATE 8/25/37 BY F. A. MEYER MAP OR QUAD Dardanelles - 5

DEVELOPMENT Existing Potential USE OR SLOPE CLASS Campground Special Use

LOCATION: T 4 N R 21 E S 30 MER M.D. GENERAL On northwest side of Emigrant Lake near foot

AREA OWNERSHIP AND CAPACITY

OWNERSHIP	CAMPGROUND				SPECIAL USE				TOTAL			
	EXISTING		POTENTIAL		EXISTING		POTENTIAL		EXISTING		POTENTIAL	
	Acres	Cap.	Acres	Cap.	Acres	Cap.	Acres	Cap.	Acres	Cap.	Acres	Cap.
GOV'T			1	12								
PRIVATE												
TOTAL												

REMARKS 3 separate spots - only one being QUALITY Excellent Good Fair Poor
right on shore. Volunteer camping

WATER
 Spring; Lake Ad. up to 1000 ft. Gravity Pump Government Private
 Source Volume Distance Service Ownership

ELEVATION 8750 SLOPE % 1 SURFACE Sm.

COVER (Kind, Density) L P (clump at each site); Mountain Hemlock and Western White Pine
nearby

ACCESSIBILITY Trails from Kennedy Meadows and Pine Crest
0

HAZARDS (Fire, Insects, Snakes, Fluctuating stream, etc.) _____

SERVICES, DISTANCE (Post Office, Store, etc.) 16 mi. from road - IN PRIMITIVE AREA

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION (Attractions on or nearby) _____
Beautiful subalpine lake, nearly 2 miles long, surrounded by nearly-bare granite.
Good fishing. Nights chilly.
Good horse feed nearby.
Suggest 3 camp units.

Figure 11: Report on potential of an Emigrant Basin site for backcountry recreation, including notes on fishing, scenery and availability of feed for horses. Courtesy of USDA Forest Service, Stanislaus National Forest.



Figure 12: New Melones Dam. Courtesy of US Bureau of Reclamation.



Mark Dubois chained on the banks of the rising Stanislaus, May 16-18, 1979.

Figure 13: Mark Dubois, river activist who chained himself to a boulder in the Stanislaus River canyon to protest New Melones Dam, 1979. Courtesy of Columbia College Special Collections and Stanislaus River Archive.

CHAPTER II

HYDROELECTRICITY AND CAPITAL ON THE STANISLAUS RIVER

The search for Windsor A. Keefer took its participants deep into the wilds of central California. But the area was not wild due to some untouched or pristine condition. It was instead defined by its precarity and unpredictability. Those who searched for Keefer combed areas that were heavily modified by human hands and human deliberation, and those human impacts contributed greatly to the landscape's capriciousness.

Keefer was one of the men who modified the foothills of central California before disappearing in April 1897. In washing away hillsides to seek riches during California's midcentury gold rush, the 20-year mining veteran – himself a capricious, mercurial and precarious figure – was partly responsible for the unpredictability of the land where he was lost. But Keefer also held a forward-looking vision of what these California landscapes could be, one he shared with capitalists in the region seeking to transform what still seemed like a wild frontier into a more ordered and productive place. (See Figure 14)

The primary leader of the search for Keefer was a man named Longstreth, another longtime miner in Calaveras County and family friend who had a long and complicated relationship with Keefer. Robert Douglas, another local miner, acquaintance of Keefer's and expert in navigating the diggings, joined Longstreth in the search. That search required geographic expertise and specific knowledge of the workings within the remnant scars of the gold rush that completely upended the central Sierra foothills socially, economically, geographically and ecologically after the precious metal was first discovered by emigrants in 1848. The search required localized knowledge of the shafts and pits of the gold fields – some abandoned, some left idle, some still working – which were understood by many now as spaces “fraught with constant danger.”⁷⁴

At times the searchers used a windlass and rope to lower each man slowly into shafts and tunnels as deep as 200 or 300 feet.⁷⁵ In an attempt to prevent suffocation from the toxic gasses that could accumulate in such places, Longstreth and Douglas lowered before their descent a small, burning torch made of dried local grasses, which would hopefully extinguish when contacting drifts air devoid of oxygen.⁷⁶ And then, assuming the air had enough oxygen to support their pursuit in the shafts and tunnels barely big enough at times for them to traverse, the men contended with the lagging and rotting timber supports holding back the slowly collapsing earth. Should they reach their destinations at the end of the shafts, they would often come to pools of

⁷⁴ “Bullet Holes in a Hat Tell of Keefer's Fate,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 28, 1897, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*; “Jupiter Directors Make Another Change,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 19, 1897, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

poisoned water filled with fallen timber supports where they would try and spot Keefer's body or other clues of his disappearance.

According to witnesses, Douglas and Longstreth risked life and limb multiple times, even with their expertise and experience in the mines. One San Francisco news outlet described a harrowing moment.

They entered the mine by means of an air shaft eighty-seven feet deep, then down an incline forty five feet long, down another perpendicular shaft fifteen feet deep to the entrance of a 300-foot tunnel. This tunnel came near being the grave of the two searchers. When they had advanced some fifty feet the drift suddenly narrowed, the result of the constant caving of roof and walls. They intended exploring this tunnel to its end, where it is connected with the outside world by an air shaft. As the way got narrower they had first to crawl, and ultimately there was barely room to let a man's body pass through, to wriggle, wormwise. Robert Douglas went ahead, and the plan, in the event of his getting stuck, was for Longstreth to pull him back by the feet. They had not figured, however, on the fact that their air supply was ahead of them, and after traveling some 200 feet in this manner Longstreth collapsed. Douglas' body having shut off the air from him. The place was too narrow for Douglas to turn around to his friend's assistance, but by superhuman efforts he succeeded in getting his body in such a position that Longstreth got a little air and soon revived. It took them several hours to get back to their friends on top, both exhausted, but undaunted by their narrow escape from death.⁷⁷

These were places where, according to the account, an “inexperienced man could not even look without a shudder.”⁷⁸

The landscape of the Calaveras County gold fields would neither give up Keefer's body nor his whereabouts during those mid-spring searches. The closest thing to a clue would be a battered and buckshot-pierced slouch hat that Longstreth found while searching through a hydraulic mining pit. (See Figure 15) This time the search site was a functioning mine, the very one where Keefer was last seen operating a powerful water cannon the workers had named Giant. Under Keefer's black rubber boots, the landscape had changed drastically, transitioning from the emerald grasses and deep orange poppies that marked the arrival of spring in the foothills to an almost barren pit that resembled a moonscape of mud and rock. The hydraulic mining pit was located almost exactly in the middle of the gulch, with a wall at least 100 yards long and 100 feet high of bare soil cut perpendicular into the hillside. At the hands of Keefer and others, Giant – powered with high water pressure created by dropping that water from high elevations – hosed ton after ton of rock and mud down the face of the

⁷⁷ “Bullet Holes in a Hat Tell of Keefer's Fate,” *San Francisco Chronicle*.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

wall. Miners would direct that material toward sluices that would catch the gold before dumping the slurry into a settling pond. Debris, gravel piles and enormous boulders littered the site without design or logic, with the only seeming order signified by a network of pipes, a few flumes and a lone watchtower made of corrugated iron next to what was left of the stream bed.⁷⁹

When they found the hat, mine co-owner Beach Thompson had cut water supplies to the mine, blaming the local water company. Longstreth and his men had to comb the mud, boulders and debris strewn about the foot of the 100-foot earthen wall without the aid of the water cannon that created those conditions the first place. They ran grappling and chains through the small reservoirs at the site, holding back water and debris in attempts to snag a body they suspect lay somewhere in the pit. At some point, their activity disturbed one of the debris dams that held the slurry back and prevented it from entering the greater watershed. That material – water, mud, waste and rocks – flowed freely across the site. When everything settled, one of the searchers noticed something. A piece of cloth stuck out of some of the exposed debris. Longstreth at first thought he had found what he was looking for. But while the hat could portend signs of foul play, its disfigurement from being covered in tons of muck and water made it impossible for Longstreth to even to tell whether it was Keefer’s at all. “When my eye fell upon this, my first thought was that my search was over, but I soon discovered my error,” he said.⁸⁰

Keefer was never found, nor were any concrete clues as to his whereabouts or his fate. However, the story of the search for Keefer, the circumstances of his disappearance, and the actions of his former colleagues afterwards offer scenes from a changing California near the turn of the 20th Century, one wherein the state’s gold rush mythos was increasingly replaced by an emerging vision of technological progress and both social and economic stability. Much like the landscape of the Mother Lode region during and after the gold rush, Keefer seemed to be a potentially dangerous and unpredictable man described by those who knew him as wild and morally dubious: a “man of great force of character,”⁸¹ a man who “had never been known to show the white feather,”⁸² and was “the last man to run away from anything.”⁸³ He was a man who was “eccentric about a good many things” inducing his fashion,⁸⁴ while being a man who was “beneath contempt”⁸⁵ who “belonged in jail.”⁸⁶

⁷⁹ Ibid; “Mystery Hangs Thick About Keefer’s Fate,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 11, 1897, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

⁸⁰ “Hunt For the Body: Vigorous Search for the Corpse of Keefer,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 29, 1897, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

⁸¹ “Teamsters Say Keefer was Slain,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 5, 1897, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

⁸² “Bullet Holes in a Hat Tell of Keefer’s Fate,” *San Francisco Chronicle*.

⁸³ “Teamsters Say Keefer was Slain,” *San Francisco Chronicle*.

⁸⁴ “Bullet Holes in a Hat Tell of Keefer’s Fate,” *San Francisco Chronicle*.

⁸⁵ “Jupiter Directors Make Another Change,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 18, 1897, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

A great public scandal materialized in the wake of Keefer's disappearance, including allegations of fraud, theft, conspiracy and murder that consumed not only newspaper editors and readers in San Francisco and Calaveras County, but also his friends, families, colleagues and enemies. In many ways, the missing miner of Calaveras County was a symbol for the mythos of mining past – an unpredictable and unwieldy 49er willing to take advantage of both his peers and the less enfranchised, whose remains likely were consumed by the very environments he and his fellow miners helped create. And yet, he seemed at the same time to be an anachronism pursuing a forward-looking vision of modernity emerging for California thanks to contemporary efforts by boosters and capitalists. The particulars of his own ambition would presage those of powerful interest who later worked to cultivate a modern economic identity for the state, whether it be emerging agricultural sectors in the region's lowlands, manufacturing and shipping in urbanizing areas like San Francisco and Sacramento, a continued focus on extractive industries like lumber or industrial mining, or the commodification of nature for leisure and recreation.

This chapter follows former business associates and friends of Keefer as they navigated his disappearance and unwound the problems he left behind. Men like Beach Thompson and Howard Veeder, who some thought were responsible for Keefer's disappearance, would take control of the mining business and leverage its remaining assets to pursue a massively ambitious hydroelectric project on the nearby Stanislaus River. On one hand, these men were central figures in the inception and completion of a network of reservoirs and powerhouses along the Stanislaus River's upper stretches that continued to dominate development, policy and uses of the river system through the 20th Century. The project was one of many that helped the state of California transition from a mining economy bolstered by bonanza farming to an economic power of its own right based on growing urban centers in and around San Francisco and a lucrative, industrial style of agriculture in the fertile Central Valley.

The works of Thompson and Veeder would have been different if Keefer hadn't either walked away from his mining operation, been thrown down one of the mineshafts or buried under the rubble caused by decades of hydraulicking. But despite their attempts to carve out a niche in a growing hydroelectricity industry still dominated by monied and connected power brokers, Thompson and Veeder were ultimately unable to shake the precarity embodied by Keefer and reflected in the shifting landscapes and waterways of the gold country. The business under their own leadership would succumb to its own series of disasters. Ultimately, much like other emergent economic sectors in California's history, what seemed for a moment to be a place of opportunity for individual entrepreneurship quickly clarified as a business landscape dominated by big capital seeking monopolistic control of land and water. In this case, that monopoly would be achieved and protected after a major consolidation ended with a relatively new a company called Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E)

⁸⁶ Herman Veeder to Howard Veeder, April 19, 1897, Box 2322, Folder 1, MANUSCRIPT Boxes 2322-2324, Stanislaus Electric Power Company Records, 1897-1917, California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento.

controlling much of the region's energy production and distribution, including the system that grew out of Keefer's vision.

"I don't know, and I don't give a — :" *The legacy of Windsor Keefer*

Around three and a half years before he disappeared, Keefer got himself into a pickle with a woman named Ruth Newlands that would portend the eventual scandals surrounding his personal character. Newlands was a relatively pronounced local character in San Francisco social circles, and she was one of the few women licensed to practice medicine in the state at the time.⁸⁷ In the later months of 1893, Keefer talked his mine prospects up with Newlands, working to sell stock in his operations which at the time were known generally as the Jupiter mines. His stories, so she said, included tales of a productive site he claimed to own known as Bully Boy. He supposedly focused his pitch to Newlands on its untapped riches, claiming it had millions of dollars in gold just waiting under the surface. Newlands bought in, paying him as much as \$23,000.⁸⁸ But soon after, she was contacted by another Calaveras County woman who claimed to own and oversee operations at the Bully Boy mines and who accused Keefer of making false claims on the property to defraud people.⁸⁹ After briefly filing papers to take Keefer to court, Newlands took matters into her own hands. She traveled to a vacant cabin located on the Jupiter property and set herself in the building as its new resident. The property, she would claim, was her share of the Jupiter operation for which she rightfully paid. Upon hearing of her moves, Keefer gathered his friend and partner, Beach Thompson, as well as a sheriff's deputy. The plan was to forcefully evict her. Though depictions of the confrontations vary, it's clear that Newlands had with her a close confidant in Longstreth – the same one who would lead the search for Keefer. The two groups engaged in a shootout, which injured Keefer with a bullet in the shoulder and ultimately ended with both Newlands and Keefer arrested. Neither was convicted of any charges.⁹⁰

Such were the characteristics of the scandals and theories that emerged after Keefer disappeared in April of 1897. Keefer had long been the primary owner and operator of mining properties under the Jupiter name, though his association with the claims on San Domingo Creek in the lower foothills of Calaveras County was so strong that they were well known as the Keefer mines to locals.⁹¹ After working the properties for as many as 20 years, Keefer built a fierce reputation as a miner and

⁸⁷ "Row Over Stock," *The Morning Call*, San Francisco, March 24, 1894, California Digital Newspaper Collection.

⁸⁸ Ibid; "Mrs. Newland's Claim," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 16, 1894, ProQuest Historical Newspapers; "A Mine in Dispute," *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 25, 1894.

⁸⁹ "Women Who Think Keefer was Crooked," *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 8, 1897, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

⁹⁰ "Trouble Over a Mine," *San Jose Mercury-news*, Nov. 2, 1893, California Digital Newspaper Collection; "Battle Over a Mine," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Oct. 28, 1893, ProQuest Historical Newspapers; "Women Who Think Keefer was Crooked" and "Bullet Holes in a Hat Tell of Keefer's Fate," *San Francisco Chronicle*.

⁹¹ "The Mines," *Sacramento Daily Record-Union*, Feb. 4, 1888, California Digital Newspaper Collection.

businessman, making friends with investors and enemies with locals. Over those years, he found himself in both legal and corporeal problems somewhat regularly with his approach to business often straddling the line between scrappy and fraudulent.

After Keefer disappeared, accusations flew from both investors who claimed to have been conned, as well as from business associates with the Jupiter company claiming similar stories. Most of the accusations of fraud involved victims claiming to have been told of the productive potential of the Jupiter mine before buying shares either with life savings or real property of their own. Only later would these people find out that the stock they bought was either over-issued or tied to a different company with no real assets. Keefer often allegedly victimized women of a certain age, either divorced, widowed or never married, but not exclusively so. Thompson himself claimed that he and other principals in the company were scammed on multiple levels and deceived about Keefer over-issuing company stock. They also claimed to have been conned into signing over property and assets belonging to the company to a new organization Keefer started and over which he maintained total control. For years leading up to the spring of 1897, public accusations against Keefer were not uncommon. Nothing ever stuck, as he was never officially convicted of crimes for such acts. But after he disappeared and quickly became a media sensation, Keefer's alleged misdeeds re-emerged in the public consciousness with scores of "widows and orphans"⁹² piling on to his scandals.⁹³

Those scandals resulted in two predominant theories of his disappearance. The first, maintained as most likely by former business associates and some alleged victims, was that Keefer willfully absconded to escape real liability as his misdeeds were about to be public. This theory was bolstered by claims that Keefer was last seen wearing drab and shoddy work clothes,⁹⁴ perfect for operating the water monitor at the Jupiter mine but different than the typical attire for a man with a reputation for his distinct style that included a custom, round-topped hat ordered from a Philadelphia haberdashery; a black, ankle length fur coat; diamond cufflinks and buttons; and other high-style accouterments.⁹⁵ He could have easily snuck away unseen in working clothes, grabbed a train out of town if necessary, and left the country. After all, Keefer was known to have associates in France where he traveled on occasion.⁹⁶ For the people who thought Keefer had run off, their move now was to pick up the pieces of

⁹² "Bullet Holes in a Hat Tell of Keefer's Fate," *San Francisco Chronicle*.

⁹³ "Women Who Think Keefer was Crooked," *San Francisco Chronicle*; "Jupiter Directors Make Another Change," *San Francisco Chronicle*; "Litigant in Luck," *San Jose Mercury-news*, July 30, 1897, California Digital Newspaper Collection; "Invested in the Jupiter: Widows Tell the Stories of their Lost Fortunes," *The San Francisco Call*, April 5, 1898, California Digital Newspaper Collection; "New Light on the Keefer Mystery," *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 7, 1897, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

⁹⁴ "Mystery Hangs Thick About Keefer's Fate," *San Francisco Chronicle*

⁹⁵ Ibid; "Bullet Holes in a Hat Tell of Keefer's Fate," *San Francisco Chronicle*; Frances E. Bishop, "The Mysterious Disappearance of Windsor A. Keefer," *Las Calaveras*, 31:3 (April and July, 1983), Calaveras County Historical Society, San Andreas.

⁹⁶ "Californians in Paris," *Daily Alta Californian*, San Francisco, Oct. 14, 1978, California Digital Newspaper Collection.

the company, re-organize, settle debts and accusations, and move forward without him. “I don’t know, and I don’t give a —,”⁹⁷ Thompson would say at one point when asked publicly where he thought Keefer might be.

The second theory was that Keefer was dead, either murdered by an enemy, killed by a supposed friend, or the victim of a kidnapping plot gone terribly wrong. Keefer’s close friends and family, including his attorney, sister, niece and Longstreth, largely perpetuated this theory. Perhaps one of his many enemies finally got the better of him, a supposedly never-ending threat for a man known to wear a coat of chain mail under his clothes while doing business in Calaveras County.⁹⁸ Keefer reportedly never sat or slept with his back to a door or window.⁹⁹ Perhaps even worse, a friend or confidant could have disposed of the unpredictable man in order to take all the assets he had worked to accumulate. Even Thompson, a man who by all accounts was a close friend and ally of Keefer’s, found himself under suspicion.¹⁰⁰ “I am firmly convinced that our labors will result in the discovery of Keefer’s body and that it lies somewhere under the thousands of tons of debris at the mine. . . . The reasons for my belief that the body will eventually be found under the debris are many. Suspicious acts, circumstances and statements justify the belief,” Longstreth would publicly say at one point.¹⁰¹

With this theory in hand, Keefer’s sister, Matilda Davids, would work diligently to declare him officially dead through local courts. The declaration would give her more access and control to his business assets and increase her leverage to prevent their being subsumed back into the company her brother left behind. While the court would grant her some say in his estate, the lack of a body or proof of death, and the constant theorizing of his escape abroad, would prevent such a declaration.¹⁰² Even seven years later, just days before a final hearing on the matter with Keefer’s sister seeking a death notice, a sudden, unattributed claim and supposed sighting of the man in Paris emerged to complicate the matter.¹⁰³ Whichever theory was true, both assumed that Keefer himself was at best a morally complicated and more likely an unseemly character who was difficult to predict or even control, one whose sudden disappearance might seem likely in hindsight.

Depictions of Keefer’s unstable and unreliable moral character, and the chaotic and menacing environments of the gold fields, seem to be out of place in a kind of moral economy that was spreading in California’s rural hinterlands through the late

⁹⁷ “Jupiter Directors Make Another Change,” *San Francisco Chronicle*.

⁹⁸ “Bullet Holes in a Hat Tell of Keefer’s Fate,” *San Francisco Chronicle*.

⁹⁹ “Mystery Hangs Thick About Keefer’s Fate,” *San Francisco Chronicle*.

¹⁰⁰ “Bullet Holes in a Hat Tell of Keefer’s Fate,” *San Francisco Chronicle*; “Search for Keefer’s Body in the Debris,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 30, 1897, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

¹⁰¹ “Hunt For the Body,” May 29, 1897, *San Francisco Chronicle*, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

¹⁰² “Keefer’s Sister Asks to be Made Trustee,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 19, 1897, ProQuest Historical Newspapers; “After Keefer’s Property,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 19, 1897; “Matilda J. Davids Applies to be Appointed Trustee of the Estate,” *The San Francisco Call*, June 20, 1897, California Digital Newspaper Collection.

¹⁰³ “Windsor. A. Keefer, Long Thought Dead, is Living in Paris,” *The San Francisco Call*, Nov. 6, 1904, California Digital Newspaper Collection.

19th Century. An transplanted form of capitalism in the region would combine water engineering, rationalization of land and resources, and particular ideas of domestication, home and families. One such vision materialized in the same place where Keefer was lost, as capitalists consolidated water rights during the later years of the gold rush and corporate water purveyors assumed economic and social control of the region by commodifying and monopolizing water as gold mining's most vital resource. This established the California Gold Rush's first elite class, but they could not make a middle class on their own and required the moral authority of domestic femininity to establish social hegemony.¹⁰⁴

Elsewhere, land speculators and railroad men worked in the state's Central Valley and southlands to sell similar visions of domestic order tied to the landscapes organized by hydraulic engineering and with the family home at their center. Beginning in the 1870s, boosters repackaged a modern twist on Jeffersonian agrarian ideals in the form of single-family farms growing diversified crops watered through year-round irrigation. The idea was that such communities, set apart from images of urban moral decay and immigration, would combine domestic family values with semi-rural landscapes and form the fundamental building block of ideal, democratic communities.¹⁰⁵ These visions of moral and natural order were often set apart from images of racialized, wild and barren landscapes of the region, places untamed by modern technology and exploited by contemporary wheat and cattle barons, left only to the moral precarity of people described as roaming and uncivilized. "Then, for many months of the year, the country seemed a barren waste, with here and there great bands of sheep or cattle, eating grass, flower, and shrub, until the picture was one of sheer desolation," stated one depiction of the nearby San Joaquin Valley just five years prior. "A few uncouth vaqueros with their wild mustangs and wilder ways, were about the only human beings to be see."¹⁰⁶

Compared to images of social and natural order driven by modern capitalism, the public portraits of Keefer showed a man outside of time, an anachronistic figure of a more chaotic capitalist past that was not consonant with versions of business and commerce that were sold as the state's moral and economic future. His version of capitalism supposedly used obsolete technology, violence and dishonesty to separate gold from the dirt and women from their money, all while perpetuating the kinds of disordered and unregulated social relations that both technological and moral progress were meant to quell. He perhaps had no place in this particular vision of moral and economic progress for a changing state.

¹⁰⁴ Susan Lee Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 241-242, 280.

¹⁰⁵ Paul J.P. Sandul, *California Dreaming: Boosterism, Memory, and Rural Suburbs in the Golden State* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2014), 43. Also see: Donald J. Pisani, *From the Family Farm to Agribusiness: The Irrigation Crusade in California and the West, 1850-1931*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021); Jared Farmer, *Trees in Paradise: The Botanical Conquest of California* (Berkeley: Heyday, 2017) 221-332.

¹⁰⁶ *Annual Report, State Board of Horticulture of the State of California*, State Board of Horticulture, Sacramento, 1892, 37, Google Books, google.com.

But while Keefer could personify that mythos of the past, the secret ambitions he pursued by various, opaque means demonstrated that he was also forward-looking in the midst of a region's economic, social and environmental change. Keefer's visions for water and resource development were especially prescient. Though mining was his main source of profit at the time of his disappearance, Keefer had his eyes set on a diversified and integrated operation, presaging a multi-purpose, hybrid approach to landscapes and technology embraced by many after him on the Stanislaus River and in the central Sierra Nevada. Keefer's potential projects included mining, water purveyance, irrigation, hydroelectricity, agriculture and even recreation.¹⁰⁷ His new venture, the Jupiter General Mining Water and Electric Power Company, would expand on his already notable electricity generation, tap the waters of the nearby Stanislaus River to supply these potential projects, and be tied to agricultural lands in the San Joaquin and some timber holdings nearby Sierras. Within all of this, Keefer intended to purchase – and in some cases already had purchased – properties in the watershed for recreation and leisure.¹⁰⁸ (See Figure 16) Though not fully articulated or even realized before he disappeared, Keefer's diversified and integrated vision saw the waterways of the Sierra Nevada as a commodity with potential to sell as all things at once to all people – a place to mine, generate electricity, produce salable products, gather water for agriculture, and enjoy the serene beauty of the natural world.

Whether cruel, just or both, Keefer's fate was to disappear without achieving his visions of a modern California, visions predicated on a reorienting of the environments of the state away from caprice and toward predictability for economic production, whether that be through agriculture, energy development or other means. Achieving such visions would require reshaping the region's hydrology to store and move water for irrigation, flood control and hydroelectricity, projects that at the time required intensive capital investments, mobilization of human labor, and technological heft. In turn, charismatic but unreliable personalities with stories of gold were not money magnets for regional or eastern investors in the same way as professionals armed with prospecti for integrated infrastructure projects.

His former associates would try to be those new, ideal professionals, shedding a liability with the disappearance of Keefer. Confidantes and brothers-in-law, Howard Veeder and Beach Thompson would take up Keefer's expanded vision and pursue an audacious water and power scheme along the nearby Stanislaus River. The men would seek to integrate mining, electric power, water supply and other sectors in a way that presaged an integrated approach to water use both in the watershed and across the state – one wherein irrigation, hydroelectricity and recreation would coexist and reinforce other processes along the heavily engineered and controlled waterscape. Thompson and Veeder would see some success as they worked to build on Keefer's vision. At the same time, they would try to eliminate the toxic elements and precarity of his presence from the business. But their personal success was limited. Much like with Keefer's

¹⁰⁷ Bishop, "The Mysterious Disappearance of Windsor A. Keefer," 25-38.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid; "Mystery Hangs Thick About Keefer's Fate," *San Francisco Chronicle*; "Summer Resorts, Big Trees," Advertisement, *Daily Alta Californian*, Oct. 6, 1874, California Digital Newspaper Collection.

persona, the precarity of the environmental and economic systems with which the project was integrated would doom their individual efforts while creating opportunities for other capitalists with larger purses, deeper pockets and more powerful connections.

“The same as it always was:” Howard Veeder and the problems with hydraulic mining

Howard Veeder might have been an ideal replacement for Windsor Keefer to work with Beach Thompson moving forward. He seemed to build on Keefer’s strengths in the business world while minimizing the unstable miner’s weaknesses and liabilities. (See Figure 17) Perhaps Veeder’s greatest asset was his predictability, not just for Thompson but also for the business and intellectual communities of central California at the time. Veeder was a trusted colleague and family member for Thompson, whose wife was Veeder’s sister, Augusta. Veeder was also an investor and director of the existing Jupiter mining company. These made him both a known commodity and a reliable presence for Thompson as he sought a new business partner to aid him in rebuilding the company in the wake of the Keefer scandal and its echoes of past shootings, lawsuits, fraud allegations and even suspicion of murder. Veeder’s presbyterian sensibilities precluded him from most of such shenanigans, and his family connection practically guaranteed loyalty and fealty between the two as they continued with the Jupiter mines. Also valuable was Veeder’s family name, as he was born to a well-known clan in the San Francisco area and had kin in locales on the East Coast with ties to big business. Veeder had cousins in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with memberships in business organizations and ties and partnerships to industrialists in that region. Such ties could be useful for Thompson and Veeder as they sought more investors to fund expansion and to locate manufacturers that could build infrastructure equipment with unique specifications. What Veeder might have lacked in public charisma, he gained in dependability and connections for Thompson.

Along with his private value for his brother-in-law and new business partner Thompson, Veeder’s name also held some public cache in the greater San Francisco Bay Area. His father, Peter Veeder, was a bit of a local celebrity and public intellectual. The elder Veeder was originally from Schenectady, NY, where he went to Union College in 1846 before attending Princeton Theological Seminary. He came to California in the 1850s, finding some trouble early on in his new surroundings by his involvement in a deadly altercation in 1854 for which he was charged and acquitted of murder. The past charge did not seem to put a permanent stain on his public reputation, as he took up as a reverend for Napa Presbyterian Church in 1856 and held that position before being appointed president of City College of San Francisco in 1860. Peter Veeder left California in 1871 when he took a position as chair of physics at the Japanese Imperial University in Tokyo. He later was a math and astronomy professor at Western University of Pennsylvania before he returned for retirement in Berkeley in 1887 where he lived until his death in August 1896. A mountain peak in Napa County remains named for P. Veeder, and thus when his son Howard graduated from the University of California in 1896 and sought to enter the mining business, many of the people whose paths he crossed would be familiar with his name and his

family's presence in the area.¹⁰⁹ Such an association would be a welcomed antidote for Thompson and other Jupiter business associates to Keefer's now-tarnished name, ideally aiding as they cleaned the company's public image and reputation among central California business circles.

Veeder helped Thompson oversee a re-imagining of the business in the months and years directly after the disappearance. After settling the messes left by Keefer, which included lawsuits from alleged fraud victims as well as his sister seeking control of his assets, they pushed to overhaul the company in a way that would be conducive to investment both in the monied class of the Pacific coast as well as from the more established capitalist class located to the East. Veeder was an integral part of this, as his family connections would help add an air of legitimacy to the operations. Thompson had been part of the mining operation since at least 1894, but Keefer – with his ostentatious personality and formidable reputation – was the face of the Jupiter operation and the will behind it. Ideally, with Veeder's loyalty through family ties and family reputation, the mining operation would draw capital investment not through personality and braggadocio like Keefer, but through networking, planning, fundraising through subtlety, professionalism and back-channel deals that made up the boardroom capitalism of a more modern California. In 1898 the Jupiter Gravel Mining Co. became the San Domingo Mining Co.,¹¹⁰ with Thompson and Veeder leading the corporate apparatus and holding the controls of Giant, the water monitor that still drove the hydraulic operations on San Domingo Creek. (See Figure 18)

Ironically, the final moment of exorcizing Keefer's presence from their business affairs would be the brief moment of Keefer's rumored return. Declarations that he was still alive ran in regional newspapers in both San Francisco and Calaveras County in November 1904. An unnamed acquaintance reportedly told one outfit that he spotted Keefer in Paris, living a quiet and otherwise anonymous life for the past eight years. Conveniently, this sighting and its reports came in the midst of a court proceeding in which Keefer's sister, Matilda Davids, was trying to close the case on her brother's disappearance, declare him officially dead, and allow her as his heir and administrator of his estate to finalize pending business involving related to his assets.¹¹¹ "As if a message from the dead, the report is received that Keefer is alive and well, spending his days in a quiet home in one of the suburbs of Paris," read one account.¹¹² This would be Keefer's brief but final moment of resurrection, with no reports of his presence domestic or abroad surfacing again.

¹⁰⁹ Hicks, Larry. "The History of Mt. Veeder," Unpublished, 1975, Napa County Regional Park & Open Space District, <https://napaoutdoors.org/documents/history-mount-veeder-larry-hicks/>; "The Late Dr. Veeder," *Napa Register*, Aug. 14, 1896; "The Late Dr. Veeder," *Napa Daily Journal*, Aug. 13, 1896.

¹¹⁰ "Manuscript Collection Summary Sheet: Stanislaus," Box 2322, Folder 0, Stanislaus Electric Power. Co. Records.

¹¹¹ "Windsor. A. Keefer, Long Thought Dead, is Living in Paris," *The San Francisco Call*; SF Call or Chron Nov. 6, 1904; "A Supposed Dead Man Comes to Life," *The Calaveras Weekly Prospect*, Oct. 22, 1904, OCLC # 28404871, World Share CAX, California State Library, Sacramento.

¹¹² "Windsor. A. Keefer, Long Thought Dead, is Living in Paris," *The San Francisco Call*.

It would also bring some finality to a struggle between his heirs and former business associates over Keefer's legacy. Davids, Thompson and Veeder had previously engaged in a brief public relations battle over Keefer's reputation, business assets, ideas and legacy. In the midst of the search for Keefer, Davids and other friends and family members publicly questioned Thompson's and Veeder's dedication to solving the mystery of his whereabouts and went as far as insinuating their guilt in the man's possible murder. At the time, Davids was also working through the legal system to try and get monetary assets, business assets to the Jupiter company, and real property as the heir of his estate – a process complicated by his whereabouts being unknown. Thompson and Veeder had publicly disavowed Keefer, denied any wrongdoing and eventually ceased cooperation with any search. To move forward as quickly as possible, Thompson's first moves as the company's new president would be to slip Veeder in as his second-in-command and settle outstanding claims with Keefer's other accusers. Thompson and Veeder would also move all of Keefer's assets back under the auspices of the main Jupiter mining company and remove Keefer's name and any of his claims from the business. As a criminal and a fraud, they would say, the man had forfeited any claim he had to business operations or assets.¹¹³ With her position complicated by his whereabouts being undetermined, Davids would become a trustee to oversee his personal assets and business but be locked out of any ongoing Jupiter business. Thompson, Veeder and their business associates had moved on without Keefer while actualizing aspects of his ambitious.

Despite successfully moving on without any trace of Keefer or his deeds attached to the company, the mining operation was still often mired in a precarity similar to that which defined its time under Keefer. Veeder would work diligently behind the scenes to try and raise capital and placate shareholders during tumultuous and unpredictable economic environments. (See Figure 19) But three constant elements would make mining San Domingo Creek a problem in terms of profitability: the varied and unpredictable climate, the economic landscape largely still controlled by water companies, and a fledgling regulatory environment for hydraulic mining. For the handful of years that they pursued mining under the newly named San Domingo Mining Co., Veeder especially would lament their prospects while holding off anxious and sometimes angry investors seeking returns or even just updated information on the operation.

As some of these investments came from Veeder's family and his family's friends and colleagues, their inquiries could be hostile and direct – like one exchange in 1901 between Veeder and his cousin. Herman Veeder was not only a shareholder himself, but he had been recruiting other investors in industrial circles and well-connected families to invest in the mining operation from his location in Pittsburgh, PA. In a February letter, Herman scolded his cousin for neglecting to communicate about the company's abilities to pay back at least some interest after a round of cleanup at the gold fields. "Now Howard I can't but feel hurt that you do not reply more promptly to my request," Herman wrote, noting it was especially problematic

¹¹³ "Jupiter Directors Make Another Change," *San Francisco Chronicle*.

considering “the way I have tried to help push the company along to success from the beginning and put my money in ... and my friends money too, and carry along a past due mortgage, and then be accused of bad faith toward the company. And now so poorly kept informed of the doings by you. ... Now if I can not depend upon you as I had hoped, please advise me at once and I will see who I can get to keep me in touch with my interests in the mine, and I will not bother you any more.”¹¹⁴

Howard Veeder would respond quickly, and with a defensive tone, writing back to his cousin on March 5.

If you were not out here long enough to acquire confidence in the way things are being run, if you don’t know me well enough not to think ... that something wrong is being done, that we are trying to conceal from you, if you are going to feel it necessary to bring up the question of what you have done for the company, if you are going to jump on me from time to time for not having told you some detail that you consider vital for you to know, and which I may have overlooked or delayed to tell you, I do not care, as you suggest, to have more than a personal correspondence with you.¹¹⁵

And yet, the shortness of the response underscored what was an alarming situation, as the remainder of the letter and a handful of others in the coming weeks detailed an unsuccessful operation buried in debt, with prospects grim for investors. Howard Veeder was getting behind on the two sets of books he was keeping for the company as secretary, following up on a poor cleanup at the mine of only \$850 the week prior, much lower than hoped. “The experiment of trying to wash off the ‘point’ has proved disastrous as far as receipts go,”¹¹⁶ Veeder told his cousin, referring to an attempt to focus the hydraulic cannon on a spot they thought would be richer with gold.

Part of the disaster was the fact that they used precious and limited water on this experiment. Operators were forced to turn off the canon after a short wash revealed little paydirt, and they hoped the remaining supply could be redirected to a more productive area¹¹⁷ before the weather dried up and they were forced to turn to the local water company for a more expensive supply. Multiple lawsuits over water and land rights compounded the precarity of their business situation.¹¹⁸ “I hope that this condition of affairs will not continue much longer. ... But in the mean time I am doing the best that I can to keep things in half way shape,” Howard Veeder stated at one point. “I hope we will soon have some respectable clean ups again. Its pretty hard

¹¹⁴ Herman Veeder to Howard Veeder, Feb. 18, 1901, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

¹¹⁵ Howard Veeder to Herman Veeder, March 5, 1901, Box 2322, Folder 5, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid

¹¹⁸ Howard Veeder to Herman Veeder, March 11, 1901, Box 2322, Folder 5, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

standing off people in the mean time."¹¹⁹ Veeder offered numerous excuses to his cousin for lack of robust revenues, while Herman fretted over the return on investment for him and others whom he had brought into the scheme. Though there was still gold in the ground, something that remains true for much of the gold country, water supply and a new regulatory regime for hydraulic mining would make business tough.

The water supply issue at the mine involved two main problems, one related to climate and one related to economy. Gold mining required water, especially in the placer deposits of the Sierra foothills. The Sierra Nevada mountains did boast many rivers and creeks running down the western slopes, and most of the early gold was taken from existing riverbeds and creeks. Eventually, miners developed the highly efficient, but water-intensive, process of hydraulic mining to rip gold out of the unexposed earth in the adjacent hillsides. This process used metal cannons like Keefer's Giant to shoot large volumes of water under immense pressure against the gold-bearing hills and straining the metal from the sediment-laden sludge with flumes and sluices. Because of the region's semi-arid climate, with generally wet springs and winters but very little rain during the summer and well into the fall, the water levels in the region's streams and rivers fluctuated greatly. Furthermore, California for millennia has been the subject of great, often decades-long swings in annual precipitation, making the volume of water in Sierra rivers often unpredictable from year to year.¹²⁰ Typical for gold claims in the later rush, Veeder's and Thompson's San Domingo mines were located on the creek for water supply, surrounded by other competing or abandoned mines and near a boom-and-bust settlement named Dogtown that seemed to attract tragedy by drawing characters like Windsor Keefer.¹²¹ And with the small and ephemeral creek, work at the mine was relegated to the wet months of the winter and early spring, when short days, floods and mucky conditions could slow progress. As the summer dried things out and made for longer days, the mine operators would have to rely on water from corporate suppliers.

Those water corporations represented the economic side of the supply issue. With the easiest gold quickly snatched up after 1849, miners started manipulating the hydrology of the area to access deposits beyond those adjacent to the rivers and creeks. They dammed and diverted the perennial waterways for two outcomes: to access gravels that would otherwise be underwater and to build networks of ditches and flumes to move water from the areas of consistent supplies to the areas of need. This extensive and labyrinthine network stretched across much of the Sierra Nevada region and supplied the hydraulic mines with water year-round. But those dams and ditches quickly became the stuff of corporate consolidation, and the emergence of hydraulic mining also saw socio-economic consequences. Keen and well-funded capitalists monopolized water rights along the rivers of the Sierra, transforming water into a

¹¹⁹ Howard Veeder to Herman Veeder, March 5, 1901, Box 2322, Folder 5, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

¹²⁰ B. Lynn Ingram Frances Malamud-Roam, *The West without Water: What Past Floods, Droughts, and Other Climatic Clues Tell Us about Tomorrow*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

¹²¹ Eva Soracco, "Dogtown -- Calaveras County's Town that Wasn't a Town," *Las Calaveras*, 10:20 (January, 1962), 1-3, Calaveras County Museum and Historical Society, San Andreas.

commodity and transitioning the gold miner from an independent entrepreneur to a wage laborer working large claims owned by large companies. It also placed much of the water supply under the control of those corporations, who were able in many cases to charge high prices for the commodified water and wield great social and economic power over the gold fields and adjacent communities. This was especially true for the areas in the southern mines, where Calaveras County was located, as at times these water companies led to protests, counter-movements and even violence.¹²² One of these water companies was Utica Water, a purveyor that had water rights on the Stanislaus River's northern fork and operated ditches to supply users around much of Calaveras County despite the river's location in the county's more remote northeastern corners. Utica was the main supplier for the San Domingo Mining Company. And while hydraulic mining was not as much of a going concern by the turn of the century and water companies were not as powerful, Veeder and Thompson still found themselves and the profitability of their company at the mercy of Utica.

Finally, the mine faced regulatory concerns that limited its profitability. Hydraulic mining had become relatively rare in the Sierra Nevada mountains by the turn of the century, as a 1884 legal decision deemed that hydraulic mining operations could be liable for their downstream environmental impacts. Those impacts were mainly flooding and other damage from the massive amount of debris and sediment that flowed into the state's rivers.¹²³ The environmental damage at the mines was also devastating, as picturesque mountain scenes were laid to waste in the name of profit. But the issue that spurred the court's intervention wasn't aesthetics, ecology, labor or morality. The choked waterways and frequent floods wreaked havoc among the state's fledgling agricultural economy. The court order severely limited hydraulic mining operations by essentially saying that the mines must keep all the debris from entering adjacent waterways.¹²⁴ Most of them shut down under such strenuous restrictions, with hard rock mining emerging near the end of the century as the last bastion of the gold rush in the Sierras.¹²⁵

But a handful of hydraulic mines continued to operate with special permits, and among those mines were Keefer's Jupiter claims. Because of the size of the claims and the site's makeup, Keefer was able to utilize a large area on the mine property as a settling reservoir, which would catch most of the debris and release the water downstream. Operations like that on San Domingo could continue to work the water monitors, but they did so under strict regulations that required catchment and settling systems to keep sediment out of the rivers and limit the flood risk downstream. The

¹²² Andrew C. Isenberg, *Mining California: An Ecological History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 25-351; Hundley, *The Great Thirst*, 65-79; Johnson, *Roaring Camp*, 237-258. Hundley focuses especially on the legal side of hydraulic mining while Johnson and Isenberg focus more heavily on social impacts. All three discuss environmental change.

¹²³ Lorenzo Sawyer, "Judge Sawyer Halts Hydraulic Mining, 1884," in *Green Versus Gold: Sources in California's Environmental History*, ed. Carolyn Merchant (Washington: Island Press, 1998), ProQuest Ebook Central, 113-116.

¹²⁴ Robert Kelly, "Mining on Trial," in *Green Versus Gold*, 120-125.

¹²⁵ Ibid; Isenberg, *Mining California: An Ecological History*, 25-351; Hundley, *The Great Thirst*, 65-79; Johnson, *Roaring Camp*, 237-258.

San Domingo operation was able to do this with a broad swath of land on a relatively shallow grade. However, they needed an intricate piping system to move the material, a system that required them to use additional water that they couldn't access on site. That meant Thompson, Veeder and the laborers were unable to run material through the sluices and move the tailings to the settling pond at the same time. Even with 12-hour shifts, they were almost never able to mine the half-yard of gravel per miner's inch of water that they needed to meet their estimated payout.¹²⁶

Letters between Howard and Herman Veeder in the spring and summer of 1901 detailed the mine's economic issues, which reached backwards and forwards in time. Winter and Spring were the most profitable times of operation, placing them at the caprice of nature as boggy conditions during the wet weather could make extended work difficult. That meant the stakes were higher during those stretches, as higher payouts with their own water supply would mean higher revenues. The drier weather would mean better working conditions, but they would be more reliant on expensive water from the Utica Corporation. Five months after the poor, late-February haul at the San Domingo mine in 1901, Howard Veeder lamented the futility when they saw a much better cleanup in August. The pay streak was there, exposed at the bottom of the pit, Veeder told his cousin. But they were still underperforming their expectations, at one point hauling in \$2,150 instead of an expected \$10,000 payout. At the rate they were striking valuable gold, they were grossing only enough money to pay for the water and labor they were using to run the operations.¹²⁷ The previous August, they had seen a \$6,000 payout during a comparable period of time.¹²⁸ That, however, proved to be more of an anomaly than a trend. "We expect to have our final results in shape to try to arrange the balance of our floating indebtedness in some satisfactory way. At present we cannot tell what we can do in the matter," Howard Veeder wrote.¹²⁹

Thompson and Veeder were regularly handling most of the duties while running back and forth between the mining pits in the mountains and their corporate office in San Francisco. Furthermore, their system required them to use additional water that they couldn't access without additional costs they couldn't afford. That meant Thompson, Veeder and the laborers were unable to run material through the sluices and move the tailings to the settling site at the same time. Even with 12-hour shifts, they were almost never able to mine the half-yard of gravel per miner's inch of water that they needed to meet their estimated payout. "As you know, while I am here, the books at the mine are getting behind, while I am there the same is true here, that when I go from one place to the other, the first thing I have to do is dig up two or three months back work. I hope that this condition of affairs will not continue much longer,

¹²⁶ Howard Veeder to Herman Veeder, March 5 and Aug. 3, 1901, March 17, 1908, Box 2322, Folders 5 and 12, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Herman Veeder to Howard Veeder, Aug. 28, 1900, Box 2322, Folder 4, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

¹²⁹ Howard Veeder to Herman Veeder, Aug. 3, 1901, Box 2322, Folder 5, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

of course as soon as things are settled, we will have to have more help, but in the mean time I am doing the best I can to keep things in half way shape,” Veeder would write from the Parrot Building on Market Street.¹³⁰ And yet, things at the mine wouldn’t entirely settle. As late as 1908 when Veeder would state that “The main problem of course is the same as it always was.”¹³¹

As early as 1901, Veeder, Thompson and potential investors saw that mining as a primary activity would not be profitable in the long term. Despite Veeder’s professional demeanor and social connections being an upgrade from the unpredictability and unseemliness of a man like Keefer, the precariousness of both the land and the economic conditions into which the mines were integrated kept Thompson and Veeder from achieving stability in their attempts to extend the gold rush. Like Keefer envisioned in his work to diversify his holdings and assets, the San Domingo Mining Company needed additional options to generate profit. Luckily, one of those options could be pursued by expanding an activity already present both in the region and on the mine itself – the generation of hydroelectric power. That option would require them to look outward, into the surrounding watershed of the Stanislaus River, where they could secure the means to produce that energy with the legal rights to use a reliable water source. And they ultimately would become worse for it, both financially and personally, before the venture would succeed without them.

Not since “the days of old and the days of gold:” Beach Thompson and the Stanislaus Electric Power Company

It seemed 1906 would be a good year for Beach Thompson. (See Figure 20) It was definitely lining up to be the best yet for his budding business, the Stanislaus Electric Power Company, which he built with Veeder after the two men took control of his former business venture about 10 years prior. With the new year, Thompson had just successfully completed the company’s official formation, transferring assets from the San Domingo Mining Company and negotiating millions in funding from eastern investors like the Knickerbocker Trust. They had also by then closed the deal on property in and around Kennedy Meadows, a high-country location along the Stanislaus River’s middle fork where they could locate multiple dam sites for future water supplies, purchasing the land from the powerful Crockers.¹³² And in just a month, they would finalize negotiations to buy the Tuolumne County Water and Electric Power Company, a long-neglected remnant of the once-powerful and infamous water company that sold supplies to hydraulickers along the Stanislaus River watershed. The 185 miles of miners’ ditches and small reservoirs that fed it would help supply and move water through their system, and more importantly the water rights associated with the company would ultimately feed it. By January of 1906, the

¹³⁰ Howard Veeder to Herman Veeder, March 5, 1901, Box 2322, Folder 5, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

¹³¹ Howard Veeder to Herman Veeder, March 17, 1908, Box 2322, Folder 12, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

¹³² Howard Veeder to Herman Veeder, March 20, 1905, Box 2322, Folder 9, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

Stanislaus Electric Power Co. had set up a local base for its construction crews in the Calaveras County mining village of Vallecito, serving as the site of an economic boom reminiscent of the middle of the last century. “All of these extensive preparations have a tendency to create a protracted smile on the faces of our business men and women too, because it is the first substantial boom the town has had since ‘the days of old and the days of gold,’” stated one observer.¹³³

With the series of wins for Thompson, Veeder and their investors, it appeared they were on track to complete and operate a large power plant on the Stanislaus River fed by multiple high-elevation reservoirs. They made all these moves in pursuit of an integrated business that would include mining, but ultimately make its profit selling hydroelectric power and potentially water supplies to growing customer bases in the growing San Francisco Bay Area and a modernizing agricultural sector in the nearby San Joaquin Valley. Recent advancements in long-distance transmission of electricity had opened up major opportunities for engineers, builders and investors in California, where poor supplies of coal and rapid deforestation made economic growth and industrial production slow, expensive or both. Systems like the Tuolumne County ditch network sprawled across the region, built by miners to drive the powerful hydraulic cannons that leveled hillsides to unearth the precious metal. The mountain terrain lent itself well to high-head electrical generation, which in turn led to a new economic rush and infusion of capital and labor into the region. Except this time, instead of gold they came for what many called white coal – hydroelectric power. “A great deal of development is underway and in contemplation, both in the way of pumping for irrigation and power lines,” Howard Veeder would state late in the 1905, referencing Thompson’s work surveying electricity markets emerging in Salinas, Santa Cruz, Monterey, Hollister and San Jose.¹³⁴

Unfortunately for Thompson, 1906 would be notable for him and his company in unanticipated ways as he would instead see the first of a series of catastrophes for himself, his business venture and the greater region of the Bay Area. Within weeks of closing on the Tuolumne County water company, the great earthquake and fire in San Francisco would throw a wrench in their plans while devastating much of the city where the Stanislaus company’s headquarters were located and much of its business and fundraising took place. A year later, a financial panic centered in New York and involving some of the company’s largest investors would disrupt the funding stream necessary to complete work on the major project and delay the timeline for generating revenue to pay back debt and pursue profits. And finally, by 1909 a San Francisco city railway company backed by some behemoths of American business would swoop in and take the company away from Thompson, Veeder and other investors, leaving them to start over in a tough financial position. Though the three events appeared at the time to be a wave of bad luck, they were in reality all connected by the earthquake and its impact on the region. These events would almost destroy Thompson financially and

¹³³ Plutus, “More Facts About the Vallecito Boom,” *The Calaveras Weekly Prospect*, Jan. 27, 1906.

¹³⁴ Howard Veeder to Herman Veeder, Sept 2, 1905, Box 2322, Folder 9, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

harm him physically before – like the man who headed his business ventures before him – the fruits of his labor were consolidated and exploited more successfully by those with more connections and access to capital.

With the ongoing mining problems on San Domingo Creek, Thompson and Veeder tried to engineer better supplies of both water and funding. They now owned some water rights on the Stanislaus River, but they still had to find a way to move it over a ridge, drop it in the Middle Fork where the miners could then pull it out and transfer it to a location above their mine on San Domingo Creek. But they needed the money to do all this, and to make the proposition more attractive to potential lenders and future stockholders they included in the plans for a hydroelectric power plant at the transfer site on the river's Middle Fork. The electric lights at the San Domingo Creek mine were already successful and well-known, maybe the most successful operation at the mine,¹³⁵ and hydroelectric power generation was already generally common in the gold fields. But it wasn't long before the mining piece of the operation was deprioritized, and electric power became the centerpiece of their business. Hydropower was rising as the new gold in the Sierras, with companies like Bay Counties Power, Great Western Power, Blue Lakes Power or similar companies building electric plants with the intended purpose of selling it to growing urban and agricultural markets.¹³⁶ Money both from back east and among the elite on the Pacific coast was starting to flow into this burgeoning industry. And by 1905, Thompson was running from coast to coast with a fully developed prospectus trying to secure funding for one of the most audacious hydroelectric power schemes seen yet in California.¹³⁷

During these early years of the new century, Thompson and Veeder were in the midst of a burgeoning hydroelectric power industry that was about to explode due to a handful of converging phenomena, including past forms of industrial production, geography and specific technological advancements. First, the establishment of hydraulic mining as the dominant form of gold production in the Sierra led to the engineering and construction of thousands of miles of water conveyance systems throughout the mountains. These ditches, flumes and canals transported water from the headwaters of perennial rivers to the gold fields along generally seasonal streams to power the high-pressure water cannons. When hydraulic mining was made largely obsolete after 1884, and many of the mining and water companies became economically weaker, physical infrastructure remained that still had the capacity to move water efficiently in terrain marked by high altitude changes. Also remaining in the area was a collective well of experience and knowledge on how to engineer such

¹³⁵ "The Mines," *Sacramento Daily Record-Union*.

¹³⁶ James C. Williams, *Energy and the Making of Modern California* (Akron, The University of Akron Press, 1997), 168-236; v Gray Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), ProQuest Ebook Central, 245-256, 262-270; Charles M. Coleman, *PG and E of California: The Centennial Story of Pacific Gas And Electric Company, 1852-1952* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1952), 51-180; Jessica B. Teisch, "Great Western Power, 'White Coal,' and Industrial Capitalism in the West." *Pacific Historical Review* 70:2 (2001), 221-53. <https://doi.org/10.1525/phr.2001.70.2.221>.

¹³⁷ Stanislaus Electric Power Company, Prospectus, 1905, Box 2324, Folder 1, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

waterways in those conditions. Second, Like Windsor Keefer's fantastic lights, many water purveyors, mines and timber operations had already been experimenting with generation of hydroelectricity at their own operations. The terrain and existing infrastructure were perfectly suited to power a relatively new water turbine invented in the 1870s called the Pelton wheel, which was turned by a relatively low volume of water shot at offset buckets on the wheel. High-head conditions created the necessary pressure, with water dropped over rapid elevation loss converting to kinetic energy at the wheel. Hydraulic engineers in the mines had already applied these kind of water delivery systems to their high-pressure monitors, and they were able to easily adapt those systems to high-head hydroelectric power plants in the region. While mining contracted as an industry after 1884, hydroelectricity in the Sierra remained, and the conditions were set for growth in that area.¹³⁸

Down the slope of the Sierra, potential urban and agricultural growth meant increasing demands for energy supplies. While the relatively new electricity could have powered that growth, California seemed to lack the resources to meet the increasing demands by 1900. Timber shortages had already been public issues for decades due to rapid and extreme deforestation in accessible areas. Furthermore, California lacked coal reserves of any significance, and the coal it did have was not very high quality. Central California industries and residents had to import large quantities of coal making energy at the time expensive. While the waterways of the Sierra held potential as energy supplies to meet existing and potential demand in the farms, factories, streetlights and homes of the region, direct current technology made it virtually impossible to transport that power the distance necessary to connect them. But by the 1890s, advancements in alternating current spurred emergent technologies for long-range transmission. Pioneered around the world, these technologies were especially useful and relevant in California where a young but vibrant electrical engineering industry was driving the creation of professional journals and university engineering programs. That industry was quickly infused with capital when high-profile Pacific coast investors from families like Spreckels and Crocker began involving themselves in a new rush to engineer the state's mountain rivers in ways that would fulfill the power demands of the rest of the state.¹³⁹

Whether or not they sensed that potential when they first planned to generate electric power in the Stanislaus River's middle fork, Thompson and Veeder eventually saw the new direction of the water industry and jumped into it themselves. They formed the Stanislaus Electric Power Company in 1905, and they leveraged both the personal and professional connections forged during their years in the mining business to secure loans and shareholders and raise the capital necessary to undertake a hydroelectricity project. Thompson was born in Chicago, the son of a well-connected railroad man, and he moved to California to study as a graduate student at Stanford after graduating from the University of Michigan. He latched on to Windsor Keefer's

¹³⁸ Williams, *Energy and the Making of Modern California*; Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco*; Coleman, *PG and E of California*; Teisch, "Great Western Power, 'White Coal,' and Industrial Capitalism in the West."

¹³⁹ Ibid.

mining operation soon after finishing at Stanford, (See Figure 21) and while working with the Jupiter and San Domingo mines became established in high-society circles in the San Francisco Bay Area by joining the elite Bohemian Club and a becoming director and at one point president of the Menlo Park Country Club.¹⁴⁰ Between his and Veeder's personal and professional connection in a growing region, he actively worked to secure funding both from individual investors and financing from major east-cost institutions like the Knickerbocker Trust Company in New York City¹⁴¹ and Tucker Anthony And Co. in Boston, as well as others.¹⁴² By the end of 1905, the Stanislaus Electric Power Company had reportedly raised as much as \$13 million for their hydroelectric power project.¹⁴³

By the beginning of 1906, the company led by Thompson was finally moving forward on the work of developing hydroelectric power and potentially supplying water. Teams of mostly immigrant laborers were digging and blasting a road along the rim of a steep foothill canyon capable of supporting both teams of livestock and modern, heavy equipment, located adjacent to what would be one of many work camps set up to support construction and operation of the system. Crews were canvassing the route through the San Joaquin Valley where unprecedented steel towers would hold the power lines running from the plant, through the former Mission San Jose and to the heart of San Francisco. Housing units and other facilities were being erected in the high Sierra near the outpost of Kennedy Meadows, thousands of workers and potential workers were coming to and going from the newly erected boomtown of Vallecito. As much as 60 miles of modern highway would be cut out of the mountainsides between the dusty Calaveras County foothill outpost to the high-Sierra facilities outside of Kennedy Meadows, allowing heavy equipment to be hauled up the slopes of the famed mountains to as high as 8,000 feet. (See Figures 22 and 23)

By late January, before any of these accomplishments were completed, the first pieces of heavy equipment arrived. The project was not only a highlight of regional business coverage from major newspapers statewide, but it was also the focus of intensive boosterism at a local and regional level by Calaveras County power brokers.

A mere glance at the preparations of this construction company and
the men who have it in charge is sufficient to convince a mere casual

¹⁴⁰ *California From 1796 to 1909: An Illustrated History, Vol. 2*, ed. Benjamin Shannon Allen, 1910, 67; Ellis Davis, *Davis' Commercial Encyclopedia of the Pacific Southwest*, Berkeley, 1911, 109, Box 2322. Folder 0, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records. Also, see *Notables of the Southwest, Being the Portraits and Biographies of Progressive men of the Southwest* (Los Angeles: The Los Angeles Examiner, 1912).

¹⁴¹ Underwriting Agreement, Stanislaus Electric Power Company, 1905, Box. 2323, Folder 9, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

¹⁴² "Big Power Plant on the Tuolumne River," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Dec. 22, 1905, ProQuest Historical Newspapers; "Development of Stanislaus River Power is Projected," *The San Francisco Call*, Dec. 24, 1905, California Digital Newspapers Collection; "Electric Power Company," *The Washington Post*, Dec. 24, 1905, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

observer that this windfall to Vallecito means business and is here to stay and for several years too.

The company is making most complete preparations to prosecute its work of road grading “full blast” as soon as the rainy season is over. An auxiliary plant, a telephone line from Angels Camp to head quarters here is being built. At present the company is domiciled by Mr. Jack Solari's Opera hall on Main street. But it is reported that the company has secured six or seven acres of ranch land that joins our town on the east where they will build a large boarding house, a large store, lodging house and large barn, a blacksmith shop, woodshed and chicken house, and also bath rooms and dwelling houses.¹⁴⁴

All seemed to be looking up, as Thompson with the help of Veeder focused on taming the river's unpredictable and capricious waters with more steady and standardized flows to generate reliable electricity and supply a growing economic engine. (See Figure 24) But three months after the above observations were pressed into ink, a major catastrophe created a chain of events that changed everything for Thompson, Veeder and power generation on the Stanislaus.

“Greatly to my regret, you are mistaken:” The fall of the Stanislaus Electric Power Company

Early in the morning on April 18, 1906, a large earthquake shook San Francisco and the greater Bay Area. The quake itself was quite traumatic for what was a relatively young city, having been built in the wake of the gold rush only a half century prior. Buildings collapsed in some instances, with the unsteady ground liquifying in certain areas of the city. But the earthquake's immediate aftermath would also prove more devastating, as an uncontrollable fire burned through much of the city built largely with the wood of the recently felled forests in the surrounding mountains. Hundreds of blocks – as much as 80 percent of the city – were destroyed, with infrastructure decimated and many deaths. Everyday lives and businesses were completely upended in the immediate aftermath, though it's not entirely clear the extent to which the earthquake and fire itself impacted the work of the Stanislaus Electric Power Company. The company had some offices in the city, and Thompson and Veeder had part-time residences there. The Stanislaus company's board conducted most of its business in San Francisco, and some of the company's directors and investors operated in the region. The hydroelectric project likely saw some disruption of normal business in the disaster's immediate aftermath, especially with communication and travel to and from the city.¹⁴⁵

But the construction operations for the hydroelectric project had some advantages that kept it afloat, and the project even offered some optimism for its

¹⁴⁴ Plutus, “More Facts About the Calaveras Boom.”

¹⁴⁵ Correspondence between Howard and Herman Veeder appear to be especially limited after the fire, until October, 1907. Box 2322, Folders 10 and 11, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

investors and executives in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake and fire. For one, the actual work was far away in the mountain counties of Calaveras and Tuolumne, as far as than 130 miles from the city. The recently constructed pieces and support infrastructure saw no reported damage, and the only infrastructure set for the Bay Area (steel towers, power lines and power stations) were not yet completed. Second, while Thompson and Veeder did look to local and regional investors, most of the project's funding by then came from eastern financiers. Economic problems did befall the goings-on of San Francisco after the earthquake and fire, but those forces didn't have as much impact on the Stanislaus project which maintained its funding pipeline. Third, the disaster displaced thousands of residents and workers who no longer had places or housing or employment in the city, many of whom would leave seeking work elsewhere. This could provide a potential bump in labor supply, drawing new workers like a young clerk named Fred Leighton who had roots in the mountains and returned to the area after the earthquake left him with few options in the city. He would eventually find a job on the Stanislaus project as a bookkeeper.¹⁴⁶ Finally, after the destruction would come the inevitable rebuild, which would likely entail lighting, transportation and industrial systems powered by electricity. The white coal rush could see a potential boom in demand for its newly developed product.

For at least a year after the earthquake, Vallecito continued to bustle. Dams, ditches and powerhouses continued to go up, and prospects seemed strong for Thompson and Veeder. "The shortage of power in this section of the state is so pronounced that there can be no question as to the value of our enterprise. The United Railroads of San Francisco have been crippled for several months because they have been unable to obtain enough power. They are now operating only about one-half of the cars they have on hand which could be operated if there were sufficient power. Other power consumers throughout the state have been completely shut off," Howard Veeder would state in one correspondence, presaging future events.¹⁴⁷ Veeder would later write of the rebuilding city in the same letter note – "The downtown area is being rapidly rebuilt and the view from our windows is very much more cheerful than it was ten months ago."¹⁴⁸

Yet, that rosy outlook would sour before the end of the following year, and a series of events would ultimately lead to the collapse of Thompson and Veeder's budding energy empire. The first, most significant of these events was the financial panic of 1907, which would dry up funding for the project and prevent proper revenue generation. This would lead to a reorganization of the project's financing and leadership, a process that would allow for a total takeover by a San Francisco electric railroad company and other capitalists from across the country. The takeover would eventually oust Thompson and Veeder from the business, offering them little to no say

¹⁴⁶ Sharon Marovich, "Fred William Leighton," *CHISPA*, 16:3 (Jan-March, 1977), 554, History Research Center, Tuolumne County Museum, Sonora.

¹⁴⁷ Howard Veeder to Herman Veeder, Oct. 28, 1907, Box 2322, Folder 11, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

in its future. Each of the incidents was related to the next, an economic chain reaction ignited by the earthquake and fire.

The financial panic of 1907 was the first serious financial crisis of the 20th Century, and likely the worst to befall American institutions until the Great Depression. Liquidity problems at poorly-regulated trusts and banks led to bank runs and the onset of a quick recession afterwards. The precarious financial situation resulted in failures at multiple New York institutions in October and November of 1907. Perhaps the highest profile of these failures was that of the Knickerbocker Trust Company, one of the primary financial backers of the Stanislaus Electric Power Company. The panic ultimately led to national financial reforms including the establishment of the federal reserve system.¹⁴⁹

But on a more local level for the Stanislaus project, the panic caused work stoppages, funding problems and general precarity to the long-term outlook for the hydroelectric project, which was on the verge of putting its first generators online but was still seeking electricity and potential water customers. The first work stoppage occurred Oct. 24, with initial local reports assuming it to be a temporary stall.¹⁵⁰ The move put approximately 750 men out of work in Calaveras and Tuolumne counties, though estimates for workers on the entire project at the time often exceeded 1,000. The construction wing of the Stanislaus project (known as the Union Construction Company) had some existing funds in local reserves, and some select work continued in the short term. But the failure of the Knickerbocker would mean long-term financial instability, as the early stoppage delayed completion of the generators and curtailed the ability of the project to generate revenue by distributing electricity. "We are at somewhat of a loss to figure how the situation has developed," Howard Veeder would state shortly after the work stoppage. Veeder also noted that the suspension tied up available funds, but they hoped in the moment that work would be able to resume shortly as they were considering other financial plans for getting back online. Still, "on account of the unfortunate labor troubles the construction, of our pile lines has been so delayed that we had given up any hope of having the plant completed until next year probably in June or July."¹⁵¹

The 1906 fire turned out to be one of the panic's long-term causes, as the outflow of specie that year from London banks to the United States ballooned because of the hundreds of millions of dollars in insurance claims for property destruction from the devastating fires. During and after the Gold Rush, with the San Francisco Bay serving as a reliable port on the West Coast of the United States, the city struck as

¹⁴⁹ ¹⁴⁹ Kerry A. Odell and Marc D. Weidenmier. "Real Shock, Monetary Aftershock: The 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and the Panic of 1907," *The Journal of Economic History*, 64:4 (Dec., 2004), 1002-1027, Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Economic History Association; Jon Moen and Ellis W. Tallman, "The Bank Panic of 1907: The Role of Trust Companies," *The Journal of Economic History*, 52:3 (Sep., 1992), 611-630, Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Economic History Association.

¹⁵⁰ "Collapse of the Knickerbocker," *The Banner*, Sonora, Oct. 25, 1907, Tuolumne County Library, Sonora.

¹⁵¹ Howard Veeder to Herman Veeder, Oct. 28, 1907, Box 2322, Folder 11, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

many if not more financial relationships with international capitalist entities in places like Britain and Germany as with the American eastern elite. Much of the growth in the city that urbanized and industrialized rapidly from the middle to the end of the 19th Century was underwritten by international capital and international insurance policies. With the fire and the subsequent claim settlements, English banks had potential liquidity problems, and they tightened their gold exports to the major financial firms in New York. This generally tightened the money supply through interest rates and other financial policies which caused a recession and made those firms – especially trusts, which were major financial institutions and capital investors despite being less regulated than banks – vulnerable to runs and collapse.¹⁵²

The Knickerbocker Trust closed its doors indefinitely and went bankrupt in the wake of its October 1907 collapse. The impacts were felt locally in Calaveras and Tuolumne counties, squeezing finances in ways that hurt Thompson's and Veeder's ability to respond to the closure of the trust with new lines of financing in the east and in San Francisco, while also putting men in Vallecito and Sonora out of work. The dual impacts of this event were not just felt by the Stanislaus company, either, as one commentator out of San Francisco pointed out.

But there are other securities which cannot be called non-speculative, but which are as legitimate as business loans virtually secured by the merchandise which the borrowed money pays for. Such loans of investments are the advances made for building a railroad or an industrial concern, and which, of course, can yield no returns until the enterprise starts up. The New York trust companies are organized for the express purpose of financing such enterprises, and so long as sound judgment is used they are perfectly safe, and more profitable than ordinary banks. But it is perfectly plain that a trust company which has large amounts of its money in uncompleted plants may be quickly forced to close by a run, and yet be absolutely solvent. Such, we suppose, is the condition of the New York trust companies which are in trouble, and unless there has been wildcatting, which has not been charged, they are pretty sure to come out right. And if they had not started in to compete with regular banks there would probably have been no trouble. But the failure of such concerns is a calamity, for it may throw men out of jobs everywhere in the country. The money which the Knickerbocker Trust Company expected to use in building the plant of the Stanislaus ... company and other enterprises was drawn

¹⁵² Kerry A. Odell and Marc D. Weidenmier. "Real Shock, Monetary Aftershock: The 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and the Panic of 1907," *The Journal of Economic History*, 64:4 (Dec., 2004), 1002-1027, Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Economic History Association; Jon Moen and Ellis W. Tallman, "The Bank Panic of 1907: The Role of Trust Companies," *The Journal of Economic History*, 52:3 (Sep., 1992), 611-630, Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Economic History Association.

out in a day by a mob of crazy depositors and the work has to stop until a new source of supply is found.¹⁵³

The situation seemed to have improved for the Stanislaus company for much of 1908, according to Thompson and Veeder. But their fate within the company was already out of their hands. The Knickerbocker Trust's managers approved and released some money the winter after the panic, with Veeder commenting in one correspondence in January that "things have improved considerably in the east."¹⁵⁴ Despite the tumult of 1907, with work stoppages and runups related to labor and material costs, and the precarity of their largest funding source, company leadership was promised that they would be paid out to honor the existing contract. To them, this meant the outlook was good for completion of the initial hydroelectric plant by possibly the end of the year. "We hope to get word any day to resume all of the work possible. ... The saw mill has been operating right along since December 1st, and the work on the upper end of the flume has already been resumed. If we can resume work promptly in the transmission line, the whole proposit (sic) on should be completed some time in August or September without much difficulty, which of course is a result much to be hoped for,"¹⁵⁵ Howard Veeder stated at the beginning of the year.

But Thompson and Veeder did not control their own professional destinies. Instead, they were subject to the will of a shadowy and opaque process that would undermine their optimism. After the Knickerbocker Trust failed, the company faced a reorganization under the management of a protective committee which would handle the assets and liabilities and set up a plan of viability moving forward. While the reorganization and the implementation of a protective committee meant that contractually obliged funding would resume to the extent that it could, it also meant that the future of the project could be precarious as it was no longer in the hands of its principals or the people with the trust who inked the deal as well. Instead, a third-party committee would determine the future of the company's assets. Would they call on the loan at the earliest moment contractually possible, in 1909? Would they default on their obligations before or after completion of the power plant, making revenue generation and payback of the loan all but impossible? Would they foreclose on the project and assume control over the infrastructure should Veeder and Thompson slip into their own state of default? Would they negotiate a hostile takeover with other stockholders?

These protective committees often worked in shadowy and unpredictable ways, and while Thompson sometimes was asked to take part in some discussions or negotiations, he was often in the dark as to what outcomes were on the table or even possible. The project had been in the news for years by this point and was considered an impressive one by many observers, especially as the city of San Francisco's needs

¹⁵³ "How Speculation Affects Trade," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Oct. 29, 1907, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

¹⁵⁴ Howard Veeder to Herman Veeder, Jan. 9, 1908, Letter in Cal lib collection, Jan 9, 1908, Box 2322, Folder 12, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

for water and power grew rapidly in the wake of the earthquake and fire. While Thompson and Veeder moved forward throughout 1908 to try and complete the power plant at Camp Nine, the reservoir at the Relief Creek and network of pipes and flumes and ditches connecting the two, they also expressed concern over the Knickerbocker Trust's reorganization and how it would or wouldn't impact their project. "I have as yet heard nothing as to the plans being considered by the Depositor's Protective Committee," Veeder would write as late as June 1908.¹⁵⁶ Veeder signaled a similar state of confusion about the company's financial situation more than seven months later, writing that, "We are at somewhat of a loss to figure how the situation has developed."¹⁵⁷

In late August of 1908, local reports of a takeover emerged with rumors that the controversial and scandal-ridden United Railway Company would acquire the Stanislaus Electric Power Company and much of its assets, including the construction company in the process of completing it.¹⁵⁸ United Railway was one of multiple street car companies in San Francisco jostling for supremacy in the city's rebuild, and its shareholders and leaders were seeking a reliable source of power to run their lines. United Railways was fresh off a scandal, as their efforts to build track and expand services were reportedly aided by graft with local political machines and resulted in one of the largest scandals in the city's history and multiple indictments.¹⁵⁹ Thompson and Veeder would remain in the dark about the reorganization, with Veeder telling his cousin in June 1909, "It has been a very trying season to all of us here as we are so far from the scene of action and the progress has been so slow. None of us know as yet what the reorganization of the new company will be and what our connection will be with - if any."¹⁶⁰

While the move by the railroad company did come as somewhat of a surprise, it was not completely unexpected. Thompson and Veeder had considered a similar proposal five years prior¹⁶¹ before opting against it. Yet they did not seem prepared when the railway company president Patrick Calhoun announced on Dec. 12 that a purchase agreement was official, and a takeover was imminent through a call on the loan and inevitable foreclosure proceedings. Reports indicated backing from major capital back east, including General Electric and Standard Oil.¹⁶² With the buyer still

¹⁵⁶ Howard Veeder to Herman Veeder, June 9, 1908, Box 2322, Folder 12, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

¹⁵⁷ Howard Veeder to Herman Veeder, Oct. 28, 1907, Box 2322, Folder 11, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

¹⁵⁸ "Millions Invested in Big Power Plant," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Aug. 25, 1908, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

¹⁵⁹ "Prominent Figures in San Francisco Scandal," *San Diego Union*, Oct 4, 1907, California Digital Newspaper Collection.

¹⁶⁰ Howard Veeder to Herman Veeder, June 22, 1909, Box 2322, Folder 13, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

¹⁶¹ Howard Veeder to Herman Veeder, Jan. 14, 1903, Box 2322, Folder 7, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

¹⁶² "United Railroads Acquires Big Plant of the Stanislaus Electric Company," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Dec. 12, 1908, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

working in the wake of scandal, and investors beyond Thompson and Veeder standing to lose quite a bit of money moving forward, the takeover would meet some opposition in court. But ultimately, enough parties settled to make way for a final purchase. In early May 1909, a mysterious representative from Boston named John C. Rice showed up on the steps of the Calaveras County courthouse and bought the Stanislaus company's assets and properties for \$2.2 million as part of a foreclosure auction. (See Figure 25) One local outlet called the sale "the largest sale of property ever held in the county."¹⁶³

United Railways would eventually form the Sierra and San Francisco Electric Power Company, which would complete the project that Thompson and Veeder pursued after Keefer disappeared. But even that corporate foundation for the project was unstable, as the plant and its related facilities would eventually be swallowed up into a large regional utility consolidation. (See Figure 26) Thompson would stay on in a kind of consulting position for some months, wherein he would work behind the scenes with the new company to try and make himself and some stockholders whole. Some assumed he had done well in the takeover, but the incident would wear on his health and that of his partner's. He would deal with stomach problems,¹⁶⁴ reportedly while facing down seemingly disastrous financial situation. In a 1911 letter to Howard Veeder's cousin, Herman, Thompson defended himself from what appeared to be accusations by an incredulous Herman that he was somehow making out of everything with a bunch of money. Thompson bristled, saying that not only was the value of all his stocks and securities wiped out through the reorganization, but also claiming United Railroads and Knickerbocker Trust were squeezing him into selling at even lower values than he thought they were worth. Further, he claimed that he borrowed money to try and make both the Veeders and other investors whole, still owing \$30,000 in outstanding debt. "You seem to think that I made a great deal of money out of the Stanislaus, unfortunately and greatly to my regret, you are entirely mistaken," Thompson would tell Herman Veeder, before continuing:

Figure out for yourself how much I have made out of the Stanislaus. You have the facts. I am leaving San Francisco tomorrow night to make my last effort to save something out of the wreck. Of the three of us who deserve much you and Howard have something. I got a great deal of credit for having done a big thing and having developed a magnificent property, but if I am to get cash or securities they are still to come, and I cannot see any prospects. ... Losing the Stanislaus will not leave me wrecked. I have an excellent prospect of making a very

¹⁶³ "Two Million Dollar Sale," *The Union Democrat*, Sonora, May 15, 1909, Tuolumne County Library, Sonora.

¹⁶⁴ "Millionaire has Even Chance for his Life," *The Evening News*, San Jose, Aug. 5, 1913, America's Historical Newspapers; "Banker Drops Dead in Hotel," *New York Tribune*, Oct. 24, 1914, ProQuest Historical Newspapers; Letter to Beach Thompson, Jan. 19, 1914, Box 2322, Folder 17, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

great deal of money in the next two or three years, but it is not in any hydro-electric development business.¹⁶⁵

That second company would prove to be somewhat more successful. Remaining partners, Thompson and Veeder pursued the new technology of wireless telegraphy right as military growth on the Pacific Coast would fuel demand in the coming years.¹⁶⁶ But Thompson would not get to see much of that growth or success. He would instead die on Oct. 23, 1914, in a New York hotel, most likely from an abscess rupturing in his abdomen.¹⁶⁷ His wife and a Christian Science practitioner were both present. His daughter was reportedly on site, as well. She was five years old at the time.

Not a place “to play in and pray in:” The Stanislaus River as an industrial environment

Much like Windsor Keefer before them, Beach Thompson and Howard Veeder would attempt but ultimately fail to complete a grand power and water project along the Stanislaus River. They worked diligently to overcome central California’s unpredictable physical and socioeconomic environments, the volatility of which were tied to both local and worldwide environmental and economic processes. But their upstart efforts were no match for the power of big capital operating at larger scales. It took a major consolidation of the power utility company PG&E – which owns and operates the entire Stanislaus system today – to make a reliable regional electrical supply system possible for the state’s growing urban and modernizing agricultural centers.

Still, it was Thompson’s and Veeder’s work, building on Keefer’s initial vision of an integrated, multi-use watershed, that drove the Stanislaus River’s transformation to the place of industrial activity and extraction as it was in 1908 when the two men lost the company. In October of that year, a group of high-profile Californians signed an open letter to the voters of San Francisco about the future of the city’s water supply. (See Figure 27) The letter was a four-page argument to the people in the urbanizing city and its growing industries against damming the Tuolumne River in the high Sierra Nevada mountains. The writers dedicated the bulk of the letter, largely meant to print in newspaper advertisements and leaflets, to economic logic and material concerns. Such a project will increase the tax rate, with financial benefits unfairly weighted toward irrigators in distant farmland. The reliability of the water source was

¹⁶⁵ Beach Thompson To Herman Veeder, Dec. 13, 1911, Box 2322, Folder 15, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

¹⁶⁶ Stephen B. Adams, “Arc of Empire: The Federal Telegraph Company, the US Navy, and the Beginnings of Silicon Valley,” *Business History Review*, 91:2 (2017), 329-359.

¹⁶⁷ “Banker Drops Dead in Hotel,” *New York Tribune*; “Wester Capitalist Dies in New York City,” *The Evening News*, San Jose, Oct. 24, 1914, America’s Historical Newspapers; “Obituaries: Beach Thompson,” *Evening Ledger*, Philadelphia, Oct. 24, 1914; “Beach Thompson Dies in New York,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Oct. 24, 1914, ProQuest Historical Newspapers; “Beach Thompson Died of Intestinal Abscess,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Oct. 25, 1914.

questionable, with more plentiful sources available closer to home. The estimates were significantly lower than the real likely costs. The dam, they argued, would be a boondoggle, pointing to other water projects that they claimed plagued taxpayers elsewhere. "Are we any wiser here in San Francisco?" they asked.

Yet buried in the letter was a short paragraph that deviated from the argument's economic and instrumental logic. Driven by the letter's first and perhaps most famous signee, John Muir, the rhetoric of that part was a better fit with the preservationist cause headed by Muir and his organization the Sierra Club. Muir here pleaded with voters to protect the Hetch Hetchy valley as a unique and scenic treasure much like its nearby sister valley in Yosemite.

Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul. The Hetch-Hetchy is a mountain temple next to Yosemite, the finest and greatest in the National Park. Should it be submerged, as proposed, it would be made inaccessible and its beauty destroyed. If preserved in pure wildness, it will attract admiring multitudes from all parts of the world and add not only to the wealth and glory of this proud State, but also bring fame and money to San Francisco.¹⁶⁸

Such was the argument that would attach itself to Hetch Hetchy moving forward. The dam would be the center of a controversy that would split the American conservation movement and invigorate a preservation-focused wing seeking to fight for wildness and natural spaces outside of the logic of instrumental use and ultimately evolve into the American environmental movement of the 1960s.

But in understanding that the city's water needs were paramount, Muir and the other signees focused most of the letter on questions over the economic, geographic and hydrological wisdom of the project. They set these points against the scenic and spiritual amenities that made Hetch Hetchy a special and preservable place. The city of San Francisco needed more water, they conceded, and it would have to come from some sort of development along nature's rivers. They just needed to get it from another river, one that does not flow through a mountain temple. With this, the letter pointed to a handful of other potential sites they argued made more geographic, economic and philosophical sense for the voters of San Francisco. One of those was the Stanislaus River, which the letter identified as a strong alternative. The river system was located just north of Hetch Hetchy's Tuolumne, sharing a similar hydrology and geography. Its headwaters started with snowmelt high in the Sierra Nevada mountains, rushing quickly down the range's western slopes in various creeks and arms before converging in the heart of the Sierra's foothills and eventually slowing among the flatlands of the San Joaquin Valley. It wasn't much less accessible

¹⁶⁸ John Muir, "Letter from John Muir et al. to The Voters of San Francisco, [ca.1908 Oct]" (1908), John Muir Correspondence (PDFs), 5558, <https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/muir-correspondence/5558>.

for the city's infrastructure. And, perhaps most importantly, the Stanislaus' high-country landscapes and waterways had already experienced extensive development, with more to come.

Another company, operating on the Stanislaus River in the Sierra, WITH STORAGE CAPACITY GREATER THAN THE HETCH HETCHY VALLEY, and protected by a forest reserve, WITH DAMS CONSTRUCTED AT NO EXPENSE TO THE CITY, will deliver the same amount of water from the Sierra at less cost than the Hetch Hetchy system, where dams must be built and valuable rights purchased.¹⁶⁹

This was not a place for protected wildness. It was not a place to play in or pray in. The city would not have to destroy a sacred place to systematically expand and secure its water by damming the Stanislaus.

And yet, that industrial landscape that would be the setting for social and material construction of two wilderness places in the Stanislaus River canyon and the Emigrant Wilderness. The outcome of Thompson's and Veeder's vision and capital would be environmental infrastructure that ultimately facilitated future recreational use. Roads for vehicles, for feet and for hooves would allow access to otherwise remote places in the region, making it possible for boaters and fishermen alike to experience the wildlands of California as part of a backcountry adventure. Dams – and the engineered, controlled waterways that they ruptured – would ensure that that the places where those people boated and fished were suitable for those activities, largely by keeping a reliable and predictable flow of water in the rivers and streams. Ultimately, these activities that took place on top of human engineering would inform the ways in which the very notion of wilderness would later be applied and understood across the United States. These places and those who used them would drive future controversy over how wilderness would be managed, used and maintained. The next chapter begins an exploration of this infrastructure, specifically the roads, which were mostly completed under the Sierra and San Francisco Power Company after Thompson and Veeder were bought out. Those roads and infrastructure where they led were both the sites and the products labor, risk and toil. And they would eventually facilitate some of the earliest forms of outdoor recreation and leisure in the region.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

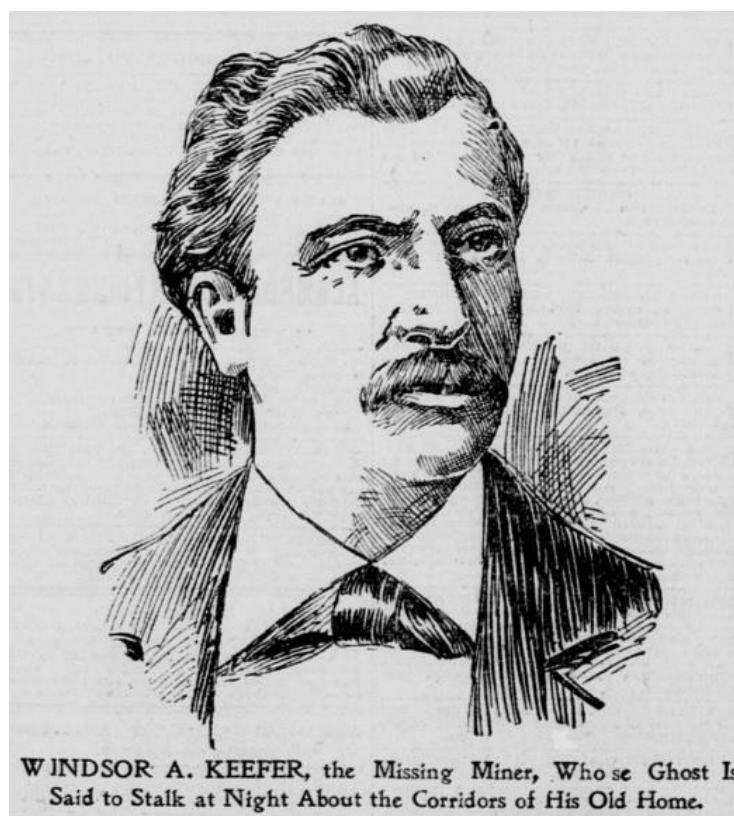


Figure 14: Windsor Keefer, 1897. *San Francisco Call*, courtesy of California Digital Newspaper Collection.

Form No. 1.

THE WESTERN UNION TELEGRAPH COMPANY.
 INCORPORATED
 21,000 OFFICES IN AMERICA. CABLE SERVICE TO ALL THE WORLD.

This Company TRANSMITS and DELIVERS messages only on conditions limiting its liability, which have been accepted to by the sender of the following message. Errors can be guarded against only by repeating a message back to the sending station for comparison, and the Company will not hold itself liable for errors or omissions in transmission or delivery of its repeated messages, beyond the amount of tolls paid thereon, in any case where the claim is not presented in writing within sixty days after the message is filed with the Company for transmission.
 This is an UNREPEATED MESSAGE, and is delivered by request of the sender, under the conditions named above.

THOS. T. ECKERT, President and General Manager.

NUMBER	SENT BY	REC'D BY	MIN'S
2132	dkf	da	9 paid

RECEIVED at San Francisco, U.S.A. M. Standard Time May 26th 1897

Dated *Angeles Camp Cal 26*
 To *James J. Cheehan*
421 1/2 Eleventh St. S.F.

Found that in debris five buckshot holes in it.
H. S. Longstreth

Figure 15: Telegram from searcher reporting on clues as to Windsor Keefer's Whereabouts, 1897. Printed in the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

Summer Resorts.

BIG TREES,
CALAVERAS COUNTY, CAL.

First-Class Hotel Accommodations.
SPERRY, KEEFER & CO., Proprietors

THE CALAVERAS GROUP is the one known to the world as "The Big Trees of California," and the one chiefly visited by tourists. It comprises the **MAMMOTH AND SOUTH PARK GROVES.**

THE MAMMOTH GROVE contains ninety-three (93) of these Giants of the Forest, among which are the **MOTHER OF THE FOREST**, the bark from which was exhibited in the Crystal Palace, London; the **FATHER OF THE FOREST**, through whose prostrate trunk thousands have ridden on horseback; and the **ORIGINAL BIG TREE**, the stump of which forms the floor of the famous Pavilion, 32 feet in diameter.

THE SOUTH PARK GROVE, Distant six miles, is superior to the more famous Mammoth Grove, both in number and size of its Big Trees, of which 1380 have been counted. It has only been recently opened up to tourists, and is readily reached with horses from the Mammoth Grove Hotel by a good bridge and trail. These two Groves comprise the Calaveras Group of Big Trees, surpassing all others in grandeur and beauty, and the only one provided with first-class hotel accommodations for tourists and family visitors, and telegraphic communication with all parts of the State.

It is readily reached by rail and stage or private conveyance. It is on the best and most interesting (Hutchings', route to the Yosemite Valley, via Murphy's, Coombs, Sonora, Chinese Camp, Big Oak Flat and Garrote, passing through the heart of the Southern Mines. 216

Figure 16: Ad for Keefer's hotel located among the Big Trees in Calaveras County, along the north fork of the Stanislaus River, 1874. *Daily Alta Californian*, courtesy of California Digital Newspaper Collection.

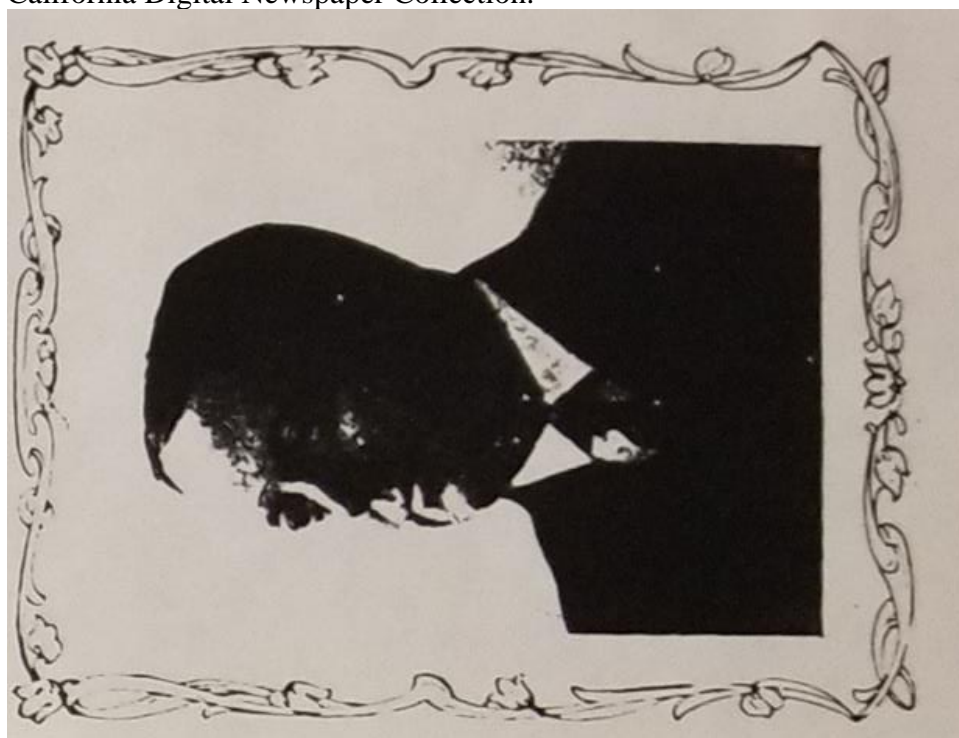


Figure 17: Howard Veeder, 1911. *Davis' Commercial Encyclopedia of the Pacific Southwest*, Berkeley, courtesy of Courtesy of the California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento, California..



Figure 18: Hydraulic workings of the San Domingo mine, ca. 1908. Courtesy of California State Library, California History Section Picture Catalogue.

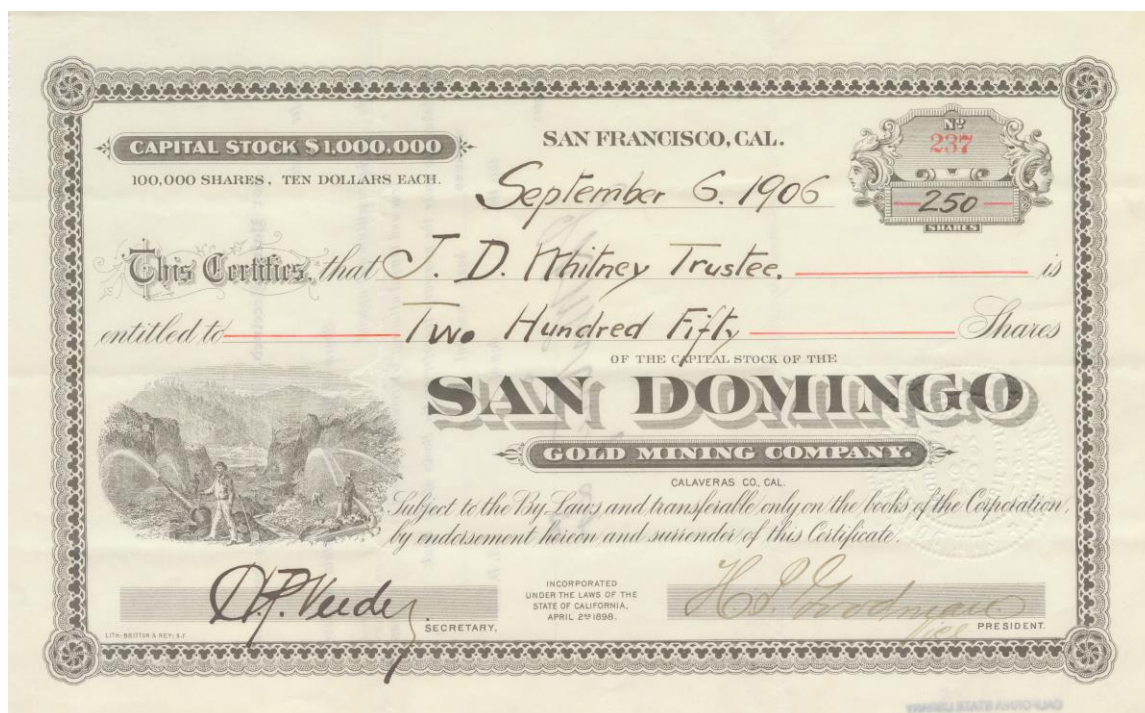
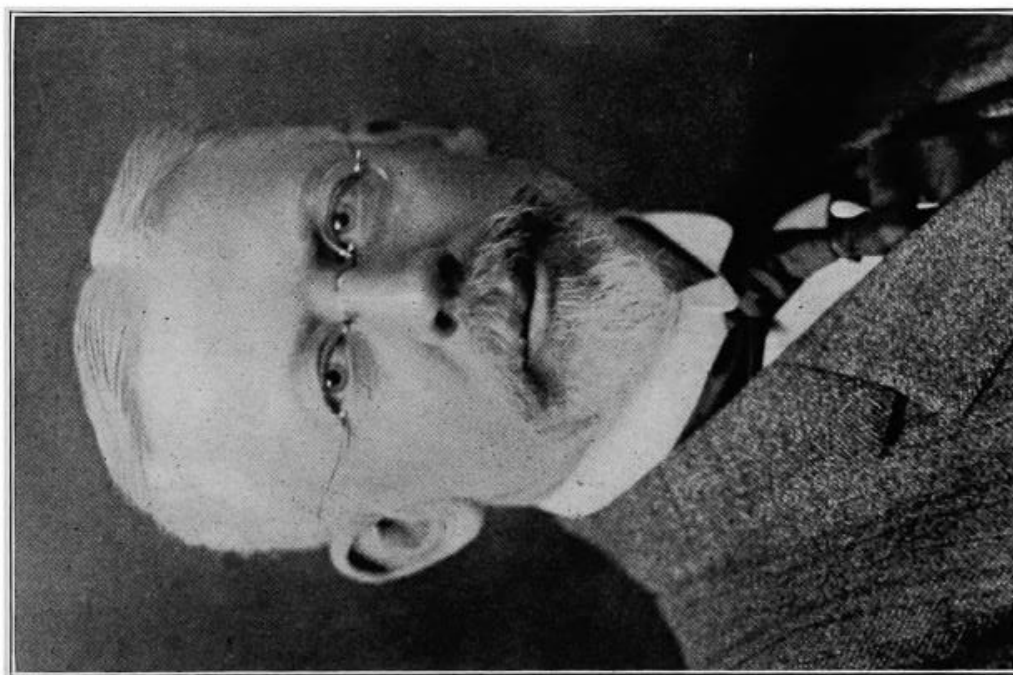


Figure 19: Stock certificate, San Domingo Gold Mining Company. Courtesy of the California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento, California.



BEACH THOMPSON

Figure 20: Beach Thompson, 1914. From *Notables of the Southwest, Being the Portraits and Biographies of Progressive men of the Southwest*.

W. A. Keefer,

14 Grant Avenue, Office 67.

<p>Real Estate Agent and Broker. Manager of Probate Properties. Promoter of Land, Water and Mining Interests. Appraisements Made on Property.</p>	<p>Collects Rents. Negotiates Loans. Directs Investments of Capital, either in Bonds, Stocks, Realty or Mining Grounds.</p>
--	---

Fire Insurance placed at lowest rates in the most reliable companies.

San Francisco, *October 6th*, 189*6*.

four \$400⁰⁰ dollars

Received from *Mr. A. B. Thompson* on account of purchase of *two hundred shares of Jupiter Gravel Mining and Water Co.'s stock* belonging to *W. A. Keefer* at *\$10⁰⁰ per share*, making *nineteen hundred dollars* paid in on *%*, Balance due on said purchase *one hundred dollars*.

W. A. Keefer

\$ 400⁰⁰/₁₀₀

Figure 21: Receipt of Beach Thompson purchase of stock in Keefer's mining company, 1896. Courtesy of the California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento, California.

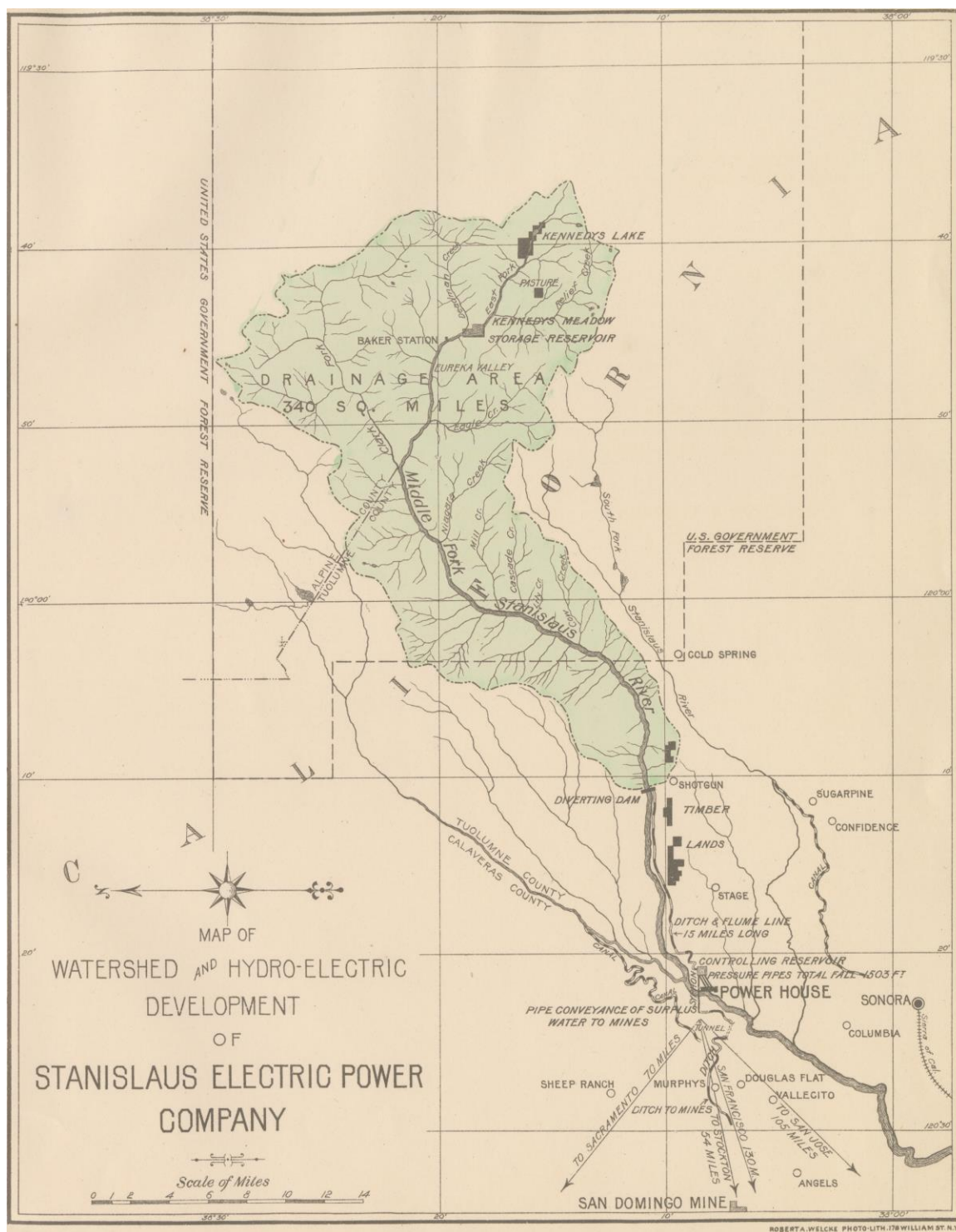


Figure 23: Map of watershed of Stanislaus Electric Power Co. from company prospectus. Courtesy of the California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento, California.



Figure 24: Beach Thompson (center of group), local leaders and company investors took a special promotional trip into the project area, 1906. Courtesy of Tuolumne County Historical Society.

FORECLOSURE SALES.
IN THE CIRCUIT COURT OF THE UNITED STATES
 in and for the
NINTH CIRCUIT, NORTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA.
Knickerbocker Trust Company,
 Complainant,
 against
 The Stanislaus Electric Power Company,
 Stanislaus Railway Company, Tuolumne Water Power Company and Union Construction Company, Defendants.
 Knickerbocker Trust Company,
 Complainant
 against
 Tuolumne Water Power Company, The Stanislaus Electric Power Company and Union Construction Company, Defendants.

NOTICE OF SALE:
 NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that in pursuance of a decree of sale made in the above entitled consolidated cause and filed and entered therein on the 3th day of April, 1909, the undersigned, George H. Whipple and Vanderlynn Stow, the Commissioners named in said decree of sale, and Knickerbocker Trust Company, as Trustees by the undersigned George H. Whipple and Vanderlynn Stow, its agents and attorneys for such purpose authorized, will sell, free and discharged of and from all liens, claims and charges of any kind and all parties to the above entitled actions, at public auction, to the highest bidder, at the main entrance of the County Court House, in the County of Tuolumne, in the State of California, at 9 o'clock, in said County, on Monday, the 10th day of May, 1909, at 12 o'clock noon of that day, the mortgaged premises and property rights, interests and franchises of The Stanislaus Electric Power Company and of The Tuolumne Water Power Company described in said decree of sale and hereafter described to wit:
 Parcel No. 1: The power plant of The Stanislaus

Figure 25: Foreclosure notice from the *New York Sun* for property associated with Stanislaus Electric Power Co., 1909.

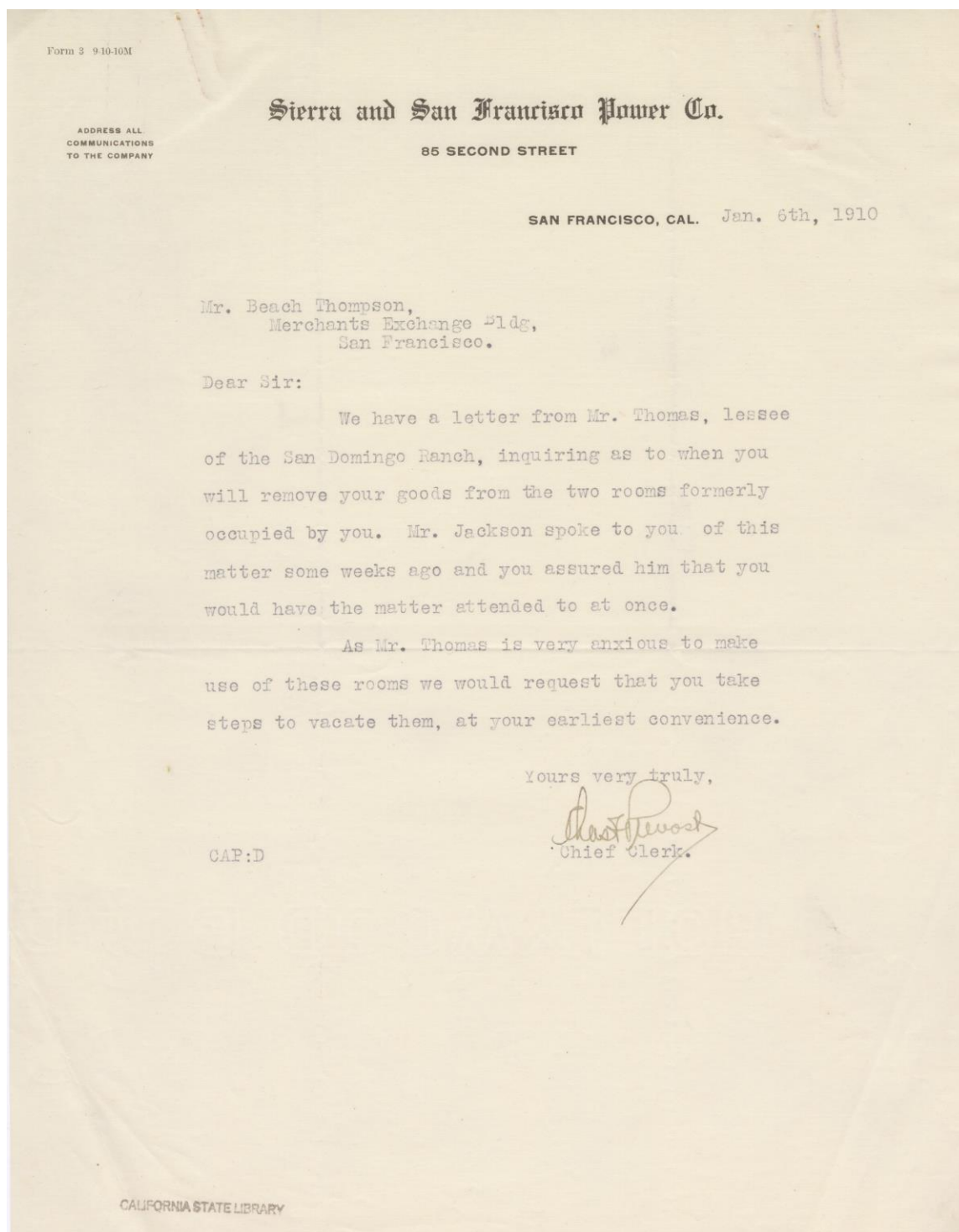


Figure 26: Eviction letter to Beach Thompson from Sierra and San Francisco Power Co., 1910. Courtesy of the California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento, California.

This is issued by citizens who are interested solely in the welfare of San Francisco and who have no interest whatever in any water supply available for San Francisco.

TO THE VOTERS OF SAN FRANCISCO:

Almost all of our citizens favor a municipal water supply. We want the best there is—acquired on the best terms possible and for the least cost.

The IMMEDIATE QUESTION before the people is the HETCH-HETCHY SUPPLY. The following are SOME OF THE REASONS WHY YOU SHOULD NOT VOTE BONDS FOR OR FAVOR THIS PROPOSITION:

FINANCIAL REASONS AGAINST THE PROJECT.

ARE YOU WILLING TO BOND THIS CITY FOR MORE THAN SEVENTY-FIVE MILLION (\$75,000,000.00) DOLLARS AND INCREASE THE TAX RATE 75 TO 100 CENTS ON EVERY HUNDRED DOLLARS?

DO YOU WANT TO RAISE TAXATION BEYOND ENDURANCE? — CHECK ENTERPRISE? — PARALYZE INDUSTRIES? — REPEL INVESTORS FROM YOUR DOORS? — BUILD UP A WALL THAT WILL KEEP OUT MONEY AND PREVENT THE EMPLOYMENT OF LABOR?

DO YOU WANT THE CITY TO SPEND MILLIONS ON A ONE-SIDED AND GROSSLY UNFAIR PARTNERSHIP WHEREBY IRRIGATION DISTRICTS ARE GUARANTEED MORE THAN ONE BILLION FIVE HUNDRED MILLION GALLONS OF WATER PER DAY AND SAN FRANCISCO IS ALLOWED ONLY WHAT IS LEFT?

Figure 27: Tuolumne River advocates in 1908 imploring voters in San Francisco to utilize Stanislaus River development for water and power instead of Hetch Hetchy proposal. Courtesy of University of the Pacific.

CHAPTER III

LABOR, ROADS AND RECREATION IN THE CENTRAL SIERRA NEVADA

Before Kennedy Meadows was the gateway to the Emigrant Wilderness, it was the gateway to Relief Reservoir. Built on the headwaters of the Stanislaus River, the reservoir flooded a scenic alpine valley in high Sierra Nevada cut by glaciers over millennia. The Sierra and San Francisco Power Company owned and operated Relief before utility giant Pacific Gas and Electric absorbed the company, but in its early years after completion around 1908, Relief was a central piece of a large hydroelectric scheme delivering power to the city of San Francisco by way of a network of power lines and steel towers running from the heart of the Sierras through the San Joaquin Valley. During its construction and at the peak of its operation, Relief Reservoir was a significant worksite to and from which men and materials constantly moved. Albert Dambacher was one of those men who moved back and forth with the materials he hauled.

Dambacher was a teamster who regularly hauled equipment and supplies from depots in Sonora or Middle Camp to the reservoir site where laborers, machines and animals worked on dam construction and operations. Depending on the load and the speed of travel, the trip could take as many as two days,¹⁷⁰ and that was even with significant improvements to the roadway that were performed specifically so that his teams could carry the loads through the crags and canyons of the Sierra Nevada. Albert was an experienced teamster working around the Tuolumne and Calaveras counties, hauling people and freight for hire much like his father had before him and his younger brother would later in life.¹⁷¹

The regular haul up to Relief was one of the more challenging of Albert's career, and negotiating the conditions required a skilled driver with complete command over a team of seasoned animals. From the roadside stop at Baker Station around 50 Miles to the east of Sonora, and just a few additional miles to the west of the looming Sonora Pass, Albert would turn onto a side road into the pleasant and scenic Kennedy Meadows where there was a small settlement and stables along the burbling middle fork of the Stanislaus River. A stop for the team would likely be justified, as the trip to Baker over the steep Patterson Pass hauling anything from machinery to hay around 1910 would have fatigued his horses by the time they reached the meadow. And after a rest came the most hazardous stretch to the reservoir.¹⁷² The short trail to the far northern end of the glaciated valley would follow the river along a road with a small incline before beginning the ascent. The steep climb followed the river along a road cut into stark granite, only wide enough to fit the wagon and a single, long line of horses pulling the load. (See Figure 28) At one point,

¹⁷⁰ Russell L. Starks (Columbia College), "Interview With" Charles A. "Doc" Dambacher, February, 1973, Oral History Series, Columbia Junior College, Columbia, Calif, <http://apps.gocolumbia.edu/oralhistory/listen?45> .

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

the road resembled a tunnel dug into a bulging mountainside, with a ceiling of granite just over the head of the load and driver.¹⁷³ The road only extended six inches beyond the wheels of the wagon at points, meaning any misstep by driver or animal could plunge the entire concern into the river hundreds of feet below. The ascent required crossing a bridge over a churning staircase of waterfalls at the bottom of a steep gorge, with tight turns and switchbacks necessary to cross the formidable, fortress-like towers of crumbling granite jutting above the tree line. At a certain point, the climb would be too much for the animals, and technology would need to intervene. Multiple steam engines had been built and placed at intervals along the final climb to pull animals and materials over the ridge. Those engines, often called donkeys by workers and teamsters, would slowly pull the animals and their loads up and along to aid as they climbed the dusty, crumbling granite trail and back down a steep descent down into Relief Valley. In all, that trip to the reservoir area from the nearby Niagara Creek (about 10 miles west of Baker) would take most or all of a day. “And you could not walk between the wagon and the river or you’d fall in,” Dambacher’s brother, Charles, also called Doc, recalled of the trip he took with Albert many times. “And if you think putting two wagons, one behind the other, with a long team over such a road wasn’t quite an undertaking then try it.”¹⁷⁴

But while the narrow road looming above a nearly vertical canyon was harrowing enough, such conditions were not unusual for experienced drivers and teams like Albert Dambacher’s. The high Sierra terrain had been traversed with varying degrees of success via horse, carriage, wagon and ox since before the gold rush of the mid-19th Century. The biggest challenges with this particular route were the sharp turns, which at times were, “absolute right angles,” necessary to cross bridges along tight margins.¹⁷⁵ And even with teamsters as experienced as Dambacher, driving a team of horses in an especially long, single file line in these conditions could still result in disaster. One trip, his brother recalled, Albert saw trouble while trying to negotiate a right angle with a full load. The sharp turn, the load, the long-set team on this grade all required the animals to pull in a constant strain. Should a horse lose its footing on the often-pebbly trail, the strain on the line and the narrowness of the trail could throw that animal right over the vertical wall of stone lining the canyon side of the road. This happened at least once to Albert as he navigated those turns, his brother and regular road companion recalled.

When he (the horse) lost his footing the strain on that line flew him right over the rock wall on the river, and he had his neck broken when it happened, and he held his collar over the rock wall with the river under him. And all my brother could do because he was a dead horse was cut the harness off of him and drop him into the river. And that’s

¹⁷³ Photograph #2, from C. A. “Doc” Dambacher describes Relief Dam Photos, interview by Joan Gorsuch, Nov. 24, 1976, Oral History Series, Columbia Junior College, Columbia, Calif, <http://apps.gocolumbia.edu/oralhistory/listen?43> .

¹⁷⁴ D Starks, “Interview With” Charles A. "Doc" Dambacher.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

what he did. Now, these teams were so well balanced out that it took every animal to do its bit to haul, that he had to tie that team up until he entered Relief to get a relief horse and then back to this point to get the load in.¹⁷⁶

Today, that same wagon road out of Kennedy Meadows is the among the most popular entrances to the Emigrant Wilderness for recreationists. In the meadow area is a pack station where one can launch a horse team, but this time each horse walks independently with a rider or a small load of gear making navigation of the turns and grades a much more reasonable proposition. The donkey engines haven't operated for more than a century, which means that last, steepest stretch over the ridge and descent to Relief Reservoir now require real human and horse power. But their traces remain, discarded along the side of the trails, as do other reminders of the human presence in the high country in the early 20th Century – rusted cables and pulleys, piles of tin cans, engines and chimneys, grown-over building foundations, and even small rooms likely for storage carved into the mountainsides. It is one stretch of the 90-mile network of roads and highways completed less than 10 years after the Stanislaus Electric Power Co. began construction on what its leaders Beach Thompson and Howard Veeder envisioned as a complex hydroelectric and water supply system. The system as conceived would involve at least three major reservoirs, a handful of other dams and holding facilities, hundreds of miles of ditches, thousands of feet of wooden flume suspended over canyons, and a collection of generators to produce electricity for the growing urban centers of the Bay Area and an agricultural sector increasingly turning to modern tools run by electricity. But before those aspects of the project could be completed, roads were needed to access the remote locations where these dams, power houses, ditches and tramways would go. This chapter is the story of those roads, connected infrastructure and their construction, which ultimately allowed access to the Stanislaus canyon and Emigrant Basin and facilitated their transformation into popular wilderness places later in the same century.

This chapter will discuss two major impacts that the roads of the Stanislaus hydroelectric system ultimately had for the people who lived, worked, and played around them. First, the road network was both the site and result of extensive labor, as thousands of men from around the world would head into the steep, rugged, and wild terrain of the central Sierra Nevada mountains. (See Figure 29) With the aid of both animal and mechanical power, these men cut roads wide, steady and reliable enough for teams like those run by Dambacher and steam-powered traction engines pulling thousands of tons of materials and machinery to the dams and powerhouses. The work was significant and daunting, claiming at times lives and limbs of men working to tame an environment that remained capricious and unreliable even a half-century after a rush for gold had re-shaped the landscapes and waterways through force, violence, capital and ingenuity. That work for many local interests and boosters signified the coming of a new era in the central Sierra foothills, both in the advanced forms of

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

electrical technology and human engineering and in the efficient and organized way corporate leaders would direct and deploy the labor itself. Second, the roads would create access to these deep hinterlands, increasing the scale of work that could be completed along their corridors. These roads ran from the relatively populated communities of Sonora and Angels Camp – connected to each other and other cities and centers of commerce – to the remote wilds of the Stanislaus River canyon, rough and rural outposts like Vallecito, resorts of the area used by sportsmen, all the way to the distant Baker Station and Kennedy Meadows at the foot of Sonora Pass. Such areas that had previously been accessible by foot or experienced rider could now be reached by automobile, wagon or carriage, facilitating new forms of production in the area and giving access to places that could be developed not just as quarries, mines and irrigation systems, but also as sites of recreation and leisure. Long after Dambacher was no longer driving teams to Relief and elsewhere along the improved network of roads, people seeking to explore the backcountry areas adjacent to them would follow his footsteps and those of the laborers who built and traversed these pathways as workers in generations past. This infrastructure ultimately made the area more legible for riders, hikers, campers, boaters and fishermen with its construction tied to the later rise of wilderness places along the Stanislaus River watershed and in the Emigrant Wilderness.

“A fine lot of men up here in the wilds:” Laboring on roads into the wilderness

The road work for the Stanislaus hydroelectric system included both improvements to existing roadways as well as completion of new ones into the area’s remote backcountry. Those existing roadways in the foothills were still relatively rugged and unreliable, though slightly improved from decades prior when villages and routes sprung up and went empty depending on booms and busts. Reliable roads were especially crucial for developing the area in and around the Stanislaus River watershed, where the steep terrain made for difficult grades and serpentine routes. Local hydrology complicated travel as well, with the area’s main rivers draining complex mountain watersheds where fast-running tributaries clove boulders from the mountainsides and cut deep canyons, gulches and gorges largely on an east-to-west trajectory. Such terrain made crossing the waterways and traveling efficiently difficult even in good conditions, and some of the most successful business ventures after the California Gold Rush included privately-owned ferry crossings at the least-treacherous points. The area’s varied and often unpredictable crossings compounded the transportation issues, with water levels ranging from trickles to torrents reflecting the boom-or-bust water cycles of central California. A bridge could be washed out by a torrent just days after it had been crossing a stagnant pool.

Stories abound of the perilous crossings over unpredictable waterways in the region. One from 1860 reached national and even international interest, when a traveling circus led by proprietors John Williams and William Hendrickson came to the area. The circus featured famous performing elephants named Victoria and Albert who ran into trouble crossing the Stanislaus on the road from Columbia to Murphys. According to one correspondent, while deliberating how to get the beasts across the

“beautiful little river running as swift as the Niagara and between twenty and thirty feet deep, and four hundred yards across,” Albert for some reason bounded into the water with Victoria following closely behind. “The current was so strong that it took both elephants down the stream about a mile, and over the falls among the rocks.” Victoria died shortly after, and newspapers around the country printed death notices.¹⁷⁷

By the turn of the 20th Century, roads and crossings in the region were improving. The Sierra Railway – which connected the foothills to the rail lines of the Central Valley near Oakdale – ran branches from the village of Jamestown, just west of Sonora, to Tuolumne to the east and Angels Camp 20 miles north. By 1902, the line between Jamestown and Angels Camp carried both cargo and passengers, with the road networks still mostly suited for horses, wagons and carriages seeing some improvements.¹⁷⁸ A concrete bridge spanned the Stanislaus River at Parrotts Ferry by 1903,¹⁷⁹ and another one crossed the same river at the old mining town of Melones by 1910.¹⁸⁰ Reliable roadways also ran between some established towns, with a main thoroughfare running east and west from Sonora, along a ridge between the Tuolumne and Stanislaus watershed. This road crossed the Stanislaus River at Strawberry, with a smaller and more rugged wagon road continuing high into the Sierras and reaching Baker Station at the foot of the range’s highest peaks as early as 1864.¹⁸¹ The movement of people and cargo was improving at the turn of the century, with operations of a toll road available for some trade and commerce. But the ability to reliably transport machinery, materials and people at the scale necessary to build multiple dams, power houses, mills, flumes, ditches and tramways required engineering and labor only seen in the area for railroad construction.¹⁸²

When Beach Thompson and Howard Veeder established the Stanislaus Electric Power Company in 1905, they established a regional headquarters to base local operations at the dusty mining outpost of Vallecito. The company leaders saw that improving existing roadways and building new ones in the area would be vital for success. An existing roadway already ran from Angels Camp through Vallecito, across Parrott’s Ferry, through the mining village of Columbia and into the next population center of Sonora in a loop that today includes Highway 4, Parrotts Ferry Road and Highway 49. That route then connected to the east-west thoroughfare out of Sonora, running eastward into the high mountains along the Sonora-Mono route. The most

¹⁷⁷ “Death of the Elephant ‘Victoria,’” *Daily National Intelligencer*, Washington, D.C., September 20, 1860; “Death of an Elephant,” *Los Angeles Star*, July 7, 1860, California Digital Newspaper Collection; Cassidy Et al., *A Guide to Three Rivers*, 122-123.

¹⁷⁸ Bancroft Library staff, “Guide to the Sierra Railroad Records, 1896-1955,” Online Archive of California, oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf396n99nd/entire_text/.

¹⁷⁹ Parrotts Ferry, Historical Landmark, Office of Historic Preservation, California State Parks, ohp.parks.ca.gov/ListedResources/Detail/438#:~:text=Historical%20Landmark&text=This%20is%20the%20site%20of,the%20first%20bridge%20was%20built.

¹⁸⁰ Bridge at Melones in 1910 (photograph), 1910, Stanislaus River Archive, stanislausriver.org/document/bridge-at-melones-in-1910/.

¹⁸¹ Pamela A. Connors, “Baker Station Historic District, Contextual History,” Stanislaus National Forest, September, 2003, digital copy, 3-6, from Stanislaus National Forest historical archives, Sonora.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

significant locations for the power and water system were along this route, between Angels Camp and the far reaches of the Mono Road. One was a site deep in the Stanislaus Canyon upstream from Parrotts Ferry known at the time as Sublett's Crossing. The other was the high-elevation sites of Kennedy Meadows and Relief Creek. To reach both of those sites, the company would need improved main routes between Angels Camp, Vallecito, Sonora and Baker Station before they cut new roads up the canyon from Vallecito and into the wilds of the Sierras above Kennedy Meadows to enable the transportation necessary for completing the project. Whether by chance or design, the state of California in 1905 started pumping annual funds into improvements and maintenance along the high stretches of the Sonora-Mono highway.¹⁸³ And soon, the remote locations would have teams of men, horses, hydroelectric machinery, cement, rails, engines, turbines and all the other additional equipment moving into them.

Through much of 1906, the work of the Union Construction Company was a going concern in the pages of the local paper, the *Calaveras Prospect*. The construction operation was owned and overseen by Thompson's and Veeder's Stanislaus Electric Power Company, handling the labor and logistics for constructing the system's infrastructure. In Vallecito, leaders and laborers established central headquarters adjacent to the existing road that crossed the Stanislaus River at Parrotts Ferry. The first wave of work involved road improvement and construction, with local boosters heralding the impact of new transportation routes. Correspondents took a breathlessly triumphant tone when praising the industriousness and vision of the capitalists who were investing in the region. And the correspondences would often emphasize the taming of the landscape's natural hazards by the ingenuity of human minds, the work and will of human bodies, and the efficiency of modern organizational structures.

By engineering and establishing infrastructure that would facilitate travel into and through the wildlands, these projects would make the environment legible and navigable, subject it to rationalized control, and create a new and more profitable physical and economic landscape for both outside investors and local capitalists. "The Union Construction Company is certainly master of the art of road construction over steep and precipitous mountains. Over rocky gorges or across deep ravines it is all the same; the road is constructed in a business like manner, and when completed will be a monument of industry to this county," wrote one observer in July, 1905, noting later that even the hazardous critters of the wilderness were no match for these crews. "There is hardly a day that passes that there is not one or more rattlesnakes killed by the graders. Snakes are in abundance here and are of all descriptions. Some in the rocks, some in the timber, and some in the 'boots,' but with it all we have a fine lot of men up here in the wilds - big hearted fellows every one of them."¹⁸⁴ (See Figure 30)

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ "Some "Vallecito Notes of Interest," *The Calaveras Prospect*, July 20, 1906, California State Library.

Also featured in these accounts were regular emphases on modern technology, engines and autos that would both help build and traverse these new, smooth and evenly graded roads. While details often focused on the manpower (200 men here, 1,000 men there) and animal power (teams of donkeys and horses pulling scrapers or materials), these announcements also highlighted machine power driven by coal and steam. (See Figure 31) Large, tractor-like vehicles known as traction engines would haul dozens of tons of materials along these roadways. Donkey engines and steam shovels would do work men and beasts could not. “The company's all steel roller is being used to solidify their road. It makes the road nearly as hard as a brick and requires six large horses to keep it rolling when used on the road,” wrote one observer. “They are making a great change to the public highway between Vallecito and Angels Camp. It is to be a well graded and gravel-capped road that will be sufficiently solid to withstand the very heavy freighting that will be done on it soon as completed.”¹⁸⁵ Much like the great impositions of the railroads onto the difficult terrain, this project would combine organic and inorganic work to bring about previously unknown possibilities for the region’s passage into modernity. (See Figure 32) Upon its completion, this main thoroughfare would transform from a dusty wagon trail through the wilds of the frontier to modern highway, capable of supporting the most advanced forms of transportation. “The automobile is quite frequently seen on the well graded and well built traction road of the Union Construction Company, moving along with the ease and grace of a duck on an inland sea or lake and with the speed that almost rivals the birds that swim into the air,” one observer stated in the pages of the *Calaveras Prospect*. “To many of us people the auto is a new and most wonderful sight. To see a machine on wheels moving along on the public high way with the speed of a first class race horse is a great surprise to more than two of us. The auto being used here now is for pleasure but it is to be followed by one that will be used for business purposes alone.”¹⁸⁶

While engine power and technological advances impressed observers, human labor still powered the road work of the Stanislaus power project. (See Figure 33) Construction of the system would begin in 1906 with the original plan predicting completion by 1909. But the work would last well into the next decade as natural and economic events would occasionally slow progress. Observers and reporters would recount armies of strong armed and strong hearted workers, carrying out the visions of supposedly keen and shrewd capitalists, directing both primeval muscle power and the latest technology at the wildlands of the region in to make the landscape more hospitable to modernity. The rhetoric painted a picture where the human will and scientific advancement would triumph over the wild country, taming also the social milieu to make way for a new California built on the rationalization of nature through electricity and irrigation.

¹⁸⁵ Plutus, “Vallecito Incidents of Recent Dates,” *The Calaveras Prospect*, April 28, 1906, California State Library.

¹⁸⁶ Plutus, “Vallecito Letter of General Items,” *The Calaveras Prospect*, June 6, 1906, California State Library.

The roads were a key piece of this process, with observers highlighting the scale and size of the transportation system's improvements and the hazards of the environment these workers would navigate. The job was formidable, with as many as 1,000 men and likely no less than 200 men working on the system at any given time between 1906 and 1909. One observer noted, "the very extensive preparations that are being made to work one or two hundred men and thirty or forty horses and mules to handle six or eight four horse dump wagons and two or three all steel reversible scraper wagons besides ten or twelve hand scrapers and several six mule plows," when describing the company's initial amassing of men and materials at the Vallecito Camp. The same writer eventually compared the project to another transformative one of the recent past – "enough to surprise a stranger and cause him to wonder if a branch of Gould's Western Pacific railroad is not to be built in close proximity to our town."¹⁸⁷ The men, animals and equipment would establish road widths to between 12 and 16 feet wide at various points along the main route for the more than 70 miles from Angels to Sonora, and up to Baker Station near Kennedy Meadows, with additional improvements to the grading and the surface.¹⁸⁸ Along the roads would be dozens of work camps, some with just a few warehouses and cottages and others built up like towns with sawmills, blacksmith shops, cook houses and barracks, signified typically with numbers or letters: Camp Nine, Camp 31, Camp F. (See Figure 34)

Beyond improvements to the main road, crews also needed to cut into virgin mountainside to connect the far reaches of the Stanislaus project with the area's population. Perhaps the most impressive of these for some local observers was the road to Sublett's crossing, one that would run from the main road near the headquarters in Vallecito to the heart of the hydroelectric project. This heart would eventually include a massive powerhouse generating 65,000 horsepower of electricity from a high head of water crashing down the canyon. The location of the Stanislaus powerhouse was eventually named for the work camp established to construct and maintain it – Camp Nine. (See Figure 35) But before the camp could be established or the powerhouse built, a road was needed to handle the traction engines, horse teams and materials moving almost ten miles up a river canyon that menaced those who tried to traverse it with churning, unpredictable waters and near-vertical ravines. The "enormous undertaking" would construct a, up-to 30-foot-wide road with a six-percent grade, cutting down to bedrock with four feet of gravel on top and retaining walls built above and below for stability.¹⁸⁹ Work would carry on through inclement weather in the wet, early-spring months of 1906 despite the muck making the hauling of rock a slog. "They are prosecuting (business) with energy and perseverance unequalled by any

¹⁸⁷ Plutus, "More Facts About the Vallecito Boom," *The Calaveras Prospect*, Jan. 27, 1906, California State Library.

¹⁸⁸ "Pioneer Builders of the Old Mono Road," *The Union Democrat*, Oct. 6, 1916, Tuolumne County Library, Sonora; "Columbia Items," *Mother Lode Magnet*, Jamestown, July 18, 1906, Tuolumne County Library, Sonora.

¹⁸⁹ "A Big Job," *The Calaveras Prospect*, April 7, 1906, California State Library.

of the great transcontinental railroad builders of the day,”¹⁹⁰ one observer would state, again comparing the job to the railroad teams that also cut new routes in hostile environments.

And much of the local coverage regularly focused on the landscape’s wildness in the face of encroaching modernity. Not just a habitat for countless rattlesnakes, the Stanislaus canyon where the Camp Nine road was built was a “wild and precipitous” country. “At this stage of the work a narrow track has been cut into the bluff just wide enough to afford the passage of a narrow tracked cart. Nothing is finished and from the unguarded edge of the track there is a perpendicular descent of fully 400 feet,”¹⁹¹ one writer stated of the conditions. Another noted that the laborers were “doing good work here and (have) gone over some good that seemed impassible. One bluff in particular, and of solid granite, has been blown out and now has a fine road bed sixteen feet across its rocky breast as an evidence of what can be done in this wild country.”¹⁹²

The hostile environment would claim its victims, as would the conditions of the work men endured to tame it. Accidents and work deaths occurred throughout the build. On a June morning in 1906, a 65-year-old German immigrant named Frederick Winkler hauled a load of wood along the unfinished road to Sublett’s Flat. Winkler was last seen taking a rest on a rock on the side of the road, and when he did not return for breakfast, some searchers retraced his route before finding his “mangled” body “lodged in a tree 200 feet below the grade.” Some initially thought of foul play, as someone might have thrown him over the edge. But investigators decided an accident in the wilderness was more likely. Had the tree not been there, his body would easily have completed the almost-vertical descent of more than 400 feet to the river below.¹⁹³ About six months later, some boys exploring along the river would find another body, though the state of the remains – partially eaten and decomposing – would suggest the man died sometime in a distant past, making it harder to identify. Yet coverage would suggest he was a Union Construction worker, or someone traveling up the road seeking work, as a fall down the precipitous edge of the river canyon was the most reasonable explanation.¹⁹⁴ After all, “a slight trip or stumble near the edge of this bluff would be very apt to result in a fatal fall.”¹⁹⁵ Perhaps the most gruesome incident along the Stanislaus system was the death of Joseph Woodside, a 30-something Irish immigrant and father of four who died instantly while standing over an explosive charge on the road site. His crew had placed 11 charges into the ground, and he and a

¹⁹⁰ Plutus, “Vallecito Boom Notes of Interest,” *The Calaveras Prospect*, March 10, 1906, California State Library.

¹⁹¹ Plutus, “A Vallecito Letter of General Items,” *The Calaveras Prospect*, June 2, 1906, California State Library.

¹⁹² “From the Vallecito Construction Camp,” *The Calaveras Prospect*, Aug. 25, 1906, California State Library.

¹⁹³ “Fatal Accident at Vallecito,” *The Calaveras Prospect*, June 2, 1906, California State Library.

¹⁹⁴ “Body of a Man is Found by Boys,” *The Calaveras Prospect*, Jan. 26, 1907, California State Library.

¹⁹⁵ “Fatal Accident at Vallecito,” *The Calaveras Prospect*, June 2, 1906, California State Library.

fellow crew member were checking the lone, leftover charge after only 10 blew. The other man was also badly injured.¹⁹⁶

Other incidents included that of Jean Saue, a 32-year-old Frenchman who died in June 1907 while working on a narrow-gage logging train at Camp 31, where a sawmill operated for construction at the nearby powerhouse. Wayward timbers on the side of the tracks knocked the load around and pinned Saue next to a broken steam pipe, resulting in severe burns and a fractured skull. He would arrive at the camp hospital unconscious and never wake up.¹⁹⁷ Elsewhere, a surveyor named Boyle was killed after being thrown from a tram, which rolled along a flume system built high along the river canyon to supply water to the power plant.¹⁹⁸ And Leslie Addis of Sonora had his leg amputated after it was crushed under fresh cut timbers near Camp 31.¹⁹⁹ In all these cases and others, the men laboring to tame the wild worked in hazardous environments, where the wilderness claimed victims as part of the process of overcoming its rugged verticality in order to exploit the resources it seemed to hold in abundance.

At times, these places' remoteness alone was enough to create hazards. Come July, the heat in the lower parts of the Stanislaus canyon would become so oppressive for the workers that most of them would be relocated to camps in the high country at Kennedy Meadows and Relief. There they would construct the high-mountain road, frequented later by Albert Dambacher, and build the main dam for Relief Reservoir. Similar accidents and injuries occurred there as along the lower roads, but the added hazard of its remoteness and elevation brought another layer of danger for those stationed at Relief for long stretches. Because it was such an undertaking to get in or out of the camp, life there was "wearying" and "monotonous."²⁰⁰ Wintering over at Relief meant being largely cut off from the outside world, with all the provisions kept on site meant to last at least 50 men through April, when some additional supplies could be carried in on snowshoes.²⁰¹

Even news to and from the high-country camps before the snows could be difficult to move across the remote terrain. A fire in October was initially thought to have destroyed the entire camp and killed many men.²⁰² It would take days before news that the fire was mild and only caused a small amount of damage travelled down

¹⁹⁶ Plutus, "Fatal Accident at Construction Works," *The Calaveras Prospect*, April 14, 1906, California State Library; "Blown to Pieces by Blast," *The Union Democrat*, April 14, 1906, Tuolumne County Library, Sonora.

¹⁹⁷ "How Saue Was Killed," *The Union Democrat*, June 22, 1907, Tuolumne County Library, Sonora..

¹⁹⁸ "Killed at Camp Nine," *The Tuolumne Independent*, Sonora, Aug. 22, 1908, Tuolumne County Library, Sonora.

¹⁹⁹ "Serious Accident at Camp 31," *The Tuolumne Independent*, April 16, 1908, Tuolumne County Library, Sonora.; "Young Man Loses Leg at Camp 31 Saw Mill," *The Union Democrat*, April 18, 1908,

²⁰⁰ "Three Men Lost in Sierra Storm," *The Calaveras Prospect*, Jan. 7, 1907, California State Library.

²⁰¹ "Local Laconics," *Mother Lode Magnet*, Sept. 19, 1906, Tuolumne County Library, Sonora.

²⁰² "Fire Destroys Camp of a Construction Company up in Sierras," *The San Diego Union*, Oct. 4, 1907, California Digital Newspapers Collection.

the hill.²⁰³ Once the snow pack became deep enough, most correspondence would stop altogether as the mail carriers would not be able to get all the way up the grade.²⁰⁴ These remote conditions would take their toll on the laborers already facing dangerous and trying work, who at times would simply walk off the site. For three of them in the winter of 1906, the route back to Sonora would prove perilous as they got lost in the mountain snows and caught in a storm for two days. One of the men reportedly suffered severe frostbite. Luckily, they walked off the site with three other men who did find their way to the nearby outpost of Strawberry and organized a search party.²⁰⁵

Dragging the wild hills of the central Sierra into a modern world of light and industry would also require an organizational structure to direct and control its labor force. Spread across a large, remote geography, thousands of laborers over more than a half-dozen years endured these dangerous conditions to complete the roads and supporting infrastructure of the Stanislaus power project. Managers and shareholders of the Union Construction Company, under its multiple umbrella corporations, would organize the operation in a way similar to other large corporations that had effectively shaped the natural environment for production in the region. Such operations utilized a rationalized labor force for both efficiency and control. In the case of the Stanislaus project, boosters and observers cheered the efficient work of the road builders, tram builders and dam builders, comparing them to those who built the railroads, and predicting the coming of a new, more urbane existence for a region still struggling with an antiquated identity. The labor expended by the hundreds and thousands of men in and around the Stanislaus watershed would have economic and social impacts on the surrounding communities, they mused. “But it is not to its gold fields that it now looks for prosperity, but to the business that will be brought to its doors by the operations of the Stanislaus Water and Power Company,” the *Calaveras Prospect* announced of the booming community of Vallecito, differentiating the kinds of business of the past with this new form of commerce.²⁰⁶ Editors suggested renaming Vallecito as “Union City”²⁰⁷ for the company. “Industrially the enterprise overshadows anything ever before attempted in this section.”²⁰⁸ This modern project needed a modern organization to bring the promise of abundant electricity to the greater state and the region and make the landscape more conducive to modern amenities and technologies.

The labor force of the Union Construction Company was a diverse one, consisting largely of immigrants from across much of Europe in ways that often served the interests of company bosses who sought to keep labor costs low and prevent

²⁰³ “Fire Loss Was Exaggerated,” *The Calaveras Prospect*, Oct. 12, 1907, California State Library.

²⁰⁴ “Three Men Lost in Sierra Storm,” *The Calaveras Prospect*.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁶ “The Coming Boom for a Calaveras Town,” *The Calaveras Prospect*, Jan. 20, 1906, California State Library.

²⁰⁷ Plutus, “Vallecito Camp is Rapidly Growing,” *The Calaveras Prospect*, Feb 24, 1906, California State Library.

²⁰⁸ “A Gigantic Work of Electrical Energy,” *The Calaveras Prospect*, Feb 24, 1906, California State Library.

worker organization. One road crew of men described as “Slavs,” likely from Serbia or an adjacent part of Eastern Europe, was relatively well-known for their diligence and hard work on the Camp Nine Road under their group leader Yanko Terzich.²⁰⁹ Men from France, Austria, Germany, Ireland and other parts of Europe also worked on the project, traveling via train from major cities like San Francisco to Jamestown or Angels Camp to seek work from a labor-hungry operation. Chinese workers also served as cooks and offered other domestic services.²¹⁰ Such diversity necessitated men like John Spaich, a labor recruiter for the construction company who regularly “rustled” the men at the local train stations, fluently speaking a dozen or more languages.²¹¹ On one hand, this ethnic tapestry reflected a region rich with diversity dating back to the gold mining boom, when people from around the world rushed into the hills to seek riches and whose legacies remained with place names like Italian Bar, French Gulch, Mormon Creek, Sonora, Colombia, or Chinese Camp.

But that diversity also aided anti-labor tactics in the gold country and elsewhere. In the nearby San Joaquin Valley, the enormous Miller & Lux beef cattle operation had by the turn of the century “developed into a large, vertically integrated enterprise” that “employed migrant, low-wage workers and divided them along racial and ethnic lines,”²¹² and helped revolutionize how labor was ordered and directed in the far west. Such balkanized workforces made organizing difficult, a phenomenon that was also common closer to home in the Stanislaus canyon. The nearby, industrial Melones gold mine boasted a stamp mill that processed ore pulled out of Carson Hill, and until the 1940s mining at Carson Hill supported a small and diverse company town. Milo Bird grew up in the town along the shores of the Stanislaus and worked in the mine at times between 1901 and 1918. Bird recalled in his memoir a place with an extraordinary diverse workforce – Italians, Serbs, Mexicans, Bosnians, Chileans, Chinese, French, and others.

But this was not a melting pot. Instead, he would write, the many peoples “perpetuated their own national integrity” with “little intermingling,” a condition that he recalled was perpetuated “perhaps unwittingly, perhaps intentionally” by mine managers. “They would pit one nationality against another to get the maximum amount of work out of them,” Bird would recall.²¹³ Inter-ethnic rivalries and language barriers prevented in many cases mine and mill workers with shared interests from unionizing. Similarly, management at the Union Construction Company did not shy away from punishing union activities and organization. They took action when workers were able to make collective demands, like in March 1906 when a group of road graders – likely including some of Terzich’s men from Camp Nine Road – walked into the Vallecito company office and demanded a 50-cent-a-day wage

²⁰⁹ “Railway Personals,” *The Mother Lode Magnet*, July 25, 1906, Tuolumne County Library, Sonora.

²¹⁰ P. Conners, notes from interview with Lloyd “Mike” Curtain, March 3, 1982, Oral History folder, Stanislaus National Forest history files, Sonora; “Mystery Hangs Thick About Keefer’s Fate,” *San Francisco Chronicle*.

²¹¹ “Short Local News Items,” *The Union Democrat*, July 23, 1909, Tuolumne County Library, Sonora.

²¹² Iglar, *Industrial Cowboys*, 123.

²¹³ Milo Bird, *Melones Memories* (Sonora, Tuolumne County Historical Society, 1985), 55.

increase in the midst of especially tough work due to muddy conditions. Instead of considering the demand or negotiating, the manager on hand fired every last one of them.²¹⁴

Even with the relative diversity among its workforce, and the common practice of using ethnic divides to prevent organization, the Union Construction Company also carried out exclusionary labor practices that discriminated against non-white, and non-European peoples. Local communities could gaze at many non-white populations with suspicion and hostility, especially Native Americans and Asian communities after an Anglo-American cultural hegemony was established with violence and discrimination in the wake of the free-wheeling gold rush.²¹⁵ The Union Construction Company carried on this relatively new tradition in its hiring practice, at one point seeking publicly “men who have been reared in northern latitudes.”²¹⁶ When a crew of 20 Japanese workers showed up to the company headquarters in the summer of 1906, the labor boss turned them away for no other reason than he was not obliged to take them.²¹⁷ This is despite the fact that the men represented a third of the number a previous manager had asked for during a season when the company faced delays due to a labor shortage.²¹⁸ So the social landscape across the working crews of the Union Construction Company seemed to boast a variety of languages and ethnicities, a patchwork of cultures working to help impose modernity on the wildlands of the Mother Lode. But that diverse veneer would be deceiving for those who interpreted it as welcoming, as company leaders used it to advance the interests of those set to gain the most financially from the project by preventing organization among the ranks. At times, company bosses wholly rejected workers – even when demand was high – based on their race and ethnic identities.

Work on the massive Stanislaus hydroelectric project that started in 1906 marked both a return to, and advancement beyond, the area’s mining history. On one hand, the project was the largest since thousands of laborers and entrepreneurs rushed into the hills for gold in the middle of the last century. Here, men from around the world descended back into the same ravines and often worked on the same hydraulic infrastructure in some of the deepest and most dangerous landscapes of the state. Those laborers and the capital that funded them would create what local economic interests hoped would be another boom for communities in Calaveras and Tuolumne counties, drawing comparisons to the Gold Rush which remained firmly in the area’s collective memories. But for many, this new rush would be different as it promised to more effectively tame those wildlands, making them more predictable and more legible for business and production, thanks both to technological advancements in construction work and the technological advancements that the power project would bring. Observers, often speaking and writing from positions of privilege and with specific economic interests in mind, praised the men and their work, noting the

²¹⁴ Plutus, “Vallecito Boom Notes of Interest.”

²¹⁵ Johnson, *Roaring Camp*, 237-344.

²¹⁶ “Local Laconics,” *Mother Lode Magnet*.

²¹⁷ “Japs Not Wanted,” *The Mother Lode Magnet*, June 6, 1906, Tuolumne County Library, Sonora.

²¹⁸ “A Great Work,” *The Mother Lode Magnet*, Aug. 29, 1906, Tuolumne County Library, Sonora.

diversity among the ranks as well as the workers' unique abilities to carve rational order out of the chaos of the wilderness. Yet, under the veneer of moral support for those laborers was a rationalized management approach familiar in other industries across the state that embraced ethnically and racially exclusionary practices and hostility to organization despite hazardous conditions and regular difficulties filling the ranks. But amid their work within these rationalizing systems, the laborers of the Stanislaus would also be some of the most forward-looking actors in these wildlands. They would utilize the newly engineered landscapes and waterways, shaped through their physical labor, for their own leisure and recreation. And this practice would largely define the corridor for future generations.

"Fine fishing, but ... no way to get down:" Roads, access and recreation

When Arthor Getchell of Calaveras County was sent to stay with his uncle for a couple weeks, the 11-year-old boy spent the time in an industrial place. His uncle was a tramway repairman for the Sierra and San Francisco Power Company, living in company housing deep in the canyon of the Stanislaus River near Camp Nine. The town was also often called Stanislaus by the time the company took over the system and completed it after 1909. Human engineering dominated the landscape around Camp Nine, with the powerhouse, flumes, trams, tracks, camps and reservoirs receiving the focus of labor by crews still living and working in the canyon. By this point, the work was largely dedicated to maintenance and operation. "I recall seeing a tramway which ran straight up, or so it seemed to me, from the power plant to an invisible point up on top of the world. There was a trail which paralleled the huge pipe conveying the water down to the power plant. It looked something like a chicken ladder and I was tempted to use it but finally climbed above the tram and up we went," Getchell later recalled of his first impressions of the area. He continued:

On top of the flume there were two rails over which Uncle Anthony pumped a hand-car the four miles, checking for leaks. ... The car tracks ran the full length of the flume and along the way there were a couple of camps or stations, manned by cooks and assistants. In addition to the repair men such as my uncle, there was also a crew of some four to six men, available for major repairs, and they traveled over the flume in an electric car.²¹⁹

Crews, camps, mills, flumes, pipes and cars remained in place to operate and maintain the massive hydroelectric system. And visitors like Arthor could see that the river was a place of industrial production despite its remote location.

But his trip was not an apprenticeship for journeyman position in this working landscape. It was a vacation, an outdoor excursion for a budding sportsman seeking to bag fish and game in their natural habitat. Though he would spend some time with his

²¹⁹ "My Visit to Camp Nine", L.H. Getchell, *Las Calaveras*, 27:3 (April, 1979), 21-22, Calaveras County Historical Society, San Andreas.

uncle and others working on the power and water system of the Stanislaus, young Arthor would spend much of his stay in the hills and along the water. He would use his 22-caliber rifle to hunt quail, only one of which he thought he had hit before it scuffled off into the dense brush of the canyon.²²⁰ He was able to get a mud hen after expending almost 75 shots, as the native fowl otherwise expertly anticipated and avoided his volleys by diving into the calmer waters of the river where they were congregating. Unfortunately, mud hens were not as tasty as the ducks for which he mistook them. Even his uncle's cabin cat avoided the meal that night.²²¹

Arthor also tried his hand at trapping, finding a pyrrhic victory in catching a skunk that – despite both the value of its hide, as well as the fact that it was dead in the trap when Anthony found it – was still able to cover the boy with its loathsome scent.²²² “This was pretty rugged county,” he would observe, despite himself being from the surrounding mountains of Calaveras County. Much of it would have been inaccessible but for the roads, trails and trams along which he traveled, and much of it remained inaccessible beyond routes like the flume on which his uncle traveled for work. “Far down below was the Middle Fork of the Stanislaus. On our return afternoon trip, we could see the trout jumping out of the water every few seconds,” he recalled. “It sure looked like fine fishing but from where we were way up on the flume, there was no way to get down to the river through all the dense brush and over the rugged terrain. We saw all sorts of wild animals such as deer and fox as well as grouse and large mountain quail.”²²³

Arthor would still do some successful fishing. It just had to take place along portions of the river accessible and in some cases shaped by the infrastructure. Near the powerhouse was a forebay, a small reservoir used as part of the system, that Arthor noticed as “a pretty, wooded area,” and a “goodly body of water” that would probably be a fine place to land a trout.²²⁴ His uncle agreed, but suggested an approach and technique different from Arthor's typical exercise on the Calaveras River of simply dropping line into the water and waiting for a fish to grab the bait. The two would fish at the forebay's inlet, where water rushed through a flume before meeting the stillness of the lake.

Uncle Anthony would cast out into the fast moving current, letting the line pay out and then feed the line back into his automatic reel. He was using flies apparently. I was doing also. It wasn't long before he hooked a beauty, actually a trout just a bit too large for his tackle. He had a firm grip on the pole and each time the trout would leap high out of the water I could hear him give a little chuckle. All fishing on my

²²⁰ Ibid, pg. 22.

²²¹ Ibid, Pg. 22-23

²²² Ibid, 25

²²³ Ibid, 22

²²⁴ Ibid, 21

part ceased immediately as I silently encouraged him in his attempt to land this beauty.²²⁵

The spot and technique were successful because of the feeding habits of trout, with the predatory fish often waiting in low currents near swifter water to catch any bugs or other food floating by. Inlets or other areas where swift water runs past or near still water often mark spots holding nice fish. However, the inlet on the far end of the lake also likely received less pressure than elsewhere on the lake, which by this point (sometime between 1915 and the early 1920s) was a popular destination for anglers and boaters. “The large forebay offered great sport for fishermen, and especially over the week-ends many small skiffs and boats were out on the water.”²²⁶

Young Arthor’s experiences demonstrate how the infrastructure of the Stanislaus hydropower system facilitated outdoor recreation in and around the canyon during the early decades of the 20th Century. Much like Arthor and those manning the boats on the forebay, the system created access to rugged parts of the Sierra Nevada mountains that previously could only be seen, hunted or fished by experienced people with proper animals, equipment and knowledge. Furthermore, the workers themselves – those thousands of men who helped build the roads and dams, and the many who remained after to maintain them – and their families came to know the lands and waterways through their own work and applied that knowledge to sporting activities on their days off.

The infrastructure and the newly acquired knowledge of the workers both helped expand recreation and sporting opportunities in the central Sierra Nevada mountains even as the region remained a patchwork of working landscapes. Mining, logging, quarrying and other extractive industries continued to produce salable goods from the environment well after the peak of the gold rush, and these conditions stood apart from another relatively new model for the use and management of outdoor places. The concept of the nature reserve as a public park, like nearby Yosemite National Park, was meant to establish and maintain a place set apart and preserved from such industrial use and engineering. The parks would still be havens for recreation and some sportsmen’s activities, and they would allow their visitors to experience what appeared to be areas of untouched, transcendental nature away from the scars of modern progress. But along the Stanislaus, labor and leisure existed side-by-side, one making the other possible, and the technology and engineering which had by this point transformed the landscape into a place of industrial production seemed to improve the fishing and hunting.

Environmental leisure and nature recreation existed around the Stanislaus River watershed and in the Emigrant Basin long before the completion of the hydroelectric system that connected those two places. Early versions of these activities took the form of sportsmen's outings, especially fishing trips. The activity itself wasn't new to the area, as the Stanislaus watershed proved productive as both hunting and

²²⁵ Ibid, 24.

²²⁶ Ibid.

fishing grounds for the mobile Miwok peoples hundreds of years before European contact. The area also saw significant hunting and fishing pressure after miners and settlers flooded into it in the middle of the 19th Century. By later the same century, people working and living in the region found favorite spots along the system to play, with some of those places located along the rivers' main stems and headwaters. In some cases, the sportsmen themselves – seeking spots to fish, especially, adjacent to their places of work – even took the earliest steps of changing the environment to facilitate such activities.

By the late 1890s, cattle and sheep ranchers were utilizing the high country for summer rangeland as the snowmelt kept grass growing green later than the lowlands. Streams, creeks and lakes also persisted in the higher mountain landscapes during the summer. These waterways were cold, clean and picturesque, seemingly as perfect for watering thirsty livestock as they would be for holding trout. The only problem was that the area's native rainbow trout were mostly absent from the high country. The closest aquatic vertebrate were small amphibians, sometimes numbering in the thousands. Though the trout were suitable for the cold, rushing waters of the high Sierra, and in fact could be found in mountain streams at slightly lower elevations, the climb up most rivers would eventually become too much with vertical falls and steep escarpments for the trout's migratory ancestors to climb. The high-country lakes of the Emigrant Basin held no fish, leaving the ranchers stuck in the country for the season without a favorite activity that could provide both fun and sustenance. Thus, cow rustlers carried out the earliest fish planting activities in the high country. They would catch trout in lower-elevation mountain waters along the Stanislaus and Tuolumne watersheds and haul them up the mountain in old oil or milk containers. These activities, which introduced trout populations to the Emigrant Basin between the 1870s²²⁷ and the 1890s,²²⁸ represent the beginning of the area's transformation into a premier fishing destination.

Similarly, other points along the Stanislaus power system became popular with recreators in the region even before workers upgraded the roads and infrastructure. Strawberry Flat, a beachy and open site along the river's south fork at the foot of granite domes and peaks, was a popular place for picnicking, fishing and swimming before the turn of the century. Close to the old Sonora-Mono Road, just outside of the quaint town of Strawberry, the location was already accessible as part of chain of small reservoirs built by miners with wooden crib dams. The facilities remained under the control of a local water company but were ideal enough for visitors that some campsites, summer camps and even rustic cabins popped up around the site by the turn of the century. In the same area, recreational use had increased enough that the 1915-1916 construction of the new dam at Strawberry Flat by the Sierra and San Francisco Power Company to expand the system (See Figure 36) created some controversy. The company housed the crews in a large barracks next to what would be the new

²²⁷ United States Department of Agriculture, "Emigrant Wilderness Dams Environmental Impact Statement," December 2003, USDA Forest Service, Sonora, 241.

²²⁸ Fred Leighton, "Historic Emigrant Basin," April 6, 1963, n.p., Folder 1, Fred Leighton Fred Leighton Papers.

reservoir's southwestern shore and installed some support facilities including a slaughterhouse. Workers at the slaughterhouse and those constructing the dam both disposed of their refuse (varying from tin cans to animal parts from the slaughter process) at a nearby dump. Already popular with recreators, the location was beset by millions of flies drawn by the putrid material, a condition that visitors and the relatively young National Forest Service deemed "offensive." The situation caused some tension between the burgeoning federal agency trying to forge new recreation policies in its reserve areas and the powerful company working to expand its system.²²⁹ Other recreational landscapes existed alongside working landscapes on the river's northern end, especially around the popular Big Trees of Calaveras County. The sequoia grove was located on the river system's northern fork and had been utilized as a park and resort since it was first seen by white Americans colonists. One of those white Americans was Windsor Keefer, who in the 1870s was part-owner of a hotel in the grove while also pursuing his mining project and working to secure the capital and rights to expand into more diverse areas.²³⁰

The central Sierra along the Stanislaus River was a place of recreation and leisure in certain areas even before the access facilitated through construction of a modern road system. But that system also helped expand recreation during the first half of the 20th Century. July, 1906 saw the small but growing resort town of Strawberry bursting at the seams with visitors during the peak of fishing season, just as "considerable travel" increased between the town due to the road construction.²³¹ One Union Construction Company worker notably was declared missing on a fishing excursion, only to be found resting from mild heat exhaustion.²³² Later, power and water employees would frequent a riverside spot known as Clarks Flat not just for fishing and swimming, but for games and sports.²³³ One young sportsman found that an unusual bait worked surprisingly well when fishing the river on and around the infrastructure near his hometown of Melones. "When a mouse hits the water it immediately begins to swim and that agitation of the surface tells the fish that manna has just dropped from Heaven."²³⁴ Kennedy Meadow, a site that was briefly meant to become a reservoir, established its resort, camp and pack station in 1917 and offered easy access to the Emigrant Basin and upper Stanislaus River for backcountry fishing by the early 1920s.²³⁵ (See Figure 37) Resorts popped up for recreationists along the same road between Strawberry and Kennedy Meadows, some of which were built

²²⁹ Pamela Conners, "Historical Overview of the Recreation Residences on the Stanislaus National Forest," (Sonora: United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Region, Stanislaus National Forest, April, 1993), Pg. 27, StF Rec Res Historical Overview, 4-93, Stanislaus National Forest, Sonora.

²³⁰ Summer Resorts, Big Trees," *Daily Alta Californian*.

²³¹ "Local Laconics," *Mother Lode Magnet*.

²³² "Some Vallecito Notes of Interest," *The Calaveras Prospect*.

²³³ "Clarks Flat," *Las Calaveras*, 47:4 (July, 1998), 7, Calaveras County Historical Society, San Andreas.

²³⁴ Bird, *Melones Memories*, 55.

²³⁵ Eric Bailey, "Historic Lodge is Reduced to Ashes," *Los Angeles Times*; Oct 2, 2007, ProQuest Documents; "Angler Trapped at Cliff's Base Finally Rescued," *Oakland Tribune*, August 31, 1923.

from old worker quarters and construction infrastructure, including Dardanelle, Niagara Creek and Baker Station.²³⁶ The water and power system and its associated infrastructure were integral to the popularization of outdoor recreation in this area during the early 20th Century, offering access and at times changing the hydrology in ways that were conducive to leisure and sporting activities like fishing and swimming.

Along with access, the roads and infrastructure increased connectivity between people and material resources across watersheds. Taking the slow trip up the Sonora-Mono Road before these modern amenities, one could look to the north and south, gazing over two watersheds separated by a steep and impenetrable ridge between the Stanislaus' southern fork and the Tuolumne's northernmost tributaries. Once at high altitude, the imposing ridges and peaks around places like Kennedy Meadows served as formidable reminders of the strain and skill required to travel from one drainage to the other. Yet the system did provide access by creating a kind of easy collection of passages between the two river systems. From the reservoir at Strawberry Dam, which inundated the scenic flat on the South Fork of the Stanislaus, it is only a short scamper over a hardly noticeable ridge to the Tuolumne River's north fork which still gurgles like a brook among the dense conifer forest. And once crossing the short-but-steep, stairway-like ascent out of Kennedy Meadows and over Relief Reservoir, visitors to the Emigrant Wilderness could continue along the headwaters of the Stanislaus or to descend to the upper forks of the Cherry Creek which drains into the Tuolumne. In both cases, an experienced visitor might be able to distinguish one river's headwaters from the other. But for many, there was a kind of experiential connection that transgressed the area's natural hydrology and created singular places and networks of connected places across watersheds. That connection would eventually become more material, as fish stocking programs and increased pressure from livestock would result in infiltration of the Tuolumne watershed from gateways on the Stanislaus.

PG&E takes control: Consolidation, automation and the erasure of human presence

By the time PG&E gained functional control of the Sierra and San Francisco Power Company in 1927, the hydroelectric system on the Stanislaus River was complete. Relief Reservoir had been operating since around 1910, lower Strawberry Reservoir since 1916. The work camps for both had either been disassembled or sold for other uses. The powerhouse near Camp Nine, by then known to many as the tiny town of Stanislaus housing company workers in a small cluster of quarters, was feeding electricity into distribution lines running high above the ground across steel towers that formed the state's growing power grid. The company also owned water supplies that ran through a system of ditches and smaller reservoirs in the basin, previously owned by the Tuolumne County Water and Power Company. PG&E put holds on some plans to build new facilities, like a reservoir at Kennedy Meadows, before eventually abandoning them altogether. Most of the roads originally built by their predecessors were public, and even private routes like the road to the powerhouse remained open for public access.

²³⁶ Connors, "Historical Overview of the Recreation Residences," 20-29.

While the labor in the watershed diminished with its completion, the system and its associated infrastructure remained and still needed some people to run, maintain, repair and rebuild it. Miles of wooden flume moved water from one facility to another, from reservoir to siphon, from pipe to reservoir, eventually to the downward chute that would feed the high head generators at the powerhouse. The system was still one of the largest in California, spanning thousands of feet in elevation and miles of road, pipe, flume, ditch, tower and river. Its sheer size and scope still necessitated some human presence in the canyons and peaks of the Stanislaus watershed. Such camps included Sand Bar, where a diversion dam moved water from both the river's southern and middle forks to a wooden flume. That flume would parallel the river along the canyon wall for approximately a dozen miles, falling at a slower rate than the river so that it could be shot down for hundreds of feet to drive the Pelton wheels at the powerhouse and feed electricity into the grid. Because the flumes, dams, powerhouses, ditches and diversion equipment required constant maintenance, the camp at Sand Bar included a lumber yard, sawmill, cottages, warehouse, mess hall, woodshed, blacksmith shop, stable, and other facilities. The Sand Bar camp was one of a few remaining like it after the completion of the Stanislaus project.²³⁷ It was also part of a larger network of industrial facilities along the river that made the area one of extraction and production alongside recreation.

But by the middle of the century, while the Stanislaus River and its surrounding wildlands would remain working landscapes within systems of economic production, the physical traces of those systems would be increasingly difficult to detect. Almost as quickly as PG&E acquired it, the growing company began dismantling the more visible components and infrastructure in favor of automated and underground systems. In 1927, PG&E helped finance an expansion of irrigation storage on the Stanislaus River watershed with downstream, agricultural water districts. This move expanded the power utility's capacity to generate and export electricity, as well as helped grow its economic and political influence in the watershed.²³⁸ In 1940, the company began automating its generation plants starting with the Phoenix power plant, a small generator on a local creek originally built in 1897. In 1941, the company replaced 16 miles of wooden flume between the diversion dam at Sand Bar and the powerhouse at Camp Nine with 11 miles of underground tunnel, both saving maintenance costs on the expensive wooden structure and preventing loss of water through leaks and evaporation.²³⁹ The company eventually replaced the powerhouse at Camp Nine in 1961, with the towering building at the foot of the main flume dismantled and power company employees taking a daily drive over the Camp Nine road from population centers like Angels Camp or Sonora instead of living on the premises.²⁴⁰ Around the same time, the major mine and mill in the small

²³⁷ PAR Environmental Services, Inc., "The Camp and Sand Bar Dam," PG&E Cultural Resources, n.d., parenvironmental.com/articles/sandbardam.php .

²³⁸ Jackson and Mikesell, *The Stanislaus River Drainage Basin and the New Melones Dam*, 13-14.

²³⁹ Art Hender, "History of Water System of Tuolumne County," n.p., date estimated 1955.

²⁴⁰ Charles R. Joy, "Calaveras County Goes Electric," *Las Calaveras*, 23:3&4 (April/July, 1975), 25-44.

town of Melones closed for good by World War II, eventually burning down and leaving behind little more than a footprint of its long-looming presence on the shore of Melones reservoir. In the high country, the working buildings at Relief Dam and Kennedy Meadows were either removed or transformed into recreation camps by the early 1960s. In all these cases, landscapes that had previously included the presence of humans doing modern work and became less populated with people, and the structures that supported those populations disappeared or became less conspicuous to those who visited the area for recreational purposes. The human pieces of these landscapes became less visible, making these places seem more natural to those who visited.

By the early 1960s, the Stanislaus watershed still functioned for energy and agricultural producers as a working, industrial place, generating electricity for millions of people and producing irrigation water for millions of dollars in salable crops. Yet these extractive activities were less visible to the people who visited these places for recreational uses, putting those extractive uses in the background as new generations developed their own senses and characteristics for these places. (See Figure 38) Boaters and hikers in the canyon, and fishermen taking pack trains into the Emigrant basin, could spend their trips feeling isolated without perceiving traces of modern man. When a wilderness recreation movement grew in popularity through 1950s and 1960s, those enthusiasts would have relatively easy access via mountain and backcountry roads to two wild places. The Emigrant Basin would be accessible to fishermen for multi-day trips despite its remote location along the Sierra crest thanks in large part to a convenient gateway at Kennedy Meadows and an entry road designed for teams of horses and donkeys to traverse the steep crags of granite. Those who wanted an experience in the wilds of the Sierra, much like those of the Emigrants for whom the place was named, could join a team out of the Kennedy pack station and spend multiple days or even weeks roughing it the frontier way. Similarly, when environmentalist groups like the Sierra Club started a river touring committee to scout locations for kayaking trips, a seemingly empty and isolated canyon along the Stanislaus would be accessible by a windy but well-graded road perfect for the kinds of vehicles needed to cart boats and materials for overnight, group rafting trips. Such easy access within relatively short trips from major population centers would make the canyon ideal for rafting pioneers seeking to build on the emerging popularity of their sport with guided trips for newcomers. In both cases, these roadways remained while other visible traces of industry and extraction did not. The thousands of men who labored along the mountains and above the rivers to control and harness nature would leave behind an ironic legacy – facilitating the erasure of their own deeds.

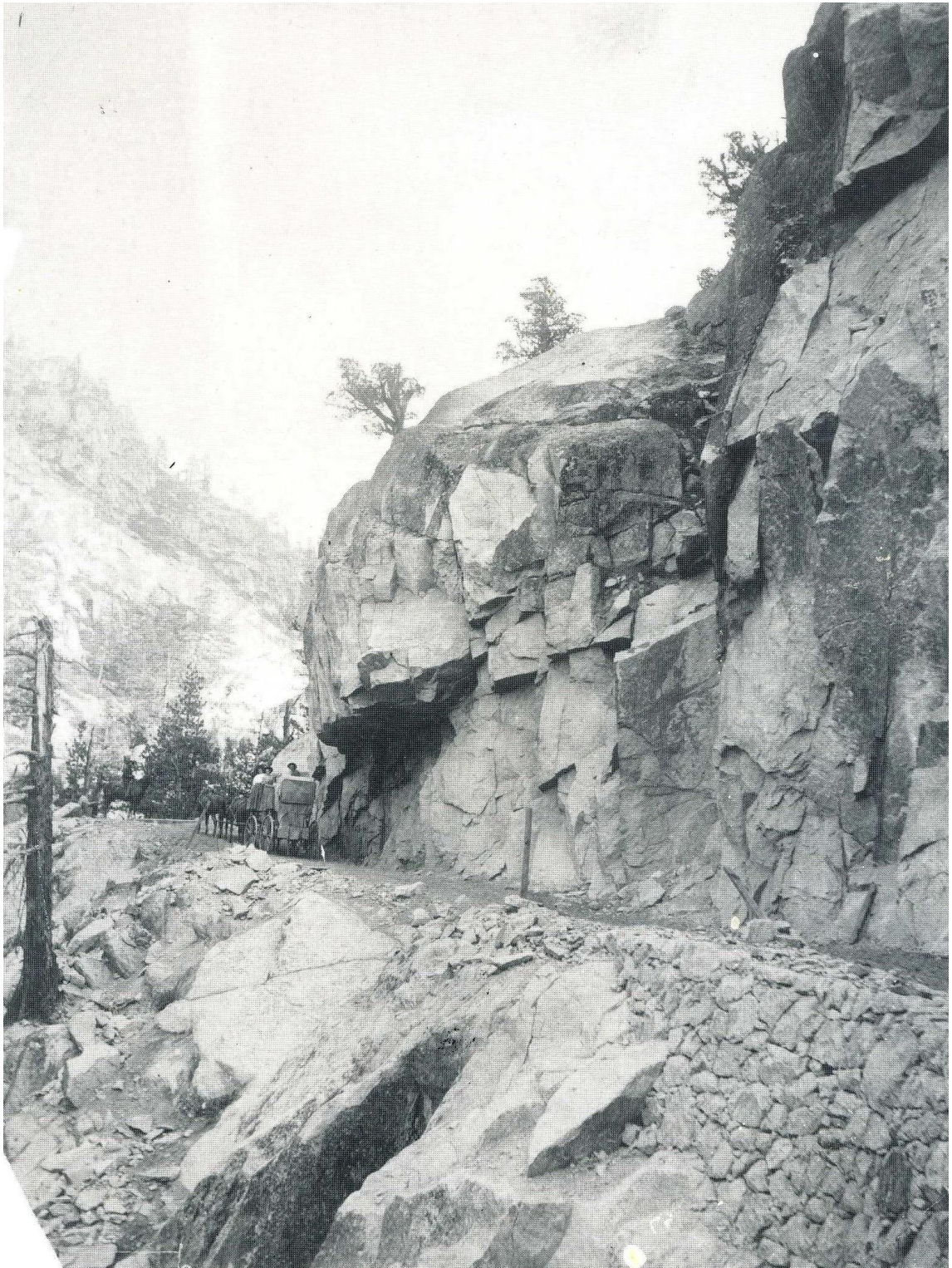


Figure 28: Road to Relief Dam. Courtesy of Columbia College Library.



Figure 29: Members of Union Construction Co. labor team, ca. 1906. Courtesy of Tuolumne County Historical Society.



Figure 30: Union Construction Co. labor team on Camp Nine Road, ca. 1906. Courtesy of Tuolumne County Historical Society.



Figure 31: Workers at Relief Reservoir, ca. 1908. Courtesy of Columbia College Library.



Figure 32: Construction by the Union Construction Co. Courtesy of USDA Forest Service, Stanislaus National Forest.



Figure 33: Forebay reservoir on Stanislaus River, 1908. Courtesy of California State Library, California History Section Picture Catalog.



Figure 34: Camp house on Stanislaus River power system, ca. 1912-1916. Courtesy of California State Library, California History Section Picture Catalog.



Figure 35: Stanislaus Powerhouse, ca. 1908. Courtesy of California State Library, California History Section Picture Catalog.



Figure 36: Early recreation at Strawberry/Pine Crest reservoir. Courtesy of USDA Forest Service, Stanislaus National Forest.



Figure 37: Kennedy Meadows, a former reservoir site and early base for recreation in the Emigrant Basin wildlands. Courtesy of Frasher Fotos Collection/HJG, Pomona Public Library.



Figure 38: Stanislaus River Power facility under PG&E, after original powerhouse dismantled, 1984. Courtesy of Stanislaus River Archive (stanislausriver.org).

CHAPTER IV

HYDRAULIC INFRASTRUCTURE, HIGH MODERNISM AND RECREATION IN THE CENTRAL SIERRA

An unusual sight worked its way through the dusty streets of Vallecito one September day in 1907. Early fall typically meant clear, warm and dry days with lengthening afternoon shadows in this Sierra foothill outpost, which increasingly resembled a bustling center of industrious activities after 18 months as the headquarters of the Union Construction Company. The mining town's residents, merchants and visitors were now used to new sights and sounds, fresh businesses and residences, and heavy equipment and materials moving in and out along newly finished roads. Livestock teams and phalanx of construction workers occasionally made the town seem like a military installation. Even a self-propelled automobile was occasionally spotted gliding around through the area,²⁴¹ a relatively new sight to the isolated community.

On that September day, a 20-ton water gate arrived on order from an eastern manufacturer via rail and was transported along the new and improved roadway to Camp Nine by way of Vallecito. The water gate was to be installed at the Stanislaus Electric Power Company's main plant deep in the river canyon, regulating the water flow for the generation facility still under construction. The gate was big even for this project, which was said by many to be the most significant construction work in the area's history. The huge piece of equipment required a special, 22-horse team to haul it to the powerhouse site. "It was a great sight for the people all along the road on account of its magnitude, and the entire population of Vallecito turned out to witness the unusual sight," stated one observer.²⁴²

Just about a month later, another group of locals gathered mid-morning to watch another unusual and notable sight related to the same system. This time the scene was in Copperopolis, another former mining town about 20 miles southwest and a little downriver from Vallecito. A crew with the Union Construction Company completed erecting the first of many towers that would hold the approximately 130 miles of long-distance lines distributing as much as 100,000 volts of electricity from the power plant at Camp Nine, down the lower foothills of Calaveras County, through the northern San Joaquin Valley and the city of San Jose, and to the heart of a growing San Francisco. The towers, almost 70 feet high, had similar designs as windmills with intricate lattice work.²⁴³ (See Figure 39) But unlike most windmills, and generally most towers of any kind seen in the area, these were built with steel instead of wood. It was a "charming and interesting scene," stated one observer, who described a "magnificent structure that dazzled the eyes." The completion of the structure "could not help but bring to the thinking mind the startling and almost incredible knowledge

²⁴¹ Plutus, "A Vallecito Letter of General Items," *The Calaveras Prospect*.

²⁴² "Local and General," *Mother Lode Magnet*, Sept. 4, 1907, Tuolumne County Library, Sonora.

²⁴³ "Stanislaus Transmission Line," *Journal of Electricity Power and Gas*, San Francisco, 23:10 (Sept 4, 1909), 15. Box 2322, Folder 0, Stanislaus Electric Power Company Records.

of the various uses of steel, and the still more marvelous uses of electricity.”²⁴⁴ Continuing, the writer with the *Calaveras Enterprise* took a moment to reflect on what these towers signified in a place and time of rapid technological progress.

Any one who had predicted thirty years ago that the almost entire Union Copper Mining company structures would be made of steel and that Copperopolis would be lighted by electricity and voices to be heard distinctly from here to San Francisco through the telephone, would have been regarded as an unbalanced enthusiast. But so long as our American workmen continue to think, and knowledge along scientific lines is earnestly sought, many dreams will be realized in the wizardry of steel making and the marvelously unexpected is sure to happen in the electrical world. ... It is unprofitable to declare nowadays that any proposed improvement is impossible. There's nothing impossible in this day and age.²⁴⁵

Not only was the tower itself an impressive structure, but in its materials and the energy it would transport it symbolized the modern progress that projects like the power plant were facilitating in the area. (See Figure 40)

The directors, investors, and managers of the hydroelectric system on the Stanislaus River were not the only people publicly optimistic about the project's impacts on their personal wealth and business standings. After the project commenced in 1906, and especially as crews completed new phases, local business interests and general observers would construct and disseminate a triumphalist narrative about the project as the centerpiece in the region's technological, social and economic modernization. The system and its associated infrastructure would, this narrative suggested, embody the technological possibilities offered by advancements in engineering and energy, dragging these backwoods communities into the 20th Century with the rest of the state by improving potential for commerce and development. Correspondences and descriptions of the project – both conceptual and material – often focused on two general characteristics: its size and scope, and its place within the region's modern progress. Much like the massive water gate hauled through Vallecito, this project was big – bigger than any that had come through the region at least since the Sierra Railroad started operating locally in 1897. (See Figure 41) But as observed with the installation of the steel towers, it was also modern in its design, engineering, construction and the presumed benefits to the local community and the regional economies and infrastructures.

In one 1906 edition of the *Calaveras Prospect* newspaper, editors pointed to the Stanislaus project as one of the largest examples of “progress in California,” noting it to be a “gigantic” endeavor that would be one of the “great factors in the development of the state.” According to the account, this project was one that would

²⁴⁴ “Copperopolis and Its News,” *The Calaveras Prospect*, Oct. 5, 1907, California State Library.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

not only bring wealth through work and local investment, but also one that would “give great impetus to all business.”²⁴⁶ Later in the same edition, a correspondent mused on the project’s impact on the location of its headquarters.

The little town of Vallecito has had a romantic history with its ups and downs of mining operations. It has been rich in gold and for many years since the decline of placer mining in the county, shipped more gold than all the rest of the towns in the county put together. ... But it is not to its gold fields that it now looks for prosperity, but to the business that will be brought to its doors by the operations of the Stanislaus Water and Power Company.²⁴⁷

For these interested commentators, this would be transformative as much in kind as it would be in its scale thanks to technological advancement, scientific rationality and the forward push of modernity, ideas local boosters and leaders would embrace with ideological fervor.

To some extent, they were correct. The Stanislaus hydroelectric project would be part of a larger energy boom that would in the words of one scholar, help make modern California. Destined to merge through consolidation and monopolization by the utility companies, these projects would make up an expansive and transformative energy apparatus – between an electrical grid and the coming petroleum boom – that would put California in the center of any story of 20th Century American growth and economic success.²⁴⁸ The Stanislaus power system would also be integral to the expansion of urban water development and agricultural irrigation, as it would help finance private irrigation projects that were precursors to the widespread systems of water development in California and the American West that historians have described when discussing the hydraulic era.²⁴⁹ And yet, this system was still a localized network of reservoirs and ditches that merely expanded upon the rudimentary hydraulic engineering of the gold rush, designed to store and move water to keep a steady flow for consistent, mechanical generation of electricity.

What the triumphalist voices and writers didn’t predict at the time was the project’s eventual connection to a cultural movement that is often interpreted as a reaction to modern development. While it was big, modern and impressive, that metal water gate would also help create consistent, predictable water flows in the Stanislaus watershed. And while consistent, predictable flows were ideal for the generation of electricity, they also helped create ideal environmental conditions for activities increasingly popular with conservationists and environmentalists, especially fishing and boating. After working on and around Stanislaus project, sportsmen would also deliberately apply a dam-building approach for improving nature both elsewhere in,

²⁴⁶ “Progress in California,” *The Calaveras Prospect*, Jan 13, 1906, California State Library.

²⁴⁷ “Vallecito to Boom With the Spring,” *The Calaveras Prospect*, Jan 13, 1906, California State Library.

²⁴⁸ James, *Energy and the Making of Modern California*.

²⁴⁹ Jackson and Mikesell, *The Stanislaus River Drainage Basin and the New Melones Dam*, 11-26.

and outside of, the watershed. Led by a former employee with the company, these conservationists built small dams and transplanted fish in the high country to create a haven for wilderness anglers. This conservation approach – the use of dams to improve waterways for purported ecological and recreational improvement – would then find proponents elsewhere in the region, as well as elsewhere in time. Among later proponents were the architects of a unique and unprecedented plan by a federal agency to combine largescale hydraulic engineering, ecosystems restoration and recreational planning in ways that revealed complex, entangled relationships between landscape conservation, river preservation and the high-modernist ideology which drove the hydraulic era of the American West. This chapter explores the design of the initial hydroelectric system itself and the ways in which the fundamentals of that system helped facilitate wilderness recreation and influenced environmental planning in and around the watershed.

“It dispels the darkness of the night like the morning sun.” The Stanislaus power system and high modernism

When the United Railways took the Stanislaus system away from Beach Thompson and Howard Veeder in 1909 and ran it through the Sierra and San Francisco Power Company, a first phase of construction was near completion. The centerpiece of this phase was the main Stanislaus Powerhouse at Camp Nine, powered by three Pelton hydroelectric generators that would produce up to 45,000 horsepower in electric energy from water in the river, with a 20,000 kilowatt capacity.²⁵⁰ But that generation plant – housed in a majestic building nestled against a steep, cliff-like mountain wall on the south end of the river canyon – represented only a piece of the already intricate system. The water fueling the electrical production was first stored in the recently completed Relief Reservoir, a 230-acre lake formed by a 150-foot-tall and 550-foot-long concrete and rock-fill restraining dam located above 7,000 feet of elevation at the edge of the Emigrant Basin.²⁵¹ (See Figure 42) From the dam at Relief, the water would feed into the Stanislaus River’s middle fork, running through Kennedy Meadows before rushing a total of 45 miles to the Sand Bar diversion, a small, 20-foot crib dam on the river’s main fork. From here, the water would divert into a 78,000-foot, wood flume that hugged the steep, rugged walls of the canyon.²⁵² Built initially by miners as part of a large network of ditches and canals, the flume had fallen into disrepair before the power company invested in its reconstruction and expansion for the system. The wooden flume would require constant maintenance, largely work supplied from camps and sawmills nestled alongside the river. Water from the flume would then feed into the Stanislaus River forebay, the lake Arthor Getchell would fish with his uncle and Howard Veeder would at one time describe as, “a very beautiful little lake in clear blue water in what is ... a very picturesque

²⁵⁰ “The Stanislaus Power Development,” *Journal of Electricity Power and Gas*, San Francisco, 23: 8 (Aug. 21, 1909), 3-14, Box 2322, Folder 0, Stanislaus Electric Power Company Records.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*

²⁵² *Ibid.*

location.”²⁵³ From there, slightly above the powerhouse, the water would run into the penstock constructed of redwood and metal pipe, which ran along the rim of the canyon before falling about 1,500 feet and shooting at high pressure across the water wheels driving the generators. Spent of its energy, the water would then wash back into the river from the powerhouse outlet, briefly flowing over an afterbay dam.²⁵⁴ The electricity, then, traveled 130 miles from the powerhouse, through the lower foothills and San Joaquin Valley, across the coastal range before being fed into the regional power grid at the old mission site in San Jose and eventually ending in the heart of San Francisco.

The Sierra and San Francisco Power Company didn't just take over a system, though. They also inherited an overall plan for further expansion – multiple reservoirs, including one at Kennedy Meadows and a higher elevation location at Kennedy Lake, more power generators and expansion of power lines, as well as a siphon and tunnel system to move water across the watershed to the San Domingo mine. To some extent, the second company pursued that expansion. Through 1916 and 1917, the company built the new Strawberry dam at Pinecrest Flat on the Stanislaus River's south fork, expanding the smaller reservoir at Strawberry built by miners in the mid-19th Century. (See Figure 43) Funneling water supplies stored behind it into the river's south fork, the company built the rock fill dam in large part thanks to the high-capacity power line that would run from the Stanislaus powerhouse to the dam site, allowing the use of heavy, industrial machinery. (See Figure 44) A few miles downstream from the Strawberry dam, they diverted water into the Philadelphia Ditch, which they constructed to move water from the river's south fork to its middle fork at Spring Gap, located above the Sand Bar diversion dam, adding to the volume of water – and thus, to the amount of power – in the middle fork for the main powerhouse. Eventually, a generation plant would be added at Spring Gap and new power lines erected on steel stretching to San Francisco, expanding the system's overall capacity to produce and distribute electricity beyond simply running the trains of the United Railway system.²⁵⁵

By 1927, a swiftly consolidating utility corporation called Pacific Gas & Electric absorbed the Sierra and San Francisco Power Company on its way to controlling most of the power generation and infrastructure in central and northern California. The growing company already functionally controlled the Stanislaus system, and thus most of the water in the Stanislaus River, as it leased the facilities and dictated most operations after 1920. The system by this point also included the old miners' ditches, which encompassed more than 100 miles of flumes and canals, as well as multiple additional small reservoirs and another minor powerhouse. Upon

²⁵³ Howard Veeder to Herman Veeder, Dec.12, 1908, Box 2322, Folder 12, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Documents.

²⁵⁴ “The Stanislaus Power Development,” *Journal of Electricity Power and Gas*.

²⁵⁵ Stephen E. Dunn, "The System of the Sierra and San Francisco Power Company" (University of California, 1917), Google Books; Cindy L. Baker, “Historic American Engineering Record: Spring-Gap-Stanislaus Hydroelectric System, Sand Bar Dam,” National Park Service, San Francisco, 2013, memory.loc.gov/master/pnp/habshaer/ca/ca4000/ca4054/data/ca4054data.pdf .

absorbing the system, PG&E slowly moved to modernize it to cut labor and materials costs. The company replaced the elevated, wooden flume between the diversion dam and the forebay with underground pipes in 1939. It also dismantled the large, modernist powerhouse in favor of a more inconspicuous and automated powerhouse in 1961. With such changes, the system itself had a smaller and less obvious footprint in the canyons of the Stanislaus by the middle of the 20th Century, despite PG&E dominating water use and policy in the area and elsewhere in the state at that point. Furthermore, the company would opt against further unilateral expansion, delaying and eventually scrapping plans for reservoirs at Kennedy Meadows and Kenney Lake in favor of more cooperative future efforts. It would also keep the lines above ground. Today, the system on the Stanislaus remains much like it did when PG&E purchased it fully, storing and moving water on both the southern and middle forks of the river, controlling flows, generating electricity, and transferring that energy along lines dozens of feet above ground from the heart of the Sierra Nevada foothills to the heart of the city of San Francisco.²⁵⁶

Despite seeming like the result of a singular, grand vision, these projects and the greater Stanislaus hydroelectric system reflected a practical shift in focus by the initial principals of the Stanislaus Electric Power Company. As early as when Howard Veeder and Beach Thompson started the San Domingo Mining Company in 1898, mining was not viable as the primary venture despite a relatively ideal site on San Domingo Creek near Dogtown. New regulatory demands required costly additions to the hydraulic mining process like settling ponds and to limit debris. An arid climate limited the time when the miners could use the giant monitors to wash down gravels in the pits. And water corporations often controlled supplies during the times of each year when working conditions were ideal.

However, the former Keefer mines also had one characteristic that made the operation notable among the Calaveras mines in the 1890s. A small hydroelectric power generator installed at the site powered an impressive array of lights allowing operations to continue through the nights. While localized electric plants were not unusual in the mines, as the water wheels were powered by the same kind of high-pressure flow that came out of the the hydraulic monitors, the lights on San Domingo Creek were notable even in that environment. “The property is lighted by an immense electric-light plant, so that when water is plenty it can be worked night and day,” one correspondent wrote of Keefer’s operation in 1888.²⁵⁷ Taking over Keefer’s assets and visions upon the miner’s disappearance, Thompson would look uphill to the Stanislaus River as a potential water source. He would begin purchasing small companies and their water rights along the river and seek investors to help fund a pipeline or canal to move it through the hills to San Domingo Creek. An obvious way both to generate investment interest and generate profit would be supplementing such projects with hydroelectric facilities.

²⁵⁶ Jackson and Mikesell, *The Stanislaus River Drainage Basin and the New Melones Dam*, 11-26; Coleman, *PG and E of California*.

²⁵⁷ “The Mines.,” *Sacramento Daily Record-Union*.

The shift to electricity generation as the primary focus of Thompson's and Veeder's operation started gradually. Company directors incorporated the Stanislaus Electric Power Company late in 1905 with more-than \$10 million in backing capital from bonds and various New York and Boston-based financial firms, though they continued operating the San Domingo mine as a distinct entity. But less than a half dozen years into the turn of the century, investment in California's Sierra Nevada mountains shifted focus. This was no longer gold country, but white coal country, with hydroelectric companies backed by big names in energy, railroads, banking and other giants of American capitalism rushing back up the Sierra slopes for quick returns on their investments.²⁵⁸ Hydroelectricity was an ascendent industry in the state as early as the 1890s, with a "new kind of hustler" arising to promote electrical generation schemes with the advancement of long-distance transmission technology allowing energy exports away from the basins where the production occurred. "The air of the whole Pacific Coast has all at once become filled with talk about setting up water wheels in lonely mountain places and making them give light and cheaply turn other wheels in towns miles away," declared a new publication dedicated to electrical engineering in the region. "From Shasta to San Diego men are organizing, or trying to organize, local or San Francisco companies to utilize in this way the water power in particular localities."²⁵⁹

This industry trend continued and expanded, with companies like Bay Counties Power and Blue Lakes Power building electric plants to supply growing urban and agricultural markets. Money both from back east and among the elite on the Pacific was beginning to flow into this burgeoning industry.²⁶⁰ Multiple journals dedicated to professionalization of electrical engineering on the Pacific coast were in print by the turn of the century. In 1901, in the midst of this expansion, one San Domingo mine investor described the electric generation portion of the project as "a very good feature" that would "go a long way in helping finance the scheme" surrounding moving water to the mine.²⁶¹ By 1903, Thompson and Veeder were fully swept into the region's hydro boom, prioritizing development of electricity and potentially water supplies for agricultural and urban users and working to woo investors in this major power scheme.²⁶² "We are being told there is more demand for power in the city every day,"²⁶³ Howard Veeder would state in January of that year, later adding that a water

²⁵⁸ Teisch, "Great Western Power, 'White Coal,' and Industrial Capitalism in the West."

²⁵⁹ "Popular Reflections of the Condition and Prospects of the Electrical Engineering on the Pacific Coast," *The Electrical Journal*, San Francisco, 1:1 (July, 1895), 27-28, San Francisco Public Library, archive.org.

²⁶⁰ Williams, *Energy and the Making of Modern California*; Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco*; Coleman, *PG and E of California*; Teisch, "Great Western Power, 'White Coal,' and Industrial Capitalism in the West."

²⁶¹ Herman Veeder to Howard Veeder, Sept. 18, 1901, Box 2322, Folder 5, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

²⁶² Multiple correspondences from 1903 between Howard Veeder, Herman Veeder and Beach Thompson, 1903, Box 2322, Folder 7, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

²⁶³ Howard Veeder to Herman Veeder, Jan. 14, 1903, Box 2322, Folder 7, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

and power system on the Stanislaus may be the last chance to realistically bring water over to work the mine.²⁶⁴ By the beginning of 1905, the Stanislaus Electric Power Company was operating, and its owners were purchasing land in the high country for reservoir sites.²⁶⁵

In the subsequent years, the Stanislaus company and their later incarnations pursued these projects by harnessing resources, capital and labor to reshape and engineer the river system. And as they did so, the project was an object of praise and subject of prognostication by boosters, business interests and print voices attempting to announce the coming of a resurgent gold country and a new, modern California. Such words focused largely on two main characteristics of these works – the size of the works and the scope of the project; and the fundamentally modern nature of the endeavor. At the local level, correspondents commented on the projections that this would be “the largest power plant in the state”²⁶⁶ and would install “steel towers” previously unseen in the area to transfer the energy across the state.²⁶⁷ Such publications highlighted that the high-elevation reservoir at relief would not only boast huge tunnels and dams, but that the power plant would require tramways that climb 1,700 feet of mountain face at the end of 5,000 foot elevation drops of water.²⁶⁸ These superlatives would extend to the technology being used to help construct these giant projects and the capital that funded it: thousands of pounds of engines and mechanical donkeys, driven by millions of dollars from the giants of finance.²⁶⁹ “Have here a saw mill with a donkey logging engine that brings logs up to the mill, a railroad with a 20-ton locomotive to haul gravel and stone, and wire cables stretched across the canyon about 300 feet high, with trolleys running upon them that let down the rock wherever desired on the dam. Will be 300 or more feet in height with concrete center and a cement wall facing the water.”²⁷⁰ Further, the result would be dragging this region into the bright, new century marked by scientific progress and reason. “The electric line has been put up in our dead town. It dispels the darkness of the night like the morning sun, in fact the light is a thing of beauty and joy for all night long,” wrote one correspondent of the *Calaveras Prospect*.²⁷¹

Along with local correspondents, regional reports also focused on the big and the modern – and at times they were prone to exaggeration. Stockton and Hanford papers described a “great line” of electrical towers running out of the plant, one of the

²⁶⁴ Howard Veeder to Herman Veeder, Aug. 11, 1903, Box 2322, Folder 7, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

²⁶⁵ Howard Veeder to Herman Veeder, Feb. 2, March 20, 1905, Box 2322, Folder 9, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

²⁶⁶ “Largest Power Plant in the State,” *Mother Lode Magnet*, Jan. 16, 1907, Tuolumne County Library, Sonora.

²⁶⁷ “Power Company Held Up,” *Mother Lode Magnet*, Sept. 25, 1907, Tuolumne County Library, Sonora.

²⁶⁸ “What the U.C. Company is Doing,” *Mother Lode Magnet*, Oct. 9, 1907, Tuolumne County Library, Sonora.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁷¹ “A Vallecito Letter of General Items,” *The Calaveras Prospect*.

“most extensive and longest lines in the world” with towers standing “800 feet apart” bringing power to the city from the hinterlands where they were completing “an unusually large undertaking” which was to be “one of the largest dams in the world ... 165 feet high and 700 feet across.”²⁷² The *San Francisco Chronicle* would focus on the transmission towers and sheer size of the power generation, emphasizing the Sierra and San Francisco Electric Power Company after the takeover by United Railroads to be “one of the three largest power companies in the state.”²⁷³ Even niche outlets which covered specifically the expansion and triumphs of electrical engineering and hydraulic works highlighted the project’s size, scope and modern trappings. The *Journal of Electricity, Power and Gas*, a publication focused on the energy industry out of San Francisco, often projected industry and professional successes back to the country’s financial and intellectual centers in the east. One 1909 report called the project “more than just a passing interest” for the industry due to the “boldness of some of the designs and variations in detail of execution,” as well as focusing again on the length and materials of the transmission lines and the size of the reservoirs.²⁷⁴

The engineering work also received regional print, detailing the water flows and the storage capacities that would ensure more reliable supplies of electricity for the city’s street cars. The size of the high-elevation Relief Dam, made possible by its unprecedented design with a concave, downstream shape necessitated by the geography, would contribute to those reliable flows. (See Figure 45) “Various prophecies of the inability of the reinforced concrete curtain to hold water have been disproved by actual trial,” the journal states, noting that the dam had been “successful where similar government tests have failed” due to quality design and materials.²⁷⁵ Local and regional descriptions of the Stanislaus plant shared an infatuation with both the size and scope of the project, as well as its modern trappings of unusual steel towers spanning distances, huge dams in high elevations, unprecedented systems of locomotives, pulleys and towers, all carrying out engineering and scientific work as part of a new movement to bring modernity to the wilderness.

This hydroelectric boom in California was driven in many ways by what social scholar James Scott described as “high modernism,” an ideology he defined as a “faith that borrowed, as it were, the legitimacy of science and technology.” Boosters of both this project and of electrical engineering in general around the Pacific exercised this ideology in their words and acts, seeking unquestioned expansion of these kinds of projects in ways that were “uncritical, unskeptical, and thus unscientifically optimistic about the possibilities for the comprehensive planning of human settlement and production.”²⁷⁶ The pursuers of these projects, and the observers and beneficiaries both

²⁷² “Great Power Plant Described,” *Hanford Weekly Sentinel*, Sept. 3, 1908, California Digital Newspaper Collection.

²⁷³ “United Railroads Acquires Big Plant of the Stanislaus Electric Company,” *San Francisco Chronicle*.

²⁷⁴ “Stanislaus Transmission Line,” *Journal of Electricity Power and Gas*.

²⁷⁵ “The Stanislaus Power Development,” *Journal of Electricity Power and Gas*.

²⁷⁶ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 4.

in and out of the watershed, overwhelmingly celebrated the application of rationalistic scientific management and modern technology to these otherwise unpredictable and capricious waterways and landscapes of the Sierra Nevada. The hydroelectric boom was even more of a step toward high modernism after the gold rush, applying even more of a deliberative planning approach to the engineering, labor and capital than the early waves of humanity that overwhelmed the peoples and ecologies present in the region before gold was discovered in the late 1840s.

Also aligned with the modernist ideology discussed by Scott, these depictions of the work and the projects themselves saw “rational order in remarkably visual aesthetic terms,” like looking at “an efficient, rationally organized” landscape in place of chaotic or illegible wilderness.²⁷⁷ The machinery and the geometry were all there, but perhaps more importantly was the fact that these projects would bring the predictability necessary for efficient production that would come with the rational organization of nature. As the *Journal of Electricity* would point out in 1909, the system’s unique aspects including the overall capacity at high elevation, large forebay reservoir and the on-site facilities and manpower to repair and maintain conveyance systems meant less likelihood for power outages previously caused either by breaks in the system or weather-related problems. “The plant thus possesses unusual advantages for meeting either emergency,”²⁷⁸ the correspondent pointed out. Here, to them, was proof of the mastery of capital, engineering and technology over a river system that even investors involved in the industry had previously questioned.²⁷⁹

The high-modern ideology described by Scott drove the large reclamation projects that would reshape the state and the American West later in the 20th Century. During this movement, both the state and large private actors erected enormous dams on the region’s river systems to control and redirect water flows and facilitate agricultural, urban and suburban development. At a certain point, these projects were pursued for the sake of themselves as much as any economic or social end, and by the end of the century they had devastating consequences both for the ecological health of the regions and for the economic and social health for many except the most privileged classes who benefitted from them.²⁸⁰ As Scott pointed out when discussing high modernism, this was driven by a “strong, one might even say muscle-bound, version of the self-confidence about scientific and technical progress, the expansion of production, the growing satisfaction of human needs, the mastery of nature ... and, above all, the rational design of social order commensurate with the scientific understanding of natural laws.”²⁸¹ Historians of California water often explore the ideological verve behind urban water systems like the San Francisco system made possible by the infamous Hetch Hetchy dam or the Los Angeles system which flooded

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ “The Stanislaus Power Development,” *Journal of Electricity Power and Gas*.

²⁷⁹ Herman Veeder to Hoawrd Veeder, April 9, 1903, Box 2322, Folder 7, Stanislaus Electric Power Co. Records.

²⁸⁰ See texts referenced in pages 21-29 of this study, especially: Hundley, *The Great Thirst*; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*; Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*; Lowry, *Dam Politics: Restoring America's Rivers*.

²⁸¹ Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 4.

the Owens Valley, as well as agricultural and multi-use systems like the federal Bureau of Reclamation's Central Valley Project or California's State Water Project.

These analyses rarely focus on California's hydroelectric boom, including the Stanislaus system. Yet these projects both set a template for, and even at times facilitated, the coming of the big dam era in multiple ways. First, these systems, with their water purveyance and their electrical transmission lines, represented some of the earliest physical infrastructure that would materially connect the state's urban centers to these distant wildlands. One historian compared the electrical grid in central California to the Roman aqueducts,²⁸² fanning out to the hinterlands from a single, imperial power center. Electrical lines crossed the turbulent waters of the San Francisco bay in 1901, a quarter century before bridges.²⁸³ And while the city of San Francisco looked to expand its physical control over the environments of the state by building a new reservoir in the high Sierra mountains, conservationists were pointing out how the infrastructure already existed along the Stanislaus to supply the city's needs for both power and water.²⁸⁴ Second, hydroelectricity along the Stanislaus River would eventually facilitate further development in the watershed. By the middle of the century, long before the federal government pursued a massive, multi-purpose dam in the form of New Melones, multiple agricultural water districts completed complex projects with PG&E's capacity to generate power as an integral ingredient for underwriting their construction.²⁸⁵

The era of big dams in California likely looks different without the established presence of hydroelectric activity in the waterways and landscapes of the Sierra Nevada – especially the Stanislaus watershed. But the electricity boom's impact on the region, driven by the modernist, ideological fervor, extended beyond reclamation and irrigation. Significant recreation and leisure occurred along the system because of engineered roads and changes along the waterways from related hydraulic infrastructure. And some of the individuals who helped build these systems would apply such modernist ideas and approaches to the back country, transforming waterways for presumed ecological benefits and actively working to use human engineering to supposedly improve nature itself for the purposes of creating new recreational places in the wildernesses.

"What a harvest of sport:" Modern recreation in the central Sierra Nevada

By the 1920s, the previously remote spaces of the Stanislaus River watershed were newly accessible and legible thanks to access from roads and the predictable water flows from dams. As a resource conservation movement drove sportsmen to explore the nation's backcountry for outdoor recreation, they found in the area places that seemed ideally suited for leisure and sport. According to one National Forest Service historian, summer home and resort construction saw a boom in the watershed after the completion of the hydroelectric projects. Those homes and the businesses

²⁸² Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco*, 265.

²⁸³ Coleman, *PG and E of California*, non-numbered page between 150 and 151.

²⁸⁴ Muir, "Letter from John Muir et al. to The Voters of San Francisco, [ca.1908 Oct]."

²⁸⁵ Jackson and Mikesell, *The Stanislaus River Drainage Basin and the New Melones Dam*, 8, 13-14.

serving them tended to cluster around newly completed and improved roads and around access points to rivers and lakes.²⁸⁶ An early survey of summer home tracts in the national forest covered much of the Stanislaus watershed and hydroelectric system, showing the largest collection of such homes around the lower reservoir near Strawberry. Accessible by the improved Mono Road, that reservoir also boasted recreational facilities that local businesses transformed from worker facilities initially built for dam construction.²⁸⁷ Very few natural lakes existed in the region due to the local geography and hydrology, so the construction of these reservoirs altered the physical and economic landscapes by producing new waterscapes that people would turn into new recreation places through their own use patterns.

One local resident – who first came to the Stanislaus River basin to work on the Union Construction Company’s traction engines – would illustrate how this modern infrastructure would impact perceptions of natural beauty and recreation in a poem he wrote in 1935 about the Strawberry reservoir. Parodying a piece on the Tiviot River by Sir Walter Scott, Russell Grigsby mustered the kind of romantic rhetoric one might see from a naturalist when discussing the engineered landscape. “Sweet Stanislaus, on thy silver tide, The PG&E has got your goat, Across the surface the outboard glide, And along your shores the flappers float. Where e’er thou windest, o’er dale, or hill, You’ve got to work, and run a mill!”²⁸⁸ Technological advances along the system had removed much of the clear human presence in these rugged canyons, mountains and forests through modernization and automation. And now, people like Grigsby with romantic verve would celebrate that system – built to be a triumph of man’s ability to control nature through high-modernist ideology – as environmental infrastructure akin to nature itself.²⁸⁹

The expansion of that infrastructure coincided with a larger national movement to get Americans – especially white, urban Americans – outdoors for physically and spiritually invigorating activities. Tied to the progressive political movement beginning in the late 19th Century, the American conservation movement stressed the importance of public resource conservation both to keep land and materials in the public trust, but also to preserve some of the remaining landscapes the country was supposedly losing to modern development. These movements pushed people to get outdoors to camp, hunt, fish and hike in country’s seemingly wild spaces, inspiring the preservation of charismatic landscapes through the founding and growth of a national parks system and spurring a growth in interest in outdoor recreation. But these experiences were not limited to high-profile jewels of the preservation movement, like John Muir’s Hetch Hetchy, the wild Yellowstone or Yosemite Valley, all places preserved from the ravages of industrialization. Just as labor and leisure existed side-

²⁸⁶ Conners, “Historical Overview of Recreation Residences on the Stanislaus National Forest,” 9-10, 27.

²⁸⁷ Ibid, 10.

²⁸⁸ Russell Grigsby, *From the Backwoods of old Tuolumne*, 69, self published, Stockton, 1943.

²⁸⁹ David Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 235. Blackbourn discusses a phenomenon in 19th Century Germany akin to Grigsby’s romanticization of this lake, one he calls “reservoir romanticism.”

by-side in the Stanislaus basin and the areas around it, the lines between the natural and the built environments were often distinctions without differences to those who recreated in the Emigrant Basin. This wilderness place served many of these conservationists as a backcountry fishing paradise, and like the new reservoir at Pine Crest Flat, this place was constructed through human intervention, modern engineering and a high-modernist approach to wilderness management.

The Emigrant Basin seemed at first glance to early sportsmen a perfect destination for wilderness fishing fanatics. The high Sierra landscape was rugged and remote, with elevations ranging from 7,500 to 9,500 and the wilderness area of the popular but protected Yosemite National Park located just to the south. The area was accessible for adventurers with pack animals or those who had the means to hire a pack team out of Kennedy Meadows, thanks to the engineered roadways into the basin via Relief Reservoir. Once in the backcountry, travelers could access dozens of streams and lakes surrounded by novel scenery and solitude. The place "is a unique scenic granite expanse abounding in small crystal lakes and perpetually verdant meadows, whose beauty is strikingly accentuated by their rough, solemn, awe-commanding surroundings, a grayish landscape splotched here and there in a variety of hues," described one sportsman in 1933.²⁹⁰

However, this place had a problem for those sportsmen. The landscape and waterways of the Emigrant Basin were not very good at supporting sustainable fish populations. Trout had been present in the streams since livestock grazers initially planted some of the basin's lakes as early as 1897. Since then, both state agencies and private actors had been trying to build and maintain a fishery in environments that had previously been barren of trout.²⁹¹ Many, if not most, of the trout planted in these waterways would die annually by the thousands because of the high country's inconsistent and often unpredictable water levels. During the driest months of the year, usually August through October, the snowmelt from the granite peaks would dwindle. Levels would lower at the many small lakes scattered across the Emigrant Basin, and the creeks where the fish in those lakes had spawned would dry up completely. The granite landscape exacerbated the issue, as it did not absorb much groundwater to feed the creeks. "The valiant effort of these fish to increase their population usually met with dismal failure – for just as the young fish were getting up to a nice size following egg hatching in the stream, the stream would go dry and thousands of fingerling trout would perish," lamented a representative of the California Chamber of Commerce, of that early situation.²⁹²

By 1931, one man seemed to have a solution for nature's problem in the high country. Fred Leighton, a native of the Sierra foothills with experience traversing the high country, decided to build some dams. Leighton did so with help from the

²⁹⁰ E.C. Damin, "An Achievement in Conservation and Propagation," *National Sportsman*, August 1933, Folder 1, Fred Leighton Papers.

²⁹¹ USDA, "Emigrant Wilderness Dams Environmental Impact Statement;" Leighton, "Historic Emigrant Basin."

²⁹² "Stream Flow Maintenance Dams Save Fish, Water," *California: Magazine of the Pacific*, January, 1950, Folder 1, Fred Leighton Papers.

Tuolumne County Sportsman's Association, an organization he co-founded and of which he was president. (See Figure 46) Leighton became acquainted with the Sierra high country as a young man when he worked for ranchers grazing their cattle around the Stanislaus River headwaters and the adjacent Emigrant Basin. He grew into an avid sportsman and a leader in the game conservation movement around the state, regularly working with policymakers, bureaucrats and private organizations on issues like fish and game husbandry and stocking programs. He would later in the 1930s run an experimental fish hatchery to keep the headwaters of the Stanislaus and Tuolumne rivers stocked with healthy trout for anglers to enjoy.

Leighton as a young professional also worked for the Stanislaus Electric Power Company and the Sierra and San Francisco Power Company, moving from San Francisco back to his hometown of Sonora to seek work after the 1906 fire drove him out of the city. Though Leighton would work as a bookkeeper and clerk, not an engineer or laborer, he was still very familiar with the system's engineering as he regularly took the trip along much of the infrastructure from the headquarters in Vallecito to the high points at Relief and the other construction sites.²⁹³ (See Figure 53) Leighton was in fact so interested in the engineering side of the company that he would dedicate time to documenting and maintaining a personal archive of the company's history, as well as the general history of water development in and around the Stanislaus River.²⁹⁴

Much like the men for whom he worked, Leighton used hydraulic engineering and dam building to solve the problems of flow volumes in Sierra waterways. Initially raising funds from sportsmen's groups and private conservationists, and leveraging the labor of his organization's members, he would spearhead the construction of five small dams in the wilderness for the sole purpose of creating suitable habitat for wild trout populations. Called by one bureaucrat as a project to "build your own hatcheries,"²⁹⁵ these experimental dams were built on the outlets of existing lakes, often raising water levels only by a few feet. Between 1925 and 1930, Leighton and volunteer crews built the dams using some materials hauled in on pack teams but also using granite from the surrounding area. In many cases, they installed rudimentary valves to regulate outlet flows. In all cases, these dams were meant to maintain water levels in the mountain creeks for spawning during dry stretches and to expand the sizes of the lakes to hold more mature fish. (See Figures 47 and 48)

The experiment of building high country dams for prosperous trout waters was largely successful. After they completed the initial dams, the local sportsmen stocked the lakes with more trout and saw self-sustaining fisheries take hold. They also observed better habitat for the insect species on which the fish would feed, as well as improved overall conditions for livestock through the expansion of meadows adjacent

²⁹³ Marovich, "Fred William Leighton," 554.

²⁹⁴ Fred Leighton to William Gianelli, March 26, 1971, Hydroelectric Power Companies Folder, Leighton Papers. The file containing this letter also contains various other correspondences and documents regarding Leighton's work to research and document the history of the system.

²⁹⁵ George Nordenholt, "Build Your Own Hatchery is Tuolumne's Slogan," *The California Conservationist*, n.d., Folder 1, Leighton Papers.

to the lakes. Leighton would work to tell the conservation world about his success, and in 1930s a kind of media blitz introduced these dams – known generally by the term check dams – to the rest of the conservation world. “I saw something to bring a glitter to the eyes of any trout fishermen, and it's been done in a large measure by the sportsmen themselves, so we research fellows aren't trying to take any credit for it,” Paul Needham, a fisheries scientist working for the federal government reportedly told a columnist with the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1933. Restating the issue of water supply in the basin, he went on:

Trout have died (in the past) by the countless thousands. Now dams have been built. There is a reserve supply of water in the lakes. Its flow is regulated in the streams, with the result that there is water for the trout all summer long. Last week I saw wild trout - none of them artificially hatched and planted there - in all these streams. Trout by the thousands, three growths of them, a year old, two years old and three years old. Man, oh man! What a harvest of sport is going to be reaped by the fishermen responsible!"²⁹⁶

These dams became a success story for water conservationists and recreationists well into the 20th Century, with sportsmen, scientists and engineers alike marveling at the supposed vision and ingenuity of Leighton and his contingent of locals. (See Figure 49) These reports often mirrored or echoed those of previous water engineering in the region, as they applauded new uses of reclamation methods improve the environment's ability to provide people with some instrumental outcome. In this case, that use was recreation.

The reclaiming of the watershed of the Wilderness Area of the cause of better fishing is a star in the crown of the Stanislaus-Tuolumne Fish and Game Protective Association, an organization of California sportsmen, among whom are numbered men of vision and energy. To accomplish this stupendous task the association did not rely on its own resources alone. It selected energetic and efficient leadership, which in turn organized the co-operative effort of a number of agencies into effective action. They accomplished the task under able supervision without loss of motion. Which proves the value of organization among sportsmen, one of the fundamental principles of the Game Restoration Program. ... Means of preventing the loss of countless thousands of young trout almost annually by the drying up of streams in a rugged, lake-studded part of the high Sierras accessible only by trail, has been solved by the construction of check dams at a number of natural bodies of water in the region. ... The plan, one of the most important ever

²⁹⁶ Bill Robinson, “The Woodsman,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Oct. 7, 1933, Folder 1, Fred Leighton Papers.

carried out in the central Sierra region for the conservation and propagation of fish life, was sponsored by the Stanislaus-Tuolumne Fish and Game Protective association. ... Its president is Fred W. Leighton, a preserving and indefatigable worker for the cause of fishing and hunting.²⁹⁷

Through rationality, organizational skills and modern engineering, Leighton and these people had found a way to save nature from herself... or at least give nature a boost. As one correspondent wrote of the transformative power of hydraulic engineering to improve fisheries, “give the trout half a chance and he is quite capable of taking care of himself!”²⁹⁸

Conservation agencies and organizations took notice, and Leighton’s local sportsmen’s group pursued an expanded program of check dam building in the Emigrant Basin with help from public sources like state and federal agencies and the city of San Francisco, as well as private funders like chambers of commerce. They erected 18 of these dams by 1951, many using their own labor and direction. Some were built with public aid, including projects with the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s and 1940s.²⁹⁹ (See Figure 50) Public officials in natural resource management and nature recreation pointed to the dam program as a model for wilderness reclamation, especially as a post-war boom of outdoor leisure activities increased demand for such places.

California's mountain lakes and streams are, in themselves, an attraction which hundreds of thousands enjoy annually. Unfortunately, however, this great California expansion has brought about a gradual but steady decline in the number of beautiful streams and lakes producing good populations of game fish, so sought after by thousands of people seeking relaxation through angling. ... When one stops to think about it, recreation in our mountain areas not only is an important contribution to the well-being of our citizens, but is also an integral part of California's economic status. Gradual disappearance of good fishing waters ... is a problem to which many groups throughout the state have given extensive thought, resulting in several programs or plans for alleviating needless loss. One plan, given widespread support by the California State Chamber of Commerce, California Division of Fish and Game, sportsmen's organizations, and the U.S. Forest Service, is that of stream flow maintenance, or, as it is more often called, the “check dam program.” ... The future of this program appears very bright. Recently the California Legislature set up a \$9,000,000 fund for capital improvements in fish and game. This

²⁹⁷ Damin, “An Achievement in Conservation and Propagation.”

²⁹⁸ “Streamflow Maintenance Dams Save Water, Fish,” *California: Magazine of the Pacific*.

²⁹⁹ Steve D. Bowman, *Leighton's High Sierra Check Dam Legacy: A Photographic Journal*, self published, 2.

money was derived from the State's share of the race track pari-mutual funds. Allocation of this money was put in the hands of a special body called the Wildlife Conservation Board. This (board) has, upon recommendation of sportsmen's groups, chambers of commerce, Division of Fish and Game, U.S. Forest Service, and other groups, allocated \$284,000 for immediate construction of "Flow Maintenance and Stream Improvement Projects" in various regions of California."³⁰⁰

According to conservation agencies, the solution to this demand for natural places to play and pray in could be the construction of new natures through modern engineering and bureaucratic planning. Before wilderness areas would be established through federal edict, they were designed and built in the primitive areas of the Stanislaus National Forest as part of a modern approach to environmental control.

Leighton's dams in the Emigrant Basin were not the only examples of interventionist environmental conservation in the region, as he and other public agencies would seek well into the 1960s to use dam building to improve natural habitat and other ecological conditions and facilitate what they deemed to be high-quality recreation in the watershed. One of these was a proposal in early 1940s by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Department of the Interior to build a dam upstream from the now popular Strawberry Reservoir and improve fishing conditions. The dam, according to one proposal, could be located in the same place as a previous dam built for mining in the mid-19th Century. Now long deteriorated, the footprint of the small reservoir left behind a flat area of willow woods and meadow. According to the proposal, the new reservoir could serve as a rearing habitat for trout which would then swim or be transferred the short distance downstream to Strawberry. Or the small lake could serve itself as a popular and attractive fishing site both at and above the lake for people willing to take less than a mile hike. Either way, according to the plan, the primary purpose of this lake – called at various points Eleanor Reservoir and Upper Strawberry – would be to improve angling by easing fishing pressure or increasing fish on the popular Strawberry reservoir.³⁰¹ (See Figure 51)

Strawberry was one of the more popular recreation destinations in the region by this point. And according to one fisheries biologist who investigated the proposal, this relatively small reservoir at Pine Crest Flat was not designed to hold trout and did not do a very good job of it largely due to PG&E's annual draw down of the lake in the late fall. "There is very little shelter around the shore for small trout, and during the winter when the water is down all the fish are concentrated in the pond above the dam. Such conditions are not favorable to the survival of young planted trout," the

³⁰⁰ "Streamflow Maintenance Dams Save Water, Fish," *California: Magazine of the Pacific*.

³⁰¹ Brian Curtis, "Biological Report on the 'Upper Pinecrest Project,'" June 10, 1940, Memo to Bureau of Fish Conservation, Folder 1 Fred Leighton Papers; P.R. Needham, "A Report on the Eleanor Reservoir Site near Pinecrest, California," June 26, 1940, Fish and Wildlife Service, Folder 1 Fred Leighton Papers.

biologist stated in one memo.³⁰² However, the Eleanor Lake site – one of multiple considered briefly as part of this proposal – would be more suitable for the fish, between the larger amount of underwater cover now present in the former lake’s footprint and a spawning ground just upstream. All it would take, according to another report, was a little bit of extra work in the lake site before it would be filled – “straightening the channel with a bulldozer during the construction and feathering the edges of the present channel so that the fish would naturally go down to the deeper areas to (or through) the outlet,” among other options.³⁰³ Though the dam was never completed, Leighton’s modern, interventionist approach to engineering the environment for habitat and recreation was increasingly embraced by the environmental managers in the region.

“A playground ... and a preserve:” New Melones and modern conservation on the lower Stanislaus River

On a cool, Sunday afternoon in March of 1971, James Donovan canoed about a dozen miles down the Stanislaus River with his son, Clay. From a county park outside of Oakdale to a small park in the center of the city of Riverbank, the trip took him through the heart of the northeastern San Joaquin Valley. The low, rolling hills marking the end of the Sierra Nevada mountains were still largely covered in fresh, green grasses with the occasional splotch of brown where the most intense, direct sunlight shone during the early spring afternoons. The miles of farmland – from wide-open cattle ranches covered in seemingly wild grasses to the geometrically rigid nut orchards – were sometimes sparsely visible through the dense, often overgrown and “unspoiled,”³⁰⁴ ribbon of riparian woodlands that hugged the banks of the river. At times, they could see the vertical bluffs in the distance looming over a flood plain that was no more than a mile wide and often less in most places. The water itself was still cold from the crisp spring climate and the distant snowmelt from where it ultimately flowed reliably over occasional, small rapids. Mostly, the water was crawling to a creep as it settled along the continuously flattening landscape. What appeared to be placid surfaces hid a strong and consistent current which regularly claimed the lives of those who didn’t heed it. With their clarity, these breezy stretches of water occasionally betrayed the presence of a small school of native rainbow trout, a striped bass or Chinook salmon migrating from the sea. Donovan would describe this stretch of the Stanislaus as “just beautiful,” with the potential for the Stanislaus to be, “a model river” for conservationists in the region.³⁰⁵

But Donovan’s vision was still just one of potential, and he needed a plan to complete it. Over the next two years, he would help lead and collaborate with local

³⁰² Brian Curtis, “Biological Report on the ‘Upper Pinecrest Project,’” June 10, 1940, Memo to Bureau of Fish Conservation, Folder 1, Fred Leighton Papers.

³⁰³ P.R. Needham, “A Report on the Eleanor Reservoir Site near Pinecrest, California,” June 26, 1940, Fish and Wildlife Service, Folder 1, Fred Leighton Papers.

³⁰⁴ Thorne Gray, “Engineers Eye Stanislaus as a ‘Model,’” *Modesto Bee*, March 15, 1971, Box 21, Folder 1, Thorne B. Gray Collection.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

groups of conservationists and riverside property owners to forge such a plan to rehabilitate and restore the river to what they deemed a high-quality environment both for the species of plants and animals that relied on it and the people who used it for recreation. Long overtaxed and diminished as ecological habitat and for recreational or scenic purposes, the lower Stanislaus River by the 1970s had become a sad testament to the impacts of dams, diversions, in-basin farming and other instrumental uses.

Yet the plan Donovan initiated would eventually combine the same modernist approach of engineering used by Leighton for his check dam projects in the Emigrant Basin. But this time, planners prioritized the wilderness activity of non-motorized boating, not fishing, as the defining use. If only they could engineer their way to improving water quality and quantity, guaranteeing fresh, cool flows during important times of the year for fish populations and other threatened species of the lower river's historical ecosystem. And if they could couple such improvements with habitat restoration and improved recreation facilities, the lower river could become an ideal place for canoeing and other non-motorized boating, an activity which was becoming increasingly popular upriver where whitewater rafters and kayakers now flocked annually. Donovan would say during this time that he believed such a plan for the lower river could not only improve the waterway, which had seen large scale ecological impacts due to upstream development and intensive agriculture in the watershed, but could help make it "pristine."³⁰⁶ One news outlet would describe Donovan's vision as one for a "playground for people and a preserve for fish and wildlife."³⁰⁷

Donovan wasn't a sportsman or a conservationist like Fred Leighton. And he wasn't a whitewater enthusiast like the guides and rafters of the upper river's more popular canyon. He was a colonel in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. And the plan that he would spearhead early on for river restoration of the lower Stanislaus was part of a multi-faceted proposal to build a massive dam called New Melones on the Stanislaus River. Completed by the Army Corps in 1979 and managed by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, it would also become one of the federal government's most controversial dams, as it proposed flooding the increasingly popular whitewater in the upper stretches of the river.

First filled in 1983, New Melones remains the newest reservoir in the complex Central Valley Project, a multi-dam system dedicated to moving water from California's northern and central mountains and the irrigating the fertile lowlands of the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys. The Stanislaus has similar hydrology and geomorphology to many Sierra Nevada rivers, with its headwaters located high along the range's crest on multiple arms north of what is today Yosemite National Park and south of Lake Tahoe. The multiple forks of its headwaters flow generally westward to their confluence in the Sierra foothills, where the main river then emerges out of the mountains and into the northern San Joaquin Valley before joining the San Joaquin

³⁰⁶ Thorne Gray, "Corps Sees a 'Pristine' Stanislaus," *Modesto Bee*, April 24, 1973, Box 20, Folder 6, Thorne B. Gray Collection.

³⁰⁷ Thorne Gray, "Engineers Plan River Playground," *Modesto Bee*, Nov 29, 1973, Box 21, Folder 1, Thorne B. Gray Collection.

River and eventually flowing into the San Francisco Bay. Though New Melones would be part of a project first conceived for irrigation, it was altered over time to also provide flood control for the lower Stanislaus River basin, recreation for lake visitors, and water for the river's strained ecosystem.

The dam was controversial from the start, becoming more so by the early 1970s due to its inevitable impact on the upriver canyon increasingly loved by river preservationists. As part of attempts to quell some of those tensions, planners with the New Melones project would attach a lower river plan for the stretch of the Stanislaus downriver from the dam. That plan would try to balance the flood control concerns that were primary for the Army Corps with newly emerging priorities for environmental improvements in the state's struggling waterways. The history of the Army Corps itself in the region was an important reason why many of those environmental questions emerged in the first place, as were those of its sister agency the Bureau of Reclamation and various other public entities like the state of California, regional water districts, and cities of Los Angeles and San Francisco. Over the 20th Century, these public actors had colluded with private agricultural and urban interests to remake the landscapes and waterways of the state and greater American West in an orgy of dam building. These dams – sometimes individual, sometimes parts of extensive regional projects – would impound in the state's rivers where water was plentiful and move it through sprawling networks of canals and aqueducts where it was needed for instrumental use as part of what many call the Era of Big Dams. This would enable increased agricultural production, urban growth and suburban development in otherwise dry lands, causing massive environmental and social impacts. This era is perhaps the clearest and most stark example of a high-modernist ideology in practice, as the actions of these agencies and the people who drove them generally moved forward through most of the century without a question of whether reason, instrumentalism and human engineering would make the West an unquestionably better society than it was before the projects were built.³⁰⁸

The lower Stanislaus River plan compiled and pursued under Donovan would apply this ideological approach to ecological improvement with an embrace of increasingly popular wilderness water sports in a kind of planning experiment in modernist environmental preservation. Like Leighton decades earlier, the Army Corps would see potential in dams to remake and improve the waterways that those structures were designed to control. Much like the construction of check dams in the high Sierra earlier in the century, the proposal to improve the lower Stanislaus River would expand an ideology of high modernism long associated with river decline and apply it to environmental conservation, operating under the assumption that the way to improve and restore ideal ecological conditions was through upstream storage. Like with Leighton's high Sierra dams, New Melones would supposedly keep more water in the system during dry months and dry years, improving both water quality and aquatic habitat for fish.

³⁰⁸ Chapter 1 of this dissertation, especially pages 35-45, covers this literature in more detail.

Whether ideological or strategic, the Army Corps plan also recognized the transformative power that recreation could have for defining the value of a waterway, a power he was also witnessing along the Stanislaus canyon located upstream. Whether rafting technically difficult whitewater or paddling canoes through slower rivers and slack-water ponds, non-motorized boating and its popularity had extended the nature preservation movement to many waterways around the country. Water was increasingly popular as a backcountry transportation route, and waterways targeted for preservation often were utilized for that very purpose.³⁰⁹ On the Stanislaus, the canyon waterway had been made especially navigable due to upstream storage and development, even if the connection between rafting and the upper Stanislaus dams was incidental. Here, on the lower river, Donovan and the federal agency he helped direct sought to deliberately create a wilderness preserve through the construction of a major, multi-purpose dam. And the preservation outcomes in this vision – improved environment and ideal outdoor recreation – at the time seemed to be reconcilable with the project of controlling and shaping the environment for instrumental purposes and economic production. Dams, it seemed they assumed, could be important parts of a natural river.

The U.S. Congress approved dams at the New Melones site throughout the 1940s and into the 1950s, with both the federal Bureau of Reclamation and Army Corps of Engineers recognizing the Stanislaus' potential for irrigation and flood control as they pursued intensive and transformative development agendas in California. Though the federal government were late comers to the watershed by the time Congress re-approved a more detailed proposal for New Melones in 1962 as part of the Federal Flood Control Act. Multiple private and local public entities heavily dammed and diverted the river system during the first half of the 20th Century, starting with initial hydraulic engineering of makeshift reservoirs and miner's ditches and culminating in complex, cooperative agreements for irrigation and hydroelectric power. By the 1950s, the river had more than 50 development projects on it including a multitude of powerhouses, ditches, canals and both small and large reservoirs,³¹⁰ with the regional utility PG&E and the local irrigation districts serving the extensive agricultural producers in and around Oakdale and southern San Joaquin County. Many of these facilities – especially those of the irrigation districts – were possible due to the unique cooperative agreement between the power utility and the districts. Under the agreement, PG&E would finance the dams in exchange for ownership and control over the power generation at the sites. This innovative agreement – called the “Melones formula” by one historian – was unique for its time, green lighting construction of the districts' older Melones dam near Carson Hill in 1926 and then the Tri-Dam project at

³⁰⁹ Tim Palmer, *The Wild and Scenic Rivers of America* (Washington, D.C., Island Press, 1993), 7, 102-104. On pg. 7, Palmer specifically connects the wild and scenic river movement with river recreation. Later (102-104), the book associates “seeing” a protected river with boating down the waterway.

³¹⁰ Jackson and Mikesell, *The Stanislaus River Drainage Basin and the New Melones Dam*, 8.

Tulloch in the lower foothills, Beardsley in the central canyon and Donnell in the high Sierra.³¹¹

Conflict over New Melones raged through much of the planning stages. Those local private developers created an initial wave of public opposition to the New Melones Dam in the late 1950s and early 1960s. PG&E, local officials and agriculturalists focused their criticism mostly on federal intervention, arguing it was unnecessary and a potential infringement on what they perceived as their rights to contemporary and future use of Stanislaus water. This was especially important since history suggested the involvement of the federal government would likely mean water exported to agricultural interests elsewhere in California. These parties collaborated as part of an informal group in the basin, developing and pursuing strategies to prevent a federal project and proposing a similar dam and reservoir built and operated at local scales.³¹² Along with the local opposition, intra-agency conflict that long plagued the Army Corps and Bureau of Reclamation spilled onto the Stanislaus River. With the Army Corps mostly focused on flood control and river navigation, and the Bureau's main cause in California being irrigation for agriculture, each agency offered competing visions for development on the Stanislaus that would fit their primary purposes.

Federal representatives, planners and local stakeholders ultimately negotiated a kind of compromise in the 1962 legislation meant to placate all parties at odds over the dam. The Army Corps would build the dam and produce a long-term plan for river channel management on the Stanislaus below New Melones. Once the dam was complete, the Bureau of Reclamation would operate it as part of the Central Valley Project, while the Army Corps would manage the lower river. That lower river management would include requirements for the Army Corps to maintain the river's natural channel from the last dam on the system (known as Goodwin Dam, a few miles downstream from New Melones) to its confluence with the San Joaquin River. The agency would also have to preserve fish and wildlife along the river, provide basic recreation facilities at the river, and consider water quality in the dam's planning and operation.³¹³ The legislation also included an amendment that would subordinate federal water exports from the Stanislaus River to the current and future water needs of in-basin users. That meant that the water districts and utilities would retain their existing and future rights, which would be senior to the federal government's claims.³¹⁴ Though some local and internal conflict remained of the dam after the legislation passed, widespread local support galvanized around the dam after a major flooding disaster along the lower river in 1964.³¹⁵

Dam designers and river planners pursued the New Melones project with the additions necessary in its downstream plan. The reservoir's long-term management would need to support four priorities for the lower river: recreation along the lower

³¹¹ Ibid, 11-26.

³¹² Ibid, 68.

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Ibid, 11-26.

river, improved water quality within it, restoration and maintenance of fish habitat, and preservation of riparian habitat adjacent to the waterway. These improvements would ideally reverse impacts that largely came from the agriculture in the surrounding lands of the eastern San Joaquin Valley, where fruit and nut orchards, dairies and other diverse row crops dominated the physical and economic landscapes. Diversions for irrigation had reduced water in the river to little more than a trickle by the summers, especially in dry years³¹⁶ which are common in the precarious and oft-arid climate of the region. The intensive nature of the factory-style farming in the watershed also led to increased contamination of the lower river's water from salts, sediment and fertilizers. This was exacerbated by the systematic destruction of riparian woodlands and wetlands along the river, which had been eliminated in large swaths both statewide and in the watershed due to conversion of land to agriculture.³¹⁷ And the upstream obstructions caused by the intensive damming also divided the watershed into segments, which re-shaped the hydrology and lead to changes in sediment distribution in the lower river with changes to gravels, silts and even in-stream erosion patterns impacting fish habitat.³¹⁸ By the 1960s, the lower Stanislaus River was widely understood as environmentally problematic, with fish populations in crisis and regularly experiencing die-offs, and poor water quality, water quantity and disappearing riparian vegetation making recreation along the waterway less and less viable. As late as 1971, locals described the river as essentially turning into a "sewer" during the summer.³¹⁹

Leading up to the approval of the New Melones Dam in 1964 as part of the federal Flood Control Act, a fledgling American environmental movement was about to grow in power and influence. Yet the majority of legislative and regulatory reforms that would come out of that movement had still not manifested. The National Environmental Policy Act would not be approved until 1970, and the federal Clean Water Act would come two years later. The Endangered Species Act passed a year after that. Therefore, the major legal and regulatory tools that would have guided the federal government and private developers in achieving those four environmental goals – riparian habitat, water quality, fish habitat and recreation improvements – were not yet available in any clear, meaningful way. The parties and interests involved had to pursue them without precedent and through negotiation. The early plan for lower river environmental management for the New Melones project would have to be an unprecedented move for an agency like the Army Corps of Engineers which had previously only focused on large flood control dams, dredging and channeling rivers,

³¹⁶ Palmer, *Stanislaus*, 94.

³¹⁷ See also: Philip Garone, *The Fall and Rise of the Wetlands of California's Great Central Valley* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2020); Hundley, *The Great Thirst*.

³¹⁸ Michael E. Aceituno, "The Relationship Between Instream Flow and Physical Habitat Availability for Chinook Salmon in the Stanislaus River, California," US Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Services, 1993.

³¹⁹ Thorne Gray, "Engineers' River Role is Eyed," *Modesto Bee*, Jan 25, 1971, Box 21, Folder 1 Thorne B. Gray Collection.

constructing levees and straightening channels, actions which had degraded the function and integrity of aquatic and riparian ecosystems around the country.³²⁰

The Army Corps of Engineers had, previous to its early New Melones planning process, considered some limited environmental management issues like water quality and recreation. By 1971, the Corps boasted itself as “the nation’s leading recreation host,” with a reportedly 276 million recreational visits to its 319 reservoirs in 1970, which was up about eight percent from the year before. By then, the Corps’ projects had extensive recreational facilities, including 2,700 picnic areas, 766 swimming beaches and 48,000 campsites.³²¹ The Corps had also managed some projects by the late 1960s with downriver water quality in mind, including the Allegheny Reservoir in Pennsylvania where the agency studied the relationship between release volumes, water temperature and fish kills below the dam.³²² So a plan dealing with environmental management and improvements would draw on some existing agency knowledge and practice. But even in the Allegheny example, the agency considered environmental management for water quality to be relevant only in places where it could impact flood control, navigation and recreation – “The Corps of Engineers does not intend to project itself into water quality surveilling or policing role.”³²³

Even with the Army Corps’ emphasis on environmental improvement, that goal would remain out of character for decades more moving forward. On the Los Angeles River, extreme feats of channelization and hydraulic engineering had completely transformed a localized river system into a geometric network of concrete channels for flood control. As late as 1997, federal officials with the Army Corps in opposition to environmental groups’ calls for river restoration refused to use the term “river” to describe the waterway, instead insisting on “flood control channel.”³²⁴ In some ways, the effort by the Army Corps to implement an environmental improvement plan for the lower Stanislaus was in some ways prototypical of what would eventually become the norm for agencies and companies dealing with water development, which would have to study, mitigate and negotiate the natural, political and regulatory environments to gain approval after the environmental reforms of the late 1960s and 1970s. But in other ways, the move was an aberration for an agency which would continue to pursue an agenda for controlling and conquering nature even in the face of those changes.

With Donovan as an early lead for the New Melones project, the Army Corps of Engineers developed its downstream management plan largely as a way to keep a high-water mark of 8,000 cubic-feet-per-second in the lower basin, which would protect all existing development without channelizing, dredging or straightening the

³²⁰ Jackson and Mikesell, *The Stanislaus River Drainage Basin and the New Melones Dam*, 82-98.

³²¹ Press Release, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, June 7, 1971, Box 18 Folder 1, Thorne B. Gray Collection

³²² Thomas L. Reilly, “Allegheny Reservoir’s Role in Water Quality,” May, 1969, *Journal (American Water Works Association)*, Box 21, Folder 1, Thorne B. Gray Collection.

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Blake Gumprecht, *The Los Angeles River: Its life, Death, and Possible Rebirth* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 298

waterway. It would also allow for the maintenance and protection of remaining woodlands and some wetlands for scenery and wildlife habitat. In doing so, based on the four specific goals stated above, the proposal called for significant work overhauling, preserving and installing habitat, parks and other environmental facilities along the approximately 60-mile stretch of undammed river before merging with the San Joaquin.

The entire lower plan revolved around a vision of the lower river as a string of parks connected by the river itself, which would function as non-motorized boating trail running the entire length. Those who did not wish to canoe or raft down the river could gain access at 12 parks, spaced in approximately equal intervals, which would provide boating, fishing, swimming and wildlife viewing for the public. Some larger parks would also include campsites and hiking trails, like the 100-acre foothill locale of Knights Ferry at the upper end of the stretch, and the densely wooded Caswell at the lower end. Recreation quality along these parks would be tied largely to the proposed environmental improvements in a purported attempt to improve the river as an ecological system while growing its role in a larger social and economic system. Water quality improvements would come from increased, cold-water flows from the ballooned capacity at New Melones, and they would improve in-stream habitat along with spawning gravel restoration and preservation for, migratory steelhead trout and salmon populations. Water quality and habitat would be enhanced by further protection of the remaining riparian and wetlands along and rare woodlands, which had been mostly eliminated from the Central Valley in the past 100 years due to agricultural development and water uses.³²⁵ The plan was an attempt to sell the idea that people can increase the river's capacity as an agricultural water source while improving its role as a natural ecosystem. The Army Corps released and began to comment on the lower-river plan's basic outline in 1971, with supporters describing it as a "string of pearls" along a beleaguered river and an example of environmental management for the agency moving forward.³²⁶ (See Figure 52)

The lower river plan was the product of extensive negotiations before it was released, and it was subject to more contests and negotiations afterwards. Conservationist groups gave input to the formation of the plan through the Yokuts Wilderness Group, a local branch of the Sierra Club based in nearby, agriculture-heavy Modesto. Though not as activist or strictly preservation focused in their activities, the Yokuts group (who were not indigenous Yokut people, but appropriated the name) still had concerns both about the existing condition of the Stanislaus River and the potential harm from a major dam. They lobbied the Army Corps in the planning stages for improved ecological and recreational conditions on the lower river, attempting to force some environmental positives out of major water development for

³²⁵ Alfred A. Souza, "Presentation of the Stanislaus River Floodway Plan," transcript, Sept. 17, 1971, public hearing, The Reclamation Board, Modesto; Documents and transcripts re: lower Stanislaus River public meeting, Nov. 28, 1973, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; all in Box 18, Folder 1, Thorne B. Gray Collection.

³²⁶ Gray, "Engineers Plan River Playground" and "Engineers Eye Stanislaus as a 'Model.'"

once.^{327 328} Property owners along the lower Stanislaus largely voiced concerns through the Stanislaus River Flood Protection Association, an advocacy organization formed to push for completion of the dam. However, the landowners – while seeking flood protection for their properties – were wary of restrictions from easements or federal condemnations, both of which were discussed as ways to protect a greenbelt of riparian habitat. The landowners also resisted some recreational and environmental improvements, such as a continuous foot or bike trail along the entire stretch or river, that they claimed would attract people to trespass on their properties.³²⁹

Negotiations over the plan continued for years, with fights often focusing on private property rights and public access. One sticking point included concerns by environmental groups who thought the improvements would be unequally beneficial for the property owners, who could leverage the improvements for property values or even private hunting or fishing access.³³⁰ At the same time, the property owners complained that a continuous foot or bike trail along the entire stretch or river would potentially impact their assets negatively.³³¹ All agreed generally in the dam as a positive intervention for environmental infrastructure and improvement. These talks were predicated under the assumption that a dam would be completed, and thus it should be done so and managed in a way that was beneficial for both people and nature as much as possible. But this dynamic changed drastically as the 1970s continued, and a new movement grew in power and scope dedicated to preserving the upriver canyon inside of the New Melones footprint. That movement was increasingly tied to the national environmental movement and stronger calls around the West for wilderness preservation and the end of dam building in general.³³²

In the early years of the 20th Century, California experienced rapid growth in hydroelectric engineering and development, especially in the Sierra Nevada mountains. These projects, one of which was a component in the complex system on the Stanislaus River, promised to satiate the energy needs of growing urban and agricultural sectors through modern technology, engineering and rational control of environmental resources. The boosters and promoters of these schemes raved when describing industrial landscapes that reflected the rationality and order that a high

³²⁷ Roger Gohring, Re: The Corps of Engineers' Plan for the Stanislaus River below Goodwin Dam, Nov. 25, 1973, The Yokut Wilderness Group of the Sierra Club, Stanislaus River Chairman, Box 18, folder 1; Thorne B. Gray Collection.

³²⁸ Thorne Gray, "Scientist Joins Melones Backers," *Modesto Bee*, June 3, 1973; Assorted minutes and correspondences, Yokuts Wilderness Group and Mother Lode Chapter, Sierra Club, 1972-1974, Modesto; both in Box 21, Folder 14, Thorne B. Gray Collection.

³²⁹ Gray, "Engineers Plan River Playground;" Documents and transcripts re: lower Stanislaus River public meeting, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

³³⁰ Acting regional director of Fish and Wildlife Service to District Engineer of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Aug. 15, 1973, Box 18, Folder 1, Thorne B. Gray Collection.

³³¹ John Hertle, Statement to the Reclamation Board of the State of California, Sept. 17, 1971, public hearing, The Reclamation Board, Modesto; District Engineer of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to Acting regional director of Fish and Wildlife Service, Aug. 23, 1973; both in Box 18, Folder 1, Thorne B. Gray Collection.

³³² Jackson and Mikesell, *The Stanislaus River Drainage Basin and the New Melones Dam*, 99-121.

modernist ideology sought to impose on nature. Not long after this hydroelectric boom, conservation sportsmen applied similar technology to their recreational landscapes in the wildlands of the Emigrant Basin, building smaller scale dams to achieve the same hydrological conditions of predictable water flows created to generate electricity. But the sportsmen built these dams to create quality fisheries, maintaining water flows in the streams even during dry months and during years of below average precipitation. In doing so, they constructed what they saw as an angler's paradise in the high Sierra Nevada mountains after years of failure by ranchers and other backcountry visitors to manage trout populations in a landscape that had never supported trout in the past. And much like with the electrical engineering in the canyons, these efforts were cheered by business and state interests seeking predictable and legible environments that could meet a growing demand for outdoor recreation in ideal natural places. As with the hydroelectricity boom, the promoters and observers wrote of the Emigrant system with triumphalism informed by a high-modernist approach to nature conservation. Not only would rationality, modern organizational techniques, science and engineering make the state a more productive place to work and produce, but central planners also assumed they could produce the kind of nature to function as the antithesis of the modern world.

About a half century after conservationist Fred Leighton built the first check dam in the Sierras, the mighty Army Corps Engineers applied a similar approach to their controversial New Melones Dam. Led early on by James Donovan, the federal agency would propose using modern hydraulic engineering to improve the natural environment. Dam planners would push the proposal below the dam they claimed would utilize impounded water, riparian habitat preservation and the construction of new parks to improve conditions for fishing, boating, wildlife watching and other forms of recreation. By the time the late-century environmental movement increased popularity for wilderness recreation and sportsmen's activities, the central Sierra Nevada mountains – especially around the Stanislaus River watershed – had long boasted a robust tradition of nature recreation occurring among modern and industrial infrastructures.

So when the Sierra Club started leading the first whitewater boaters on excursions to find the state's remaining free-flowing rivers in the 1960s, major tensions did not yet exist between the notions of a wild riparian environment and the existence of the infrastructure which made it accessible and navigable. As the federal government sought to build a new, massive dam to bring the hydraulic era to the Stanislaus River, project designers, recreationalists and conservationists envisioned how the dam could be utilized for environmental improvements in some of the more beleaguered stretches of the river. Only after the preservationist approach to environmentalism and the high-modernist approach to nature conservation were no longer compatible did these tensions grow. The next chapters will explore those tensions grew with the establishment and expansion of a wilderness ethic which would be eventually inconsistent with high-modernist visions of nature as many of its proponents embraced purity ideals that allowed no place for human interventions in nature.



Figure 39: Stanislaus power lines running across the San Joaquin River, 1909. From *Journal of Electricity Power and Gas*.

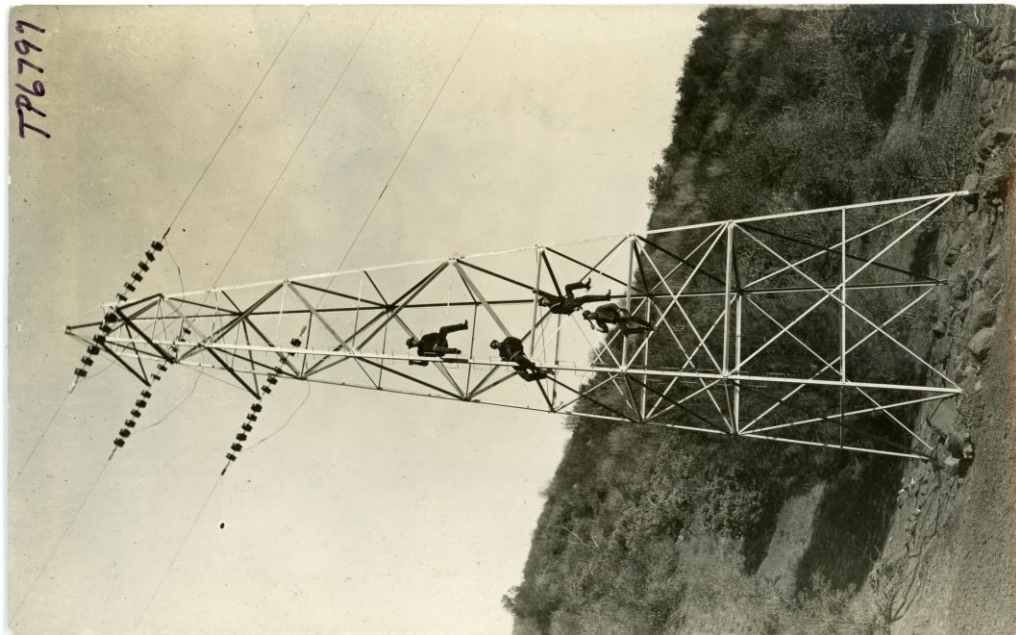


Figure 40: Putting up the Stanislaus power lines. Courtesy of the Tuolumne County Historical Society



Figure 42: Construction at Relief Dam. Courtesy of Columbia Collete Library.



Figure 43: Construction at Strawberry Dam, 1915. Courtesy of California State Library

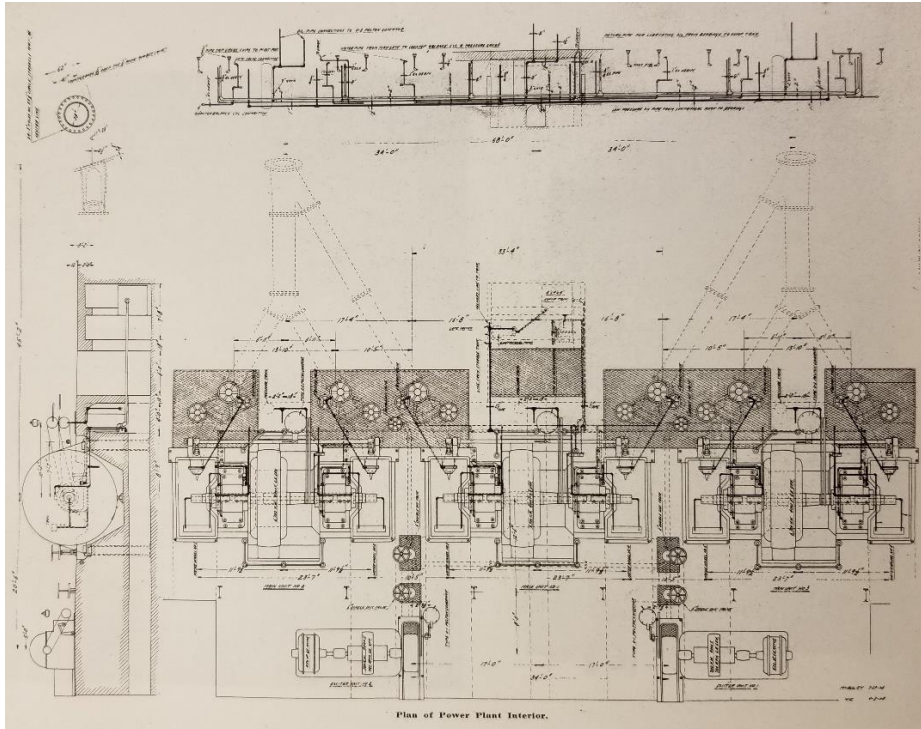


Figure 44: Diagram of Stanislaus River power plant interior, 1909. From *Journal of Electricity Power and Gas*.

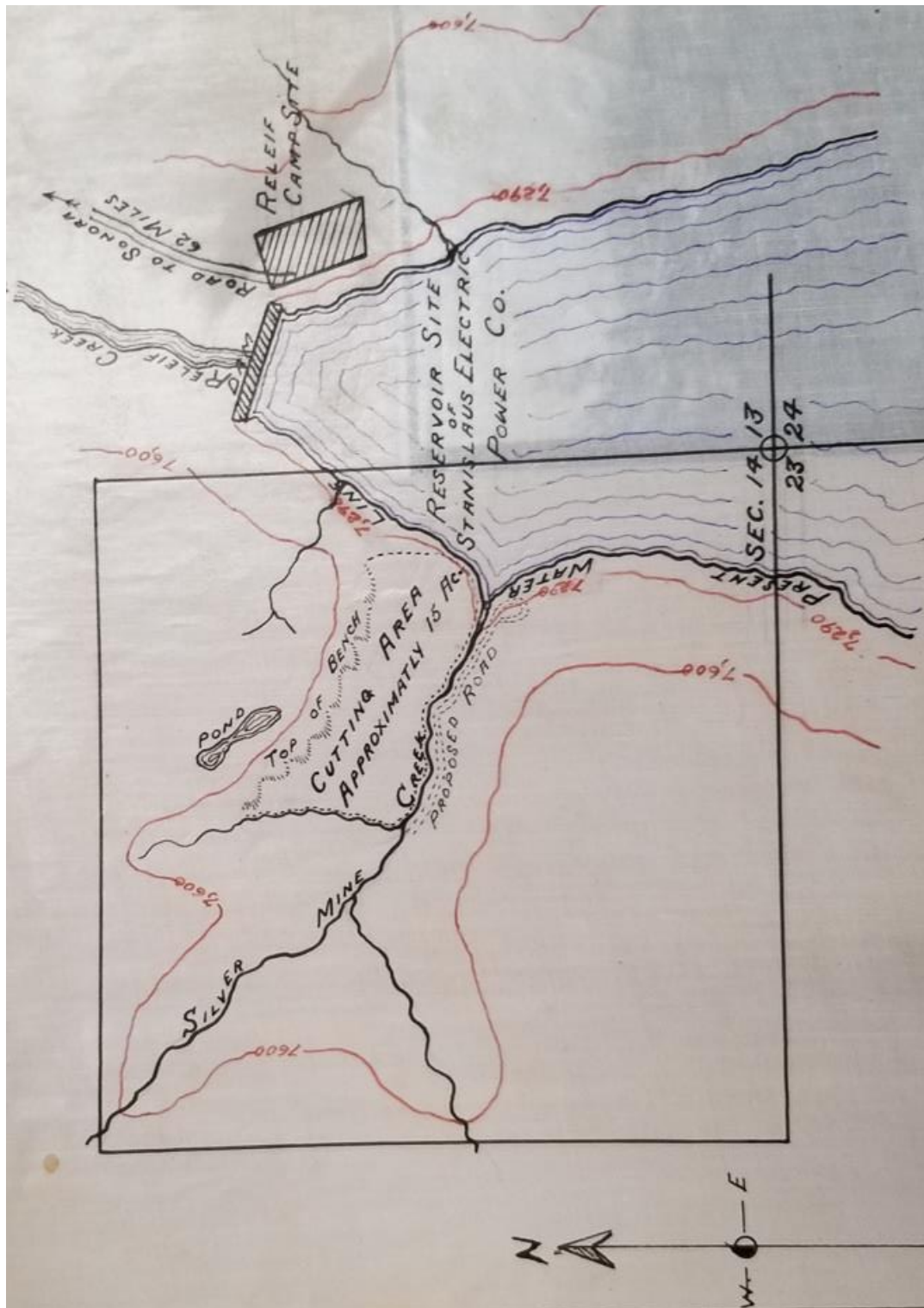


Figure 45: Drawing of Relief Dam site, overhead, unknown date. Courtesy of USDA Forest Service, Stanislaus National Forest.

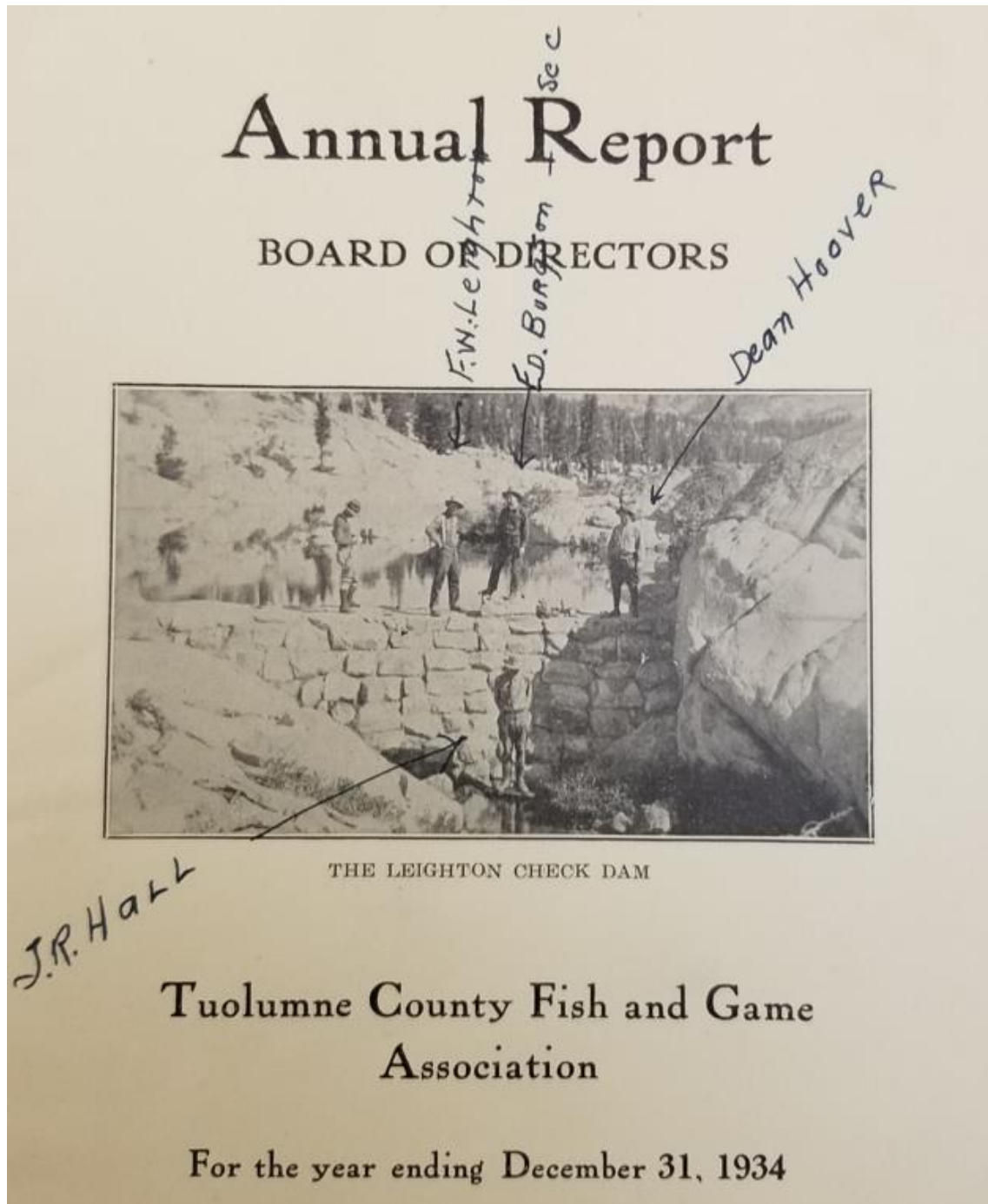


Figure 46: Annual report from the early years of the Tuolumne County Fish and Game Association features cover with image of check dam construction. Courtesy of Tuolumne County Historical Society.



Figure 47: Leighton Lake check dam, 1981. Steve Robertson, courtesy of USDA Forest Service, Stanislaus National Forest.



Figure 48: Leighton Lake, 1981. Steve Robertson, courtesy of USDA Forest Service, Stanislaus National Forest.



Figure 49: Inspecting the check dam at Bigelow Lake, 1932. Courtesy of Tuolumne County Historical Society.



Figure 50: Civilian Conservation Corps workers constructed a check dam at Bear Lake and other similar dams, 1933. Courtesy of USDA Forest Service, Stanislaus National Forest.



Figure 51: Though never completed, a reservoir was proposed at this location to improve recreation along the upper Stanislaus River through dam construction, 1943. Courtesy of Tuolumne County Historical Society.

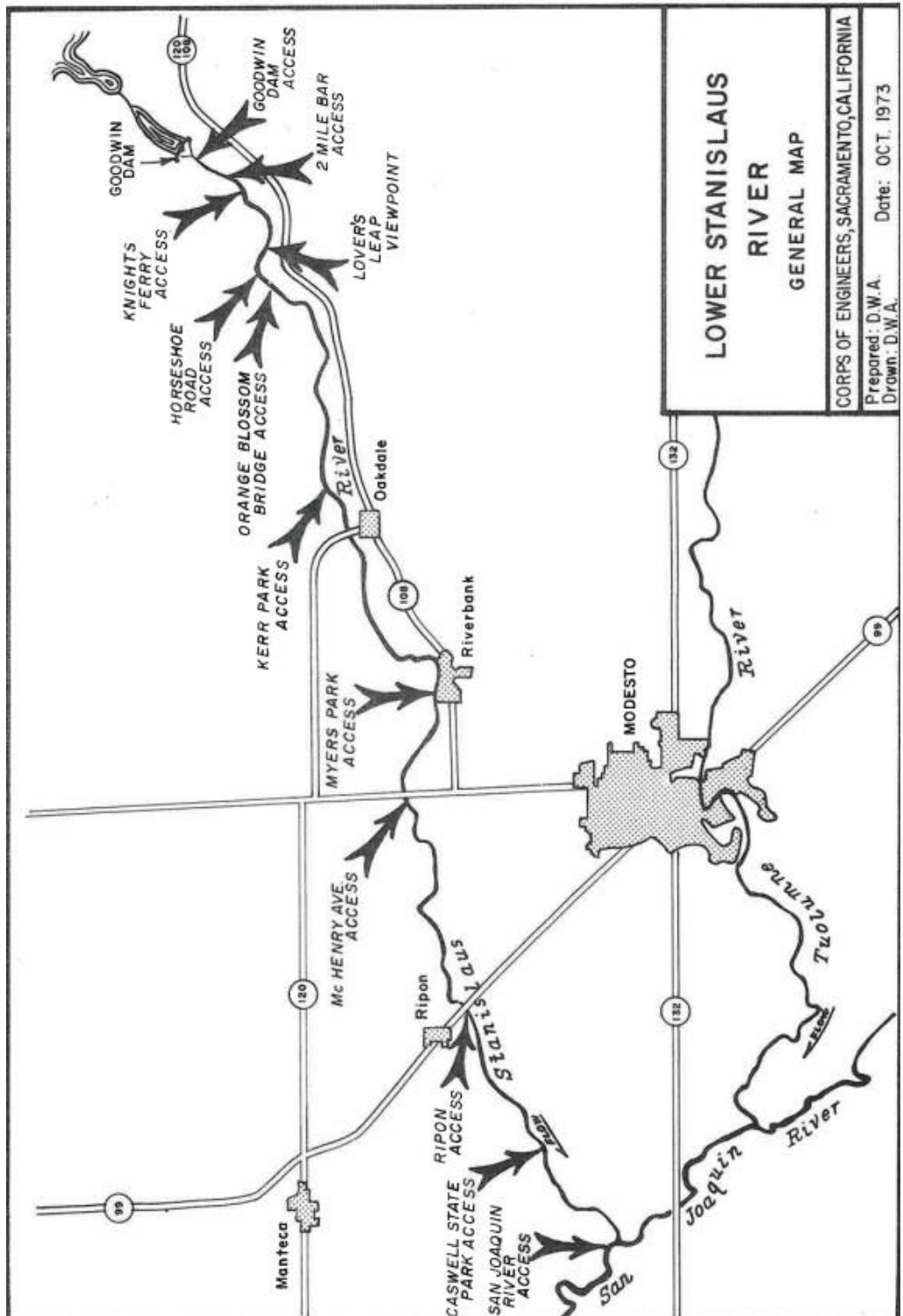


Figure 52: Attached to the construction of New Melones, a plan for the lower river attempted to use the dam to improve recreation and aquatic habitat. Courtesy of University of California, Davis.



Figure 53: Fred Leighton worked as a bookkeeper for the Stanislaus power project before spearheading a check dam programs in the wilderness, 1909. Courtesy of Tuolumne County Historical Society.

CHAPTER V

THE CULT OF WILDERNESS AND THE EMIGRANT BASIN

Early in the summer of 1932, Lloyd T. Damin and his friend, Ham, took a weekend trip up the Sonora-Mono highway from the San Francisco Bay Area. Damin was a correspondent for a sportsman's magazine, and he was intent on scouting the Emigrant Basin as a destination for a lengthy fishing trip and potential feature. Other national periodicals had already featured good places in the region for fishing, including the Stanislaus River near Strawberry.³³³ The Emigrant Basin was more remote – a five-hour drive to the trailhead, and at least a day's horse ride to the heart of the wilderness – but the reputation of its wild trout fishery was growing. Arriving in the early evening at the Kennedy Meadows camp and resort, where most trips into the Emigrant backcountry originated, Lloyd and Ham took advice from the resort proprietor on where to go for a one-day survey of the place. The pair would take rented horses along the wilderness trail, past the reservoir in the Relief Valley and out to scenic Relief Peak where they could get at least a glimpse of the basin's many lakes and streams. "I'll bet my Stetson that when that time comes you'll be beatin' it right back up into that granite country again, only you'll be wanting a couple of pack horses then, so you can stay longer," said Frank Kurzzi, the proprietor and longtime backcountry guide.³³⁴

As this was merely a trip for scouting a location and taking in the scenery, the two men wouldn't have time for fishing. They arrived at Kennedy Meadows late and tired with plans to leave into the wilderness early the next morning on horseback. They'd move quickly to reach the high points with the ideal vistas in time to make it back by the next evening. Their initial time spent preparing dinner and having a leisurely smoke in their camp, located a "stone's throw away"³³⁵ from the middle fork of the Stanislaus River, suggested they were on the right track. "(The river) wound silently through the meadow, its silvery surface broken only now and then by the soft splash of fin and tail as some hungry trout gathered his evening meal, while occasionally, from the deep shadows of the pines at the foot of the canyon wall across the river, came the faint, melancholy call of a night bird," Damin would later write. "But these sounds only helped to lend enchantment to the scene. For perhaps an hour my companion and I sat quietly drinking in the beauty of the mountain night and filling our souls with that 'something' which banishes cares and worries and fills one's heart with the joy of living."³³⁶ Even without their tackle, the fish were biting, and the setting was idyllic. And they were only in the gateway meadow, not the increasingly

³³³ E.C. Damin, "Big Boy of the Stanislaus," *Hunter, Trader, Trapper*, July, 1932, Folder 1, Fred Leighton Papers.

³³⁴ Lloyd T. Damin, "Week-Ending in the High Sierras," *All Outdoors*, July, 1932, Folder 1, Fred Leighton Papers.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*

³³⁶ *Ibid.*

famous “mountain paradise”³³⁷ of the Emigrant Basin. Once in the basin, they would be able to “fish and explore”³³⁸ along the creeks that ran through lower Relief Valley or past Emigrant Lake where they would surely, “experience the delight of filling our baskets with fighting lake trout.”³³⁹

The next morning, as they headed into the wilderness, Damin was struck by how white the landscape was in the rising sun, between the granite, the snow still melting and the churning water of the many swollen streams. But perhaps more impressive to him than the blinding landscape were the earliest emigrants who first passed through it, the men and women for whom the basin was named and on whose struggles the name Relief was based. Early parties passing the Sierras into the foothills and lowlands of California crossed at the nearby Sonora pass, and those who met with unexpected snowstorms would often seek shelter in the lower Relief Valley. The spot was less vulnerable to storms and more accessible to search parties than elsewhere in the high country. Not all the emigrants would make it through, and the pass would eventually be avoided by most in favor of less treacherous routes. “One cannot but marvel and wonder at the courage and determination displayed by those early pioneers in attempting such hazardous undertakings with their wagons and oxen, in their efforts to reach California, Land of Gold, but of such ‘stuff’ was the keel of an empire laid! For a long while we sat in reverence of those pioneers, awed by the magnitude of their accomplishments,” Damin mused.³⁴⁰

But that was almost a century prior, and now Californians like Lloyd Damin and Ham lived in cities like San Francisco only to use what they viewed as former frontier lands for respite from the stresses of civilization. As they rode out to the high point near Relief Peak, they were not disappointed. There was Monk Rock, which “was outlined against the blue sky like some sacred monument, its cap tipped with snow which ... glistened in the morning sun.”³⁴¹ Past Relief Gorge they saw a valley with “a brilliant, green meadowland bathing in the warm sun of early spring, at this high altitude, and which is surrounded by snow-covered domes.” He later wrote that, “Nature’s wonders beckoned us from all sides. ... We tarried often; sometimes to snap a picture of a commanding bluff outlined against the sky, or again merely to absorb the beauty of some marvelous study in light and shadows.” The two men made their plans, informing Frank Kurzzi they would be back for longer trips.³⁴² (See Figure 54)

Damin’s descriptions of the Emigrant Basin highlighted three specific aspects of the place that would come to define much of America’s wilderness lands in the early 20th Century. It was largely a destination for recreation. It was both a symbol and a preserved slice of a long-gone frontier. And it was dominated by an aesthetic of rugged, western beauty that both mirrored the pioneer myth but also transcended into the spiritual. These three characteristics made up what American historian Roderick

³³⁷ Ibid

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Ibid.

Nash would later describe as a “cult” of wilderness that emerged around the turn of the 20th Century and came to dominate much of the country’s wilderness discourse well into the environmental movement decades later. Reacting to what they interpreted as the social, spiritual and environmental problems born of urbanization and industrialization, prominent members of the American public and government during those early decades of the century would establish a regime of public lands and nature preservation to set aside places that fit those characteristics and manage them as part of the public trust. The Emigrant Basin and adjacent land would be one of those prototypical wilderness places, one in which visitors could fish and marvel at the scenic wonders in what was deemed a small slice of the country’s few spaces protected from the voraciousness of modern development. And yet, the Emigrant Wilderness that sportsmen and outdoorsmen cherished for the rest of the century was also the product of modern development and an ideology from which it supposedly offered respite.³⁴³

This chapter is an exploration of the Emigrant backcountry as that prototypical American wilderness, discussing the ways in which it fits Nash’s definition of the American cult thanks to the capital, labor and ideological devotion to high modernism discussed in previous chapters. The basin and surrounding lands, which the U.S. Forest Service would manage as a primitive area until the 1970s, was renowned for its fishing thanks to human introductions of regional and non-native species into its lakes and streams. With its frontier stories and historic artifacts, a trip into the basin would also offer a trip back in time for its visitors while simultaneously erasing the violent history which made such trips possible for 20th Century tourists. And all of this would take place at the feet of some of the Sierra’s tallest peaks, offering the solitude and scenery framed within a commodified, Western motif necessary for a unique, aesthetic experience of the wildlands. These features of the place’s character would contribute to the basin’s official designation as a federally protected wilderness by 1975.

Following this chapter is a similar examination of the Stanislaus River canyon, which in the 1970s was the subject of intense political and legal debates over wild river preservation. Through those debates and contests, the canyon also served as a prototype for wilderness designation largely thanks to the industrial development discussed in previous chapters. In both cases, these wilderness characteristics would later be questioned and undermined as the definition of wild changed with a new generation of preservationists contesting them within political and legal processes in favor of idealized visions of purity in nature.

“Sparkling lakes and turbulent streams:” Fishing, place and identity

Fishing became the primary outdoorsman’s adventure in the Emigrant Wilderness as part of a deliberate plan. With the help of other sportsmen, Fred Leighton built the original check dams in the basin mainly to facilitate the sustainability of wild trout populations in the lakes and streams. But those dams were also built as part of a larger campaign in the early and middle 20th Century to expand

³⁴³ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 141-160.

opportunities and create new places for outdoor recreation. An outdoor movement drove hunters, fishermen, campers and wildlife watchers into the country's more remote places, and these sportsmen and recreationists headed to the mountains and forests that remained wild compared to the growing cities and suburbs. Leighton was part of this movement, helping shape the future of conservation both locally and across the state of California. A charter member of the Tuolumne and Stanislaus County Fish and Game Protective Association dating back to the 1920s,³⁴⁴ Leighton then helped found the Tuolumne County Fish and Game Association in 1934³⁴⁵ to expand fishing and hunting opportunities. Along with the check dam projects, Leighton started and oversaw an experimental fish hatchery along Mormon Creek in the Stanislaus River drainage. Initially started in 1927,³⁴⁶ the hatchery functioned thanks to an old, upstream mine which diverted cold spring water into the creek and created ideal conditions for rearing pools.³⁴⁷ (See Figure 59) From there, fish were planted along the Stanislaus and Tuolumne watersheds, mostly rainbow trout, creating in those watersheds many popular places for sportsmen around the region.³⁴⁸ (See Figure 60)

Even then, fishing in the high Sierra – especially along the Stanislaus – could be a difficult endeavor. The cold-water fisheries were best suited for trout, including the native rainbows as well as imported brown trout, cutthroat trout and brook trout, the latter three having been stocked in the local rivers and streams for years. These high-country waterways boasted falls, holes and cool, clear water, holding trout in great quality and quantity. Rivers like the Stanislaus in most of its upper stretches rushed swiftly through steep canyons, making both open casting and wading more difficult than prototypical fly rivers. The narrow channels and swift currents of the Stanislaus could make catching its well-known, healthy trout difficult for some, especially in areas outside of the high-pressure locations like the reservoir at Strawberry. The Emigrant Basin's conditions were more ideal. The open granite landscape, though steep in areas, left lower grades in its heart for its gurgling streams. The smaller lakes were generally shallow, with fish often feeding best at its edges where there was more vegetation and critters for food and with the snowmelt's frigid temperatures keeping the trout near the surface even in the summer.³⁴⁹ So while the Stanislaus River was a well-known fishing destination, those who sought even more ideal conditions in the backwoods had an option in the Emigrant Basin that was a drive and a horse ride away. (See Figure 58)

³⁴⁴ Fred Leighton to Dan Beebe, Dec. 21, 1922, Fred Leighton Letters 1922-27 Folder, Fred Leighton Papers.

³⁴⁵ Annual Report: Board of Directors, Tuolumne County Fish and Game Association, Dec. 31, 1934, Folder 1, Fred Leighton Papers.

³⁴⁶ Fred Leighton to B.L. Welton, Jan. 9, 1928, Folder T, Fred Leighton Papers.

³⁴⁷ Fred Leighton to I. Zellerbach, March 31, 1928, Folder T, Fred Leighton Papers.

³⁴⁸ Fieldman's Fish Requirements & Planting Record, Mormon Creek, June 29, 1928, Stanislaus County; Fred Leighton to Division of Fish and Game, June 28, 1930; L. Longeway, Trout Planting List, Tuolumne River Tributaries – From Mormon Creek Hatchery, July 12, 1930; other assorted documents related to hatchery and planting; all in Folder T, Fred Leighton Papers.

³⁴⁹ These descriptions of trout fishing conditions are based on personal experience of this dissertation's author.

One of the most popular forms of outdoor recreation in the United States, both historically and contemporarily, fishing as early as the turn of the 20th Century was part of what historian Roderick Nash described as “the American celebration of savagery” that he argued “contributed to the rising popularity of wilderness”³⁵⁰ and helped form the “cult” which was building around such a notion. During this time, participants in the “outdoor movement”³⁵¹ made clear associations between the virility of both the American man and the long-term sustainability of the white race in the face of industrialization and urbanization with the ability of those urbanized, white men to head into the backcountry and thrive. Sportsmen's activities like hunting and fishing became particularly popular, symbolic adventures for both the urbane and working classes to prove their mettle against nature by invoking their more primitive selves. To take a pole, reel and fly or bait, let it lie on the waters of a fishery, one needed the stamina and strength to hike and ride in and out of a canyon or the high mountains. These adventures also required the skill to set a hook and reel in the animal with the light line and tackle necessary to trick it to bite. The activity also required some level of ecological knowledge, wherein the fisherman must understand the hydrology of the waters, the feeding habits and cycles of the fish, and the species of grub and bug and fry on which the trout feeds. Fueled by racist anxieties over supposed threats to modern whiteness, the movement also romanticized indigenous and pre-industrial societies, generally in a condescending and essentializing manner, an ironic twist considering the plight of the country's own native peoples in the face of both urban industrialization and frontier expansion. Ultimately, a re-connection between man and his primitive self, Nash wrote of the outdoorsman's point of view, could overcome the problems of the “modern American” who was becoming “overcivilized” and had “lost the great fighting, masterful virtues.”³⁵²

Nash was not the only scholar to see such a connection between American cultural values of the early 20th Century and fishing. Among these systems of signification, the trout and its cousin salmonoids would find themselves at or near the top of social hierarchies. Historian Richard White discussed salmon fishing in his history of the Columbia River, including the social and economic struggles between factions working the river to gain power and control over the valuable salmon runs.³⁵³ White also explored the extent to which salmon were “repositories of meaning” along the Columbia, especially for sportsmen who in the wake of major hydroelectric development took the fish to “symbolize nature” in the waterways deeply impacted by dams.³⁵⁴ Anders Halverson also connected the breeding and propagation of rainbow trout in much of the world's waters with contemporary anxieties over loss of such fighting, masterful values. Halverson in his study of the rainbow trout – the native fish of the Stanislaus River – cited early American conservationists like George Perkins Marsh who saw sportsmen's activities as necessary for a healthy American culture.

³⁵⁰ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 151.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 153.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 150.

³⁵³ White, *The Organic Machine*, 38-45.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 90-92.

“Say goodbye to recreational fishing, and say goodbye to American democracy,” he wrote of the widespread cultural links between components of nature and social values.³⁵⁵ Raising and planting fish like trout, he would write later, “was the solution to the decline of fisheries” as well as to the decline of “the virility of men.”³⁵⁶ During the same stretch of time, Halverson continued, fishing would become a “status symbol,”³⁵⁷ with certain kinds of prized fishes symbolizing the values projected by the men of status who sought them. Sportsmen divided species of fish between desirable game fish and undesirable course fish, with each carrying the weight of race and class ubiquitous to any cultural distinctions in America. Trout and salmon were prized as aristocratic and genteel, with bass seen as indignant and self-reliant. The lowest rung included catfish, long associated with the south’s African American underclass.³⁵⁸

Such symbolic power of fish – especially trout – has crossed space and time, beyond the particular historical moment identified in the United States by Nash. James Owen in his history of trout points out that the fish – native to the northern hemisphere – has held sacred, symbolic and economic value to the peoples who have caught it for tens of thousands of years.³⁵⁹ As many of those peoples around those European waters began to colonize other parts of the world, they not only brought the fish with them, but they brought those same values. Even before Halverson’s depictions of fish hierarchies among American sportsman, colonizing Europeans projected their native fish as symbols of domination on new lands. “Where the white man went, so did his trout,”³⁶⁰ Owen wrote as he tracked the fish’s paths to almost every corner of the earth through “an ambitious programme of biological colonialism.”³⁶¹

Such scholars have identified the historical connections between fishing and social values, analyzing the rise and spread of recreational fishing culture with the historical conditions of the 19th and early 20th Century in America. But one particular value of fish is part of a larger phenomenon that extends across human cultures – the way in which people draw their collective and personal identities from of their relationships with wild animals. In their book *Wild Games: Hunting and Fishing Traditions in North America*, editors and cultural scholars Dennis Cutchins and Eric Eliason offer both a collection of essays and an introductory explanation of how relationships with wild animals – specifically in the contexts of hunting, fishing and herding – deeply inform the identities of people who participate in such activities. Though the book’s content also focuses on North America, with contemporary examples cited, Cutchins and Eliason point out societies have long constructed their particular hunting, fishing and herding ways “to service various notions of identity,

³⁵⁵ Anders Halverson, *An Entirely Synthetic Fish: How Rainbow Trout Beguiled America and Overran the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 7.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 71-75.

³⁵⁹ James Owen, *Trout* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 41-106.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

authenticity, ecology and morality.”³⁶² The Nez Perce using salmon fishing as a significant practice through which they have used to “identify themselves as people”³⁶³ for millennia, and contemporary rural Pennsylvania families using camp experiences of deer hunting as a “rite of passage during which boys learn to be men.”³⁶⁴ In such examples, fishing, hunting or herding for either sustenance or sport are closely tied to larger cultural and ideological systems that reinforce the social hierarchies in which they take place. “For many practitioners hunting, fishing and herding provide a vital context in which to work out an identity for themselves,” they write as they seek to answer questions about “how and why these traditional practices have so long satisfied deep and common human needs.”³⁶⁵ Such needs include identifying, defining and codifying roles within families, politics, gender hierarchies, cultural contests, morality, ethics and other deeply ideological systems. “Of course, these activities have often provided needed food and clothing, but the traditions associated with hunting, fishing and herding have also clearly been effective in meeting people's social and aesthetic needs,” they write.³⁶⁶ Whether sacred figure, commodity, or symbol for class, race, virility, or all of them, fish – and in turn the activities associated with tracking and catching them – have long represented certain social values, a tradition of which the sportsmen’s conservation movement of the 19th and 20th Century in America was only part. Nature’s components, especially the animals people hunt, catch, kill, eat and utilize otherwise, have long symbolized diverse cultural values and meanings across space and time.

So as Americans faced the 20th Century, and along with it juggled the issues of industrialization, conservation, and the perceived social strife that came with them, wild animals like the trout in mountain waters would come to represent the very wild landscapes and places through which those waters would run. This was especially true in the Emigrant Basin, which was best known by the early 1930s as a premier backcountry fishing destination. (See Figure 61) Sportsmen’s publications and other conservation periodicals featured the place and the check dam idea after Leighton finished and publicized the first five structures in 1931. The National Forest Service managed the then-97,000 acre area as part of the Stanislaus National Forest, setting the basin aside in 1931 as a primitive area, which was a precursor to wilderness legislation. Under the primitive designation, the federal government would manage the area in a manner that it attempted to keep “only essential trails and primitive camping facilities” ... so that “only the hiker or horseman who finds the answer to his needs for solitude far away from the noises and frustrations of solitude.”³⁶⁷

³⁶² Dennis Cutchins and Eric A. Elliason, “Introduction,” in *Wild Games: Hunting and Fishing Traditions in North America* ed. Cutchins and Elliason (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2009), xi.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, xii

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, xiv

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, xii.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, xii.

³⁶⁷ Sonora Pass Area, Stanislaus/Toiyabe National Forests (Map), 1967, U.S. Department of Agriculture – Forest Service, Drawer 4, Wilderness & Primitive Areas: Emigrant Wilderness Folder, Stanislaus National Forest historical archives, Sonora.

The primitive designation was in place largely because of the check dams and the stocking programs which kept hungry fish in the basin's waters. A 1937 survey by the U.S. Forest Service of recreation potential for the Stanislaus National Forest focused heavily on the various lakes in the Emigrant and supporting facilities, with recommendations to build primitive camp sites in already popular places and destinations with potential. "Beautiful subalpine lake," stated one report for lower Emigrant Lake, where managers suggest three campsites 16 miles from the nearest road. "Good Fishing. Nights Chilly. Good horse feed nearby."³⁶⁸ Kennedy Meadows, which housed 80 horses at the time, remained the most popular jumping off point as the multi-day trips necessitated pack animals to haul gear and food for most adventurers who did not have backcountry experience or specialty supplies. Enough popularity existed to support the resort and guide service in the meadow, with Kurzzi hiring summer help often in the form of seasonal cowboy labor to lead the trips in the summer. By the middle of the 1960s, on the heels of the federal Wilderness Act of 1964 but still before the Emigrant Wilderness would be officially designated under subsequent legislation, the Forest Service highlighted the primitive area in maps and promotional material for its "sparkling lakes and turbulent streams."³⁶⁹ A 1964 map and brochure produced for anglers by the California Department of Fish and Game explicitly discusses the check dams as central features of the primitive area, giving it its unique wilderness characteristics, and specifically highlighting the lakes and streams with the dams as some of the most successful and ideal points in the basin.³⁷⁰ (See Figure 56) Thus, a 1971 proposal to designate the Emigrant basin as an official federal wilderness discussed the place as one where dams, fish and pack groups were all quintessential aspects of the visit.³⁷¹ Even in congressional hearings on the proposal, these were considered invaluable to the experience.³⁷²

A "total step back in time:" The Emigrant Wilderness and the American frontier myth

While backcountry fishing was a primary activity that defined the Emigrant Basin as a unique wilderness place, it was not the only activity that constructed the place's character as part of the American cult. As Lloyd Damin wrote when he was scouting the place in 1932, this backcountry was steeped in the mythos of the emigrants for which the basin was named. For visitors, especially those in the early decades of the century, this mythos was quintessential to an experience that often

³⁶⁸ F.A. Meyer, Field Reconnaissance Sheet, Emigrant Basin Primitive Area, Aug. 25, 1937, Drawer 3, Folder 2300 – Recreation, Stanislaus National Forest historical archives, Sonora.

³⁶⁹ Sonora Pass Area, Stanislaus/Toiybe National Forests (Map), 1967, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

³⁷⁰ Angler's Guide to the waters of the Emigrant Basin Area (map), 1964, California Department of Fish and Game, Drawer 4, Wilderness & Primitive Areas: Emigrant Wilderness Folder, Stanislaus National Forest historical archives, Sonora.

³⁷¹ "A Proposal -- Emigrant Wilderness, Stanislaus National Forest, California," Sept. 1, 1971, USDA Forest Service, Stanislaus National Forest historical archives, Sonora, Drawer 4.

³⁷² Report [To accompany H.R. 12884], 93d Congress, 2d Session July 30, 1974, 7-10, attached to "Memorandum for The President," Jan. 2, 1975, Box 21, Folder 1975/01/03 HR 12884 Omnibus Wilderness Designation (digitized), Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.

included finding artifacts and mementos left behind by those who crossed the Sierra in wagons or those who transformed them with dams and wheels. Furthermore, the pack teams and horses these visitors needed to see the full experience created a setting for backcountry campers in the Emigrant to act out their own version of the place's ranching past. (See Figure 62) Here they could live a frontier fantasy with Stetsons, horses, cattle and vittles, reinforcing the myths of a romantic frontier to the American public reproduced in episodes of the popular television show *Little House on the Prairie* – a show sometimes filmed along the trail between Kennedy Meadows resort and Relief Reservoir.³⁷³

In Nash's writings, the notion of American wilderness as a place to be preserved and protected emerged after the frontier became a strong symbol of the country's past. Pointing to American historian Fredrick Jackson Turner's work at the end of the 19th Century on the close of the frontier, Nash argued that Americans saw a notable change in their attitude of the wilderness from places of dubious morality and social chaos to places that stood apart from the urban and industrialized landscapes that by then were the focus the same moral panic. With the frontier closed, as Turner announced in 1893, the places where he surmised Americans (specifically, white men) forged a character of virility, independence, ingenuity and self-sufficiency were no longer available. Thus, Nash argued, there began "a growing tendency to associate wilderness with America's frontier and pioneer past," especially with the "frontier way of life" and the role of "primitive conditions"³⁷⁴ in that way of life. "The ending of frontier prompted many Americans to seek ways of retaining the influence of wilderness in modern civilization," Nash wrote, pointing to institutions like Boy Scouts and the American presidency under Theodore Roosevelt that helped spread and validate this symbol of wilderness as "a perpetual frontier" that would keep "Americans in contact with primitive conditions."³⁷⁵ In the Emigrant Basin primitive area and wilderness, the landscape became a of symbol for a lost American frontier, offering its visitors outdoor environments wherein they could see traces of the past while acting out a romanticized version of that past on their own.

Land managers and visitors embraced this mythic past, often organizing the place's identity around it. In the summer of 1963, Fred Leighton, Frank Kurzzi and a group of land management officials attempted a historical survey of the artifacts, items and traces left behind by the westward travelers who crossed the pass with their wagons, livestock and belongings in the 1850s. People widely knew that the emigrants left sites and items behind as they travelled, and many by then had been removed and were on display at area history centers. But some remained. A large, iron piece from a disassembled wagon was still visible to packers who entered the lower Relief Valley. Before reaching that site, on the trail from the upper Relief Valley, they would also pass a wagon wheel mounted on a rock, with an iron plaque placed under the wheel by anonymous armchair historians dedicating the site to the emigrant parties of 1853

³⁷³ Torne Gray, "Sierra Solitude: Getting There is a Footman's Feat," *Modesto Bee*, Aug. 17, 1975, Folder 1, Fred Leighton Papers.

³⁷⁴ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 145.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 147-151.

which saw unique hardships from which they sought refuge in the Relief valleys. Some who traversed the Emigrant trail didn't survive, and a tree near Saucer meadow (along the entrance trail to the basin lakes, past Lunch Meadow) bore the etchings "Bahi A. Hubbs, Oct. 31, 1853."³⁷⁶ Other trees bore similar carvings, though less legible, down trail from Hubbs' memorial. All the way to the lower Relief Valley, the party searched for what were said to be as many as ten more graves of emigrants who died of starvation in the snows, marked supposedly by "a single layer of stones surrounding it" left by the search party who found their remains. The survey crew found two sites that could have been those places, but never confirmed either.³⁷⁷

Such sites were well-known to regulars in the Emigrant. Both seeking and stumbling across traces of a frontier past – when white Americans were still struggling to subdue the wilds of the West – constituted essential aspects visiting the place. Wanda Spicer, a forest service employee in the middle of the century and the wife of a forest official, was well aware of such relics. Spicer on her trips into the backcountry, when taking time off from working at Pine Crest or other popular areas, would typically stick to some of the more accessible lakes instead of going "far enough" out to find some of those mythical sites. But even then, the presence of past workers and visitors – be they the cattle rustlers or the laborers helping to build dams – was inescapable. Long-unused refuse piles remained from the work crews who helped shape and reshape the wilderness. While the Forest Service and hikers would often lead efforts to locate and remove these piles of rusting cans and utensils and other metal waste, they remain even today in various hidden spots for those with keen eyes and reasons to look. "One time we went back, we were way out into Lunch Meadow, we discovered we hadn't brought any cooking utensils. The packer was supposed to put them in and he didn't put them in," Spicer recalled. "So we started picking up things. There were old dishpans and what not. When I got back to camp, I boiled them and scrubbed them good with sand and dirt and boiled them out. I used the old dishpan to fry fish in. We got so we built a nice fire on the rocks. We had a lot of canned stuff and as we'd open it we'd use the cans. There were plenty of tin cans around."³⁷⁸

Some visitors went to the Emigrant specifically seeking the artifacts and grave sites of the place's frontier past. For Modesto's Boy Scouts Troop 36, those sites were regular destinations by 1969. The troop had taken many trips in search of remnants of the old wagon trail, attempting to re-trace the original emigrant trips and document the important locations much like the forest service had done previously with Leighton and Kurzzi. They were particularly interested in what one troop leader referred to as "signs," old trees with carvings and messages on them. As the federal government was at the time considering official wilderness status for the Emigrant, the troop members pleaded with the National Forest Service to try and preserve or mark the sites and

³⁷⁶ "Pack Party Researches Sierra Emigrant Trail," *The Union Democrat*, July 31, 1963, Folder 1, Fred Leighton Papers.

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Gary Hines and Bash York, Transcript of Wanda Spicer Oral History, March 10, 1983, Tape 21, Forest Service Career & History, Oral History folder, Stanislaus National Forest historical archives, Sonora.

signs as they represented essential components of the wilderness and the experiences in them. “Many Carvings and Blazes have been found. Those on living trees are gradually being enveloped by the bark growing over them. Some have been opened up in years past but too rapidly these signs of their passage are being lost to future generations,” troop leader Lenard Hewson wrote in a letter signed by the members of his troop. “Trees have been found laying on the ground, from storms, old age, etc. As years pass they are being destroyed by weather and man. It is our proposal that (the Forest Service) allow for the bark to be trimmed back to preserve these carvings and blazes and to preserve the fallen signs (trees) in such a way that future generations can forever trace and admire the trails blazed by those hardy people.”³⁷⁹

Along with the traveling emigrants, the wilderness’ connection to a mythical period of California’s agriculture remained central to its symbol as part of a long-lost past. Livestock grazing in the highlands of the central Sierra Nevada mountains dated at least as far back as the gold rush, when both cattle and sheep were released in the green areas during the summers while the lowlands of the foothills and the flat Central Valley were browned from the hot, dry summer climate. Near the turn of the century, a group of ranchers grazed their livestock annually in the high country around the Emigrant Basin. They included Dave Rosasco, for whom Fred Leighton worked in the 1890s as a boy, as well as other ranchers who built cabins in the region as early as the 1860s.³⁸⁰ Once the woodlands were brought under a federal forest reserve systems, rangers and other officials in the Stanislaus National Forest built systems of permits and regulations regarding livestock grazing. Not only did these early cattlemen impact the basin’s ecology by transplanting trout into the lakes and rivers, but they also built numerous cabins and other facilities in the high country as bases for operations and as summer retreats for the ranchers, friends and families. Perhaps the most famous of these was Leighton’s Yellowhammer Camp, which he built around 1922 next to the lake of the same name where he built his first check dam. Yellowhammer Camp started with a log cabin, built almost entirely of wood harvested in and around the area of the camp, and Leighton added other structures over years including a cookhouse, barn, shower building, outhouse, corrals, water pump, work table, a log carrier and eventually a more modern main house built in the 1950s.³⁸¹ Leighton regularly hosted groups with friends, family and other visitors from rangers and congressmen to business leaders, at his Yellowhammer camp. He used the place as a base for construction and maintenance of the check dams, and he also allowed campers to use it on a limited basis.³⁸² Though Leighton himself didn’t work in the ranching business or use Yellowhammer for ranching during most of its existence, the camp did resemble

³⁷⁹ Lenard B. Hewson to Harry Grace, Oct. 22, 1969, Drawer 4, Folder 2320, Stanislaus National Forest historical archives, Sonora.

³⁸⁰ Bob White, "Cowboys," *Modesto Bee*, Aug. 11, 1985, Drawer 3, Folder 2200 (grazing, cow camps), Stanislaus National Forest historical archives, Sonora.

³⁸¹ National Register of Historic Places Registration Form: Leighton Encampment/Yellowhammer Camp, NPS Form 10-900 (digital version), Feb. 22, 2013, Stanislaus National Forest digital files, Sonora.

³⁸² *Ibid.*

closely in style, location and construction the other rustic cabins in the Emigrant area. Those included a rudimentary cabin at Kennedy Lake, built as early as the 1880s,³⁸³ the Coopers' cabin built in the 1860s,³⁸⁴ or the Meyers' cabin down by Huckleberry Lake.³⁸⁵

These rustic outposts functioned in two ways to reinforce for wilderness visitors the place's identity as a piece of long-lost American frontier. They represented an idealized version of agricultural production, giving visitors a living version of a moment outside of the state's broader agricultural history as one of land monopolies and powerful interests dominating the landscapes and the peoples. This was true with the landed gentry known as the Californios during the state's Spanish and Mexican eras. It was true under the wheat and cattle barons who used organizing systems from industrial capitalism in the San Joaquin Valley. And it remained true with factory farmers who emerged out of the great reclamation projects to dominate what would become the most powerful agricultural economy in the world. Yet agriculture boosters in California have often attempted to identify with small, family farms dedicated to democratic ideals and self-reliance – such as the early horticulture movement of the 1890s.³⁸⁶ In the Emigrant Wilderness, cows seemingly belonging to a handful of regional ranchers were free to wander through the fenceless meadows of the untamed country. This was a place untouched in the imaginations of its visitors by the environmental impacts of industrialization and by the cultural and social issues wrought by the same process. This was not a place for the “industrial cowboys” of the cattle pens and slaughterhouses,³⁸⁷ at least for the visitors, who associated cattle ranching with romanticized visions of open ranges, cowboys and big-sky country. (See Figure 63)

The rustic structures in the backcountry would reinforce this identity, serving as points of interest on the trails and as bases for multi-day trips, where campers and fishermen could spend meals and evenings playing out a kind of frontier reenactment over open fires and cast iron cookware. When working to preserve some of these cabins as protected historic structures, forest service officials pointed to their centrality as symbols of the area's heritage. The Yellowhammer site, for instance, had an “association with this significant period in California history,” referring to “the habitat conservation movement ... in the late 1920s” pursued initially by ranchers to build sites of leisure within their working landscapes. Furthermore, according to the Forest Service, “the Camp is significant... for its association with the conservation movement

³⁸³ Knox Mellon to Blaine Cornell, Jan. 31, 1979; Multiple photographs of "Kennedy Lake Log Cabin, n.d.; all in Drawer 5, Folders 2360/2361, Special Interest Areas Kennedy Lake Log Cabin, Stanislaus National Forest historical archives, Sonora.

³⁸⁴ Kathy Hodge, “The Little Log Cabin,” n.p., Jan. 12, 1976, Drawer 3, Folder 2200 Grazing / Cow Camps, Stanislaus National Forest historical archives, Sonora.

³⁸⁵ Pam Conners (Stanislaus National Forest), interview with Zeke (Edwin) Goodwin, June 17, 1981, Oral History folder, Stanislaus National Forest history files, Sonora.

³⁸⁶ Some of the literature cited in Chapter II covers California's agricultural history during the late 19th Century and early 20th Century, especially: Sandul, *California Dreaming*; Farmer, *Trees in Paradise*; Pisani, *From the Family Farm to Agribusiness*.

³⁸⁷ Iglar, *Industrial Cowboys*.

in California that championed responsible watershed and fish and game management within which Leighton worked and received funding and support.”³⁸⁸

At the time of their operation for ranching, their owners saw the distinction between the wilderness as a place for wealthy and connected elites seeking a play place and rural gentry working in a landscape they molded after their own interests and ideals. Zeke Goodwin worked as a young man for Johnny Meyers, who Goodwin once described as one of the “biggest cattlemen in the mountains.”³⁸⁹ Meyers largely claimed a grazing area known as Horse Meadow, where his rustlers – including Goodwin – would let out their animals while working in the high country during the summer. Goodwin recalled Meyers’ backcountry cabin where they would stay near Huckleberry Lake to be one of the largest in the basin, and large enough to be noticed by other backcountry visitors. It became a common problem, he said, for out-of-town anglers to trespass and use his property for their own wilderness fishing adventures – something Goodwin said bothered Meyers intensely.

He had a boat, right on the lake. They used to come in, like these fancy people, these doctors, and they'd take his boat -- go out and get out on this island and stay a week -- I know of twice they done it, and smoked the fish; he couldn't get to them. But I was there the time Johnny Meyers finally got them to come in; they were watching him. They came in on their horses for a two week stay. They'd send the horses out and have them cowboys come in after them. And they were waiting for them; and they wouldn't come in off that island. That was the only boat in the mountains. Johnny Meyers was there, he was a big, powerful man, and when they brought the boat in, he just picked a big rock up and he turned upside down' busted it all to pieces. All he said was, “You won't come back here again.”³⁹⁰

In the minds of Johnny Meyers and his cowboys, Huckleberry Lake and the facilities around it were for rustlers and mountain men working the land, not for doctors seeking a leisurely outing. And while he didn’t have the authority to keep the elite, fancy folks out of the publicly owned national forest, he would rather destroy his own boat than see it be used for such an undignified purpose as a vacation destination. While this impression ignored Meyers’ own place as part of a regional elite, it still offered the backcountry as symbol for certain values associated with the rural hinterlands and not the urban cores.

Noteworthy in the Emigrant Basin’s role as a symbol of a lost frontier, kept apart from the imposition and problems of modern civilization, was the absence of American Indians in much of the mythmaking. The Stanislaus River watershed and the adjacent areas are rich in native history, as Miwok and Yokut peoples thrived along its

³⁸⁸ National Register of Historic Places Registration Form: Leighton Encampment.

³⁸⁹ Connors, interview with Zeke Goodwin.

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

banks for centuries before the colonial traumas of European contact and the American westward expansion. The river itself is named for a Yokut man raised on a mission who led one of the most successful indigenous revolts in the region against the Mexican military.³⁹¹ The Emigrant Wilderness is also part of that history, as some place names in the basin hinted, like the popular Paiute Meadow in the heart of the basin. And yet, the mythologizing of this wilderness suggests that the American backcountry became and largely remains a collection of places constructed and perpetuated by the values of its middle and upper class, white advocates and visitors.³⁹²

While the forest service would eventually conduct the occasional cultural program for campers at popular tourist sites like the lake at Pine Crest, and the agency also dedicated some monuments in the lower elevations of the forest to Miwok people and customs,³⁹³ efforts to highlight indigenous activities in the high granite of the Emigrant were rare as its popularity grew. At one point, forest managers attempted to locate and verify reports of what they referred to as Indian trail trees deep in the wilderness, around the headwaters of Herring Creek. (See Figure 64) These kinds of trees were known in other outdoor spaces of the country, created by native peoples who manipulated their growth to create a discernible sign for important routes. If they were present in the Emigrant Wilderness, and verifiable, some thought they could serve as analogues to the trees marked by the westward Emigrants that were viewed with such interest by some backcountry visitors. The effort saw mixed results, with archaeologists disagreeing on whether the trees in the area were deformed by natural or human causes.³⁹⁴ (See Figure 65) And even then, this brief search of native cultural resources – as they were called in the Emigrant Wilderness as well as in places adjacent to the forest – took place in the 1970s and 1980s, decades after the identity of the wilderness was one dominated by its pioneer heritage.

This attempt to memorialize the native presence in a wilderness as part of a largely empty and sterile landscape, bereft of indigenous history until the arrival of white frontiersmen and settlers, reflects both a physical and discursive erasure of

³⁹¹ Jose Sanchez and Joaquin Pina, “The Revolt of Estanislao,” *Lands of Promise and Despair: Chronicles of Early California, 1535–1846*, Rose Marie Beebe and Robert M. Senkewicz, Eds. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015), 366-374; William Bauer, “First People: Estanislao,” *News from Native California*, Winter 2005/06, 42-43.

³⁹² Kevin DeLuca and Anne Demo, “Imagining Nature and Erasing Class and Race: Carleton Watkinds, John Muir and the Construction of Wilderness,” *Environmental History*, 6:4, October, 2001, 541-560; Carolyn Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), ProQuest Ebook Central, 1-20.

³⁹³ Gary Hines, “Telltale Ranger: Stories and Insights from the Stanislaus National Forest,” *Mother Lode Weekly*, July 28, 1962; Betty Linderfelt, “Mi-Wuk or Mi-Wok? Anything but ‘Diggers,’” *Modesto Bee*, July 4, 1966; Lois Nielsen, “‘Just Exactly the Way the Indians Did It:’ A Lifelong Study of Customs,” *The Union Democrat*, July 23, 1982, Drawer 2, People/Groups/Indians File, Stanislaus National Forest historical archive, Sonora.

³⁹⁴ Alan Lamb to District Ranger, Aug. 31, 1976; Donald Miller to Director, June 8, 1967; To Director (partial letter), June 11, 1976; additional various notes and photographs; all in Drawer 2, Folder People/Groups/Indians, Stanislaus National Forest history files, Sonora.

indigenous histories from America's public lands. While large swaths of the American West at the turn of the century were being preserved, people would experience these lands as nature in large part because of the recreation taking place within them. In the Emigrant Basin and its surroundings, this recreation included wilderness fishing and horseback riding. But before the basin could be a place for these kinds of outdoor adventures, it had to be subdued and tamed through the violence against, and removal of, its native inhabitants.

Historians and scholars since Nash have explored this relationship between the extermination and removal of indigenous people from Western lands and the rise of wilderness recreation that would later take place in the same spaces, identifying how the earlier enabled the latter. This process took place in the wake of the project of settler colonialism across the continent, predicated on the "elimination of the native" as "an organizing principle" for the settler society that usurped indigenous peoples.³⁹⁵ Willian Cronon in his essay problematizing wilderness connected the colonial project with these activities in the wilds that would nostalgically mimic and help ritualize a myth of frontier individualism and American democracy forged through the settlement of the West.³⁹⁶ These recreationists did so as "consumers" of the landscapes, playing with their guides who served as "romantic surrogates for the rough riders and hunters of the frontier"³⁹⁷ they were now enjoying as outdoor playgrounds. But the prerequisite for this "uninhabited wilderness" and the "absence of human violence" in these supposed frontier settings was the "removal of Indians" who had to move elsewhere against their will so "tourists could safely enjoy the illusion that they were seeing their nation in its pristine, original state."³⁹⁸

Cronon is not alone among scholars who make these connections between the establishment of a "pristine myth"³⁹⁹ of the American West and the sanitization of the region's history of violence and subjugation. Historian Karl Jacoby in his study about the relationship between class, race and the conservationist legal regimes explained how the establishment of America's first national park in the 1870s coincided with a "flurry of reservation building" in the region.⁴⁰⁰ Setting the stage for the successes of the conservation movement, Yellowstone's preservation involved conservationists emptying a "preexisting native world" with rhetorical accounts of "primeval solitude" that had never shaped by humans.⁴⁰¹ "The vision of nature that the park's backers sought to enact—nature as prehuman wilderness—was predicated on eliminating any Indian presence from the Yellowstone landscape," Jacoby stated.⁴⁰²

³⁹⁵ Patrick Wolfe, "Settler colonialism and the elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8:4, December, 2006, 387–409.

³⁹⁶ Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 77.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁹⁹ William M. Denevan, "The Pristine Myth: The Landscape of the Americas in 1492," *American Environmental History*, Louis S. Warren, Ed. (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 5-21.

⁴⁰⁰ Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 87.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, 87.

Environmental scholars have cast critical eyes on the conservation movement's local work much closer to the Emigrant Wilderness, as well. In the state's distant north, the project to preserve California's northern redwood stands would reproduce this pattern, obscuring the "violent practices of land dispossession, enclosure and privatization, and the marginalization of Native American People" with a "celebratory U.S. settler colonial history," preserving and perpetuating stories of white male loggers and tree stump demarcating important moments in European, American and Judeo-Christian mythical histories.⁴⁰³

Even closer, just south of the Emigrant Basin, have been the northern stretches of the Yosemite wilderness protected by the American national park system. Like with Yellowstone, Yosemite's history also involved advocates of its preservation writing its indigenous presence – and in turn, its violent indigenous removal – out of its story. As Rebecca Solnit explored in an essay about conflicts in Yosemite between native inhabitants and white authorities, some of the iconic landscape's earliest white visitors started this project with their initial descriptions. Those visitors were there as an act of war, after all, as the Mariposa Battalion in 1851 pursued a group of native Californians and their chief up the Merced River with the expressed purpose of extermination and relocation. Once resistance was eliminated through force, the more serene images of the valley and surrounding natures could be disseminated by boosters like John Muir or Ansel Adams to present the Yosemite landscape – one inhabited and shaped profoundly by indigenous management practices – as a collection of Edenic, "sublimely empty" and wild scenes instead of reminders of the brutal origins of white Americans preserving and managing it for largely recreation purposes.⁴⁰⁴

But the native Californians of the central Sierra would remain with some presence in the national park into the early 20th Century, as historian Mark Spence found, even growing in numbers through the California Gold Rush with the place's increasing popularity for tourists.⁴⁰⁵ During these decades, the remaining Indians of Yosemite would be increasingly regulated and confined as a "problem"⁴⁰⁶ in the wilderness, with a dwindling native population ultimately disappearing by the 1930s thanks to restrictive and exploitative management. Yet, even this history – one of the Yosemite as a "wilderness dispossessed" of the people who initially shaped it – is largely forgotten in favor of narratives of wilderness as a "'virgin' continent waiting to be peopled"⁴⁰⁷ by largely white American settlers and pioneers. Among those settlers

⁴⁰³ Pierre Walter, "Settler colonialism and the violent geographies of tourism in the California redwoods," *Tourism Geographies*, 25:1, 2023, 243-264.

⁴⁰⁴ Rebecca Solnit, "Indian– White Conflicts over Yosemite," *Green Versus Gold : Sources in California's Environmental History*, Carolyn Merchant, ed., (Washington: Island Press, 1998), ProQuest Ebook Central, 296-300, excerpted from Solnit, "Up the River of Mercy," *Sierra*, November/December, 1992, 52– 57, 78.

⁴⁰⁵ Mark Spence, "Dispossessing the Wilderness: Yosemite Indians and the National Park Ideal, 1864-1930," *Pacific Historical Review*, 65:1, February, 1996, 27-59.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 57-58

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 57-59. Much of Spence's essay also focuses on the Yosemite Indians themselves becoming a romanticized part of the scenic and recreational experience of American tourists in Yosemite's early decades as a popular National Park. This will be discussed further in the next chapter.

and pioneers were the ones romanticized during the early construction of the Emigrant Wilderness by people like Leighton and Damin. They and others like them were able to materially and discursively build a landscape both injected with, and bereft of, human history, with legacies of certain past inhabitants cemented into the landscape and others erased.

Before it was established as an official wilderness, a key piece of the Emigrant Basin's place character was its symbolic connection to the mythical, lost American frontier. The place was littered with stories and traces of the wagon trains of the Emigrants for which the wilderness was named, serving as key destinations and important parts of the wildland experience for its visitors. It had remained a kind of working landscape for idealized visions of Western agriculture, with cowboys on horses grazing cattle in the open meadows. Such cowboys were difficult to find – if ever realistic – in California's agricultural economy dominated by big capital, mechanized work, immigrant wage labor and industrial organization. This identity for the Emigrant Wilderness would remain well into the 21st Century, as described after a fire damaged some buildings at the wilderness' most popular gateway of Kennedy Meadows. Not just a gateway to the wild but a doorway to the past, the resort as late as 2007 was seen as a "total step back in time." Before heading to the basin on their horses or with their mule train, visitors would hear the call for breakfast at the restaurant from the "clang on an old triangle. ... Locals said the resort long has defied the years to stand as a throwback to a different era, when the Sierra was a less commercial tourist destination. For generations, wranglers from the lodge have taken visitors on pack rides into the Emigrant Wilderness."⁴⁰⁸

But conveniently missing from these visions were the traditions and cultures of the indigenous peoples of central California and the Sierra slopes. Instead, their use of the basin and its adjacent watersheds as a zone of trade and place of sustenance and identity would all but disappear from the wilderness experience as part of a nationwide process of material and rhetorical removal. The Emigrant Wilderness would instead be a place for pioneers and cowboys, symbolizing a mild and whitewashed version of Westward expansion. And its preservation – whether it be of the trees marking the graces of hardy pioneers, or of the cabins used by men donning Stetsons and boots – was largely intended maintain an idealized, mythologized Western landscape and the particular story of America set within it.

"Fine views to behold in a primitive setting:" Beauty and performance in an aesthetic experience.

Nash's concept of the American wilderness cult required reenacting the primeval and supposedly savage nature of man through sports and recreation. And those reenactments took place within that romanticized, lost frontier made possible through the colonial violence. But Nash's cult also required that wilderness hold

⁴⁰⁸ Eric Bailey, "Historic Lodge is Reduced to Ashes," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 2, 2007, ProQuest Documents.

within it both “beauty and spiritual truth.”⁴⁰⁹ This final piece of the wilderness ideal was part of an aesthetic quality that blended scenic beauty, romanticism and spirituality that transcendentalists like John Muir and Henry David Thoreau attached to America’s natural places. These ideas percolated in American intellectual thought and writings in the early-to-middle 19th Century, growing in influence into the early part of the next century. In Nash’s work, the aesthetics of wilderness were those that encompassed “the qualities of innocence, purity, cleanliness, and morality which seemed on the verge of succumbing to the utilitarianism and the surge of progress.” A wilderness place would be the aesthetic “antipode of civilization,” with its open, untouched and scenic locales “associated with the virtues” lacked by the despoiled scenery “of cities, and of machines.”⁴¹⁰ These places would be pure and unspoiled, offering “wild scenery.”⁴¹¹ And like the Edenic garden myths of Judeo-Christian theologies, they would take on very clear “spiritual significance as a resuscitator of faith.”⁴¹² A wilderness would be a place to find God in the midst of his unspoiled creation. Or it could be a place to regain faith in the less rationalistic approach to nature surrounded by the beauty it could provide when left untouched. This vision of wilderness encompassed the picturesque and the scenic, all while connecting its visitors to a faith in something bigger. And in the Emigrant Wilderness, such aesthetics – hinted at when Frank Kurzzi tipped his hat to Lloyd Damin in Kennedy Meadows and guaranteed the men would be awed by the granite – combined the highest caliber scenery with the western aesthetic of the cowboy traveler.

As a landscape largely dominated by granite, punctuated by meadows, lakes and groves of high-alpine trees, the Emigrant Basin and the peaks surrounding it offered quintessential views of the Sierra Nevada. Wilderness visitors, recreationists and outdoorsmen emphasized such scenes when discussing and describing the area which was “a picturesque land of rugged, rocky domes, deep granite-walled canyons, sparkling lakes and turbulent streams,” the type of place where a man “finds the answer to his needs for solitude far away from the noises and frustrations of civilization” whether by foot or horse.⁴¹³ (See Figure 57) One 1933 article, dedicated almost entirely to the design, labor and hydrology for the early check dams, set aside space for those views. The area, then officially managed by the government under a primitive designation, “is a unique scenic granite expanse abounding in small crystal lakes and perpetually verdant meadows, whose beauty is strikingly accentuated by their rough, solemn, awe-commanding surroundings, a grayish landscape splotched here and there in a variety of hues.”⁴¹⁴ A publication funded by the state’s chamber of commerce also highlighted the check dams and their purported benefits for the fisheries, this time in 1950 after more had been completed. Similarly, the piece

⁴⁰⁹ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 156.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*

⁴¹² *Ibid.*

⁴¹³ Emigrant Basin Area (map), National Forest Service, 1964, Drawer 4, Wilderness & Primitive Areas: Emigrant Wilderness Folder, Stanislaus National Forest historical archives, Sonora.

⁴¹⁴ Damin, “An Achievement in Conservation and Propagation.”

accentuated the Emigrant Basin's distinctly Sierran scenic values, noting that they were among California's "renowned claim to beautiful scenery of unexcelled esthetic value" in its recreational places and that the dams kept water in the creeks "greatly enhancing the beauty of our forest areas."⁴¹⁵

A regional newspaper highlighted the scenes in a photo and caption spread from October 1932. In it, panoramic images highlighted the grandeur – "A beautiful prospect of Upper Buck Lake in its Granite setting," as well as "one of the most beautiful bodies of water in the region, Water Lilly Lake on Buck Lake trail."⁴¹⁶ Coverage and descriptions of this place almost always focused on "towering" peaks, overlooking "broad" meadows, "sheer wall(s)" of granite next to "the sapphire splendor of the mountain waterway."⁴¹⁷ One writer extolled its virtues in the 1960s: "There is snow in July and granite peaks that make the tallest skyscrapers look miniature. There are deer on the trail and birds on the wing, and the wild canaries' song is sweet. This haven is the Emigrant Basin Wilds" with "towering mountains and broad sweeping meadows; its crystalline streams and sapphire lakes."⁴¹⁸ Described in similar terms by visitors throughout the century, the scenes captured these places as quintessentially high Sierra and fit the kind of scenery described and treasured by the nature lovers and conservationists of the time. And essential to its beauty were the contrast and dynamism between those gray crags, the meadows and waterways below it, and the varying shades of light throughout the seasons.⁴¹⁹ (See Figure 55)

While sublime rhetoric seemingly set the places apart from human agency, and placed them among the spiritual, the settings of the Emigrant Wilderness also marked a particular kind of rural, western aesthetic associated with its supposedly agrarian past. From the saloon at Kennedy Meadows, with its juke box carrying country and western music no more modern than the contemporaries of Hank Williams, to the Stetsons worn by the guides and staff, the sights, sounds and tastes of the trip into the Emigrant wilderness were those that become part of mainstream culture as commodified versions of the same frontier myth. Discussions, coverage and descriptions of the Emigrant Wilderness have been filled with such images. One article from the 1960s focused heavily on this western aesthetic, highlighting the popular backcountry trip cowboy experience. "Cowboying" here signified as much a look and attitude as a livelihood, with the term applying to unique sense of humor of the trail guides as well as their wide brimmed hats, striped button-up shirts, denim and shining belt buckles. The same piece lamented the decline of this identity and lifestyle while using colloquial language describing the "skullduggery" of range humor and the

⁴¹⁵ "Stream Flow Maintenance Dams Save Fish, Water," *California: Magazine of the Pacific*.

⁴¹⁶ "Check Dams Make Contribution to Fish and Game Conservation in the Sierra," *Stockton Record*, Oct. 15, 1932, Fred Leighton Papers.

⁴¹⁷ Scott Matthews, "'Cowboying' is Dying Out - but Packing in Campers is 'Grand,'" *Stockton Record*, n.d., Fred Leighton Papers.

⁴¹⁸ Scott Matthews, "Snow in July, Gigantic Peaks – This is Rugged High Sierra," *Stockton Record*, n.d., Fred Leighton Papers.

⁴¹⁹ Craig H. Jones, *The Mountains that Remade America: How Sierra Nevada Geology Impacts Modern Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 123-125.

“whooping and hollering” between the cow hands. “Cowboying is dying out,” stated one guide who regularly led groups from Kennedy Meadows into the backcountry, treated as men whose sensibilities matched the scenery. “Their nature is geared to the slow easy pace of moving in and out of the mountains and meadows and the bigness of the wide open spaces has given them the patience and freedom that can be found nowhere else,” the writer continued, describing what could be actors in a frontier performance. So strong was the connection between the cowboy imagery and the wilderness experience that more modern incarnations were described as alien or out of place. People who brought their own gear and carried them were called “footburners,” though admired by the packers. One group, they marveled, consisted of two women and two men who dared take a multi-day trek without guides. They even carried a baby into the wilderness,⁴²⁰ much to the surprise of those who witnessed it.

In many ways, this country and its groomed Western aesthetic fits a critique of 20th Century ecotourism and tourism from historian Hal Rothman. Such tourism spread across the American West through the century in ways that both popularized and commodified aspects of the West and created aesthetic experiences that became common in national parks, as well as malls and casinos. Rothman referred to these experiences, often deliberately curated, as part of the process of “scripting space” to create specific identities for the places where they occur.⁴²¹ In the Emigrant Wilderness, with its scarce or caricatured representations of the region’s original inhabitants, people’s visits were shaped by the hired cowboys and real horses as they rode across historic, high-country rangeland. In Rothman’s work, these kinds of tourism experiences – whether rustling cattle on a dude ranch or participating in archaeological digs as customers – allowed people to consume the pioneer landscapes through experiences in ways he identified as colonial and exploitative.⁴²² Though appearing to offer particularly authentic western experiences, Rothman’s critique offers a reading of the Emigrant Wilderness as a manufactured place. This place, in this reading, was part of a larger collection of landscapes created as much by postindustrial, global capitalism as by other geophysical or cultural processes.⁴²³ The critique seems to hold true in regional coverage of the Emigrant Wilderness, almost always associating experiences there with this cowboy aesthetic. One local report in 1985 on the fate of a ranching family’s historic cabins in the Emigrant basin was simply headlined, “Cowboys: A Sanguinetti Wonders about cabins’ future.”⁴²⁴ More explicit was a 1991 feature on the Emigrant Wilderness, focusing largely on the Western attire and lifeways of the packing guides.

⁴²⁰ Matthews, “‘Cowboying’ is Dying Out - but Packing in Campers is ‘Grand.’”

⁴²¹ Hal K. Rothman, *Devils Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 10-12.

⁴²² *Ibid.*, 14

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, 17-21.

⁴²⁴ White, “Cowboys.”

Long before the morning sun brought the granite mountain peaks to light, the packers at Kennedy Meadows were up saddling horses and mules for a day's journey to Emigrant Lake.

This is the life they lead and love. Their heroes have always been cowboys, as the song goes. ... still are, it seems. They conduct business in the corral, the saddle and on the trail -- one of the last vestiges of the American cowboy as romanticism would have it. And to these men -- some young, some merely young at heart -- it's much more than that. It's the best the 1990s can offer in the spirit of the American West. Stetsons and Resistols still reign. Silver buckles, chaps, boots and spurs. Long hours for low pay, with the greatest reward being the lifestyle itself. God help the cowboy who shows up at the corral wearing an earring. ...

With six pack mules and four saddle horses in tow, Findley began his return trip to the pack station at 3 p.m. He was back home by 7:30, but his work hadn't ended.

There were horses and mules to be unsaddled, watered and fed and saddles to be stored.

His next stop would be the kitchen, where the cook would put the daily special in front of him.

By then it was dark and time to find his bunk, where he would sleep hard until the next day's wakeup call came all too early.

And with it would come another day of horses, mules, saddles, dust and living the cowboy's ways.⁴²⁵

The cowboy aesthetic – one performed both by hired guides and backcountry visitors – helped define the Emigrant as a wilderness place from as far back as 1932 to beyond 1991.

Today's trips out of Kennedy Meadows can still feature horses, ten-gallon hats and a pregame at a country saloon. These trips offer a chance – as Rothman wrote of similar tourist experiences on western ranches – “to live in the American outdoors and experience the proximity of nature ... in an evocation of cowboys on the mythic cattle drives of the 1860s and 1870s,” and to “embrace an American creation myth and act it out.”⁴²⁶ And yet, the Emigrant Wilderness' cowboy cache doesn't completely fit Rothman's total critique of tourism and ecotourism of the 20th Century American West. For Rothman, the postmodern nature of these experiences left them bereft of authenticity, largely manufactured and performed in a way that drained the places of meaning where they were performed for those performing them. In his critique, he directly compared such experiences to the manufactured conditions of outdoor spaces derided by environmentalist writer Edward Abbey as “industrial tourism.”⁴²⁷

⁴²⁵ Jeff Jardine, “I'll Be A Cowboy All My Life,” *Modesto Bee*, July 31, 1991, Newsbank Access World News..

⁴²⁶ Rothman, *Devil's Bargains*, 117.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

But angling in the basin did offer a kind of connection between the visitors, the landscapes and waterways of the Emigrant that transcended the “postmodern,” and “industrial” aspects of the place. As Dennis Cutchins and Eric Eliason suggested in their writings on hunting and fishing, such activities deeply inform the individual and cultural identities of the people who pursue them. At a certain point, postmodern abstraction falls away in a material environment, and personal experiences become authentic for those who experience them. As even Rothman wrote, “all places, even open prairies or rugged deserts, have identities; people see and define them, they have intrinsic characteristics, and they welcome or repel according to people’s definitions of them as much as by their innate characteristics.”⁴²⁸ Even if the western aesthetic is in part a postmodern facsimile, manufactured and consumed as part of a commodified experience in a postindustrial world, the Emigrant’s history as a modern fishing destination remains part of its construction as a wilderness palace and its identity today.

Through the 1990s, a wilderness aesthetic with both scenic and cultural components defined the Emigrant Wilderness, combining the high Sierra granite landscapes with a mid-century, commodified Western style often associated with outdoor leisure and recreation. Both recreated a romantic vision of the lost American frontier, set apart from modern civilization and developed cities. Both set a spiritual and scenic tone for the kind of wilderness this would be and the kind of person who would be most welcome. Perhaps their best analogue would be the check dams in the backcountry, designed to blend into the high-country environment by utilizing mostly the local granite stones for their construction and rudimentary designs much like the cabins and camps built by some of the same. Such aesthetic values could be the antidote for, as Nash quoted one of wilderness’ early American champions, “the great curse of this age and the American people in its materialistic tendency.”⁴²⁹

“Characteristic of the untrammelled portions:” Dams as wilderness in the Emigrant Basin

Decades before the Emigrant basin in the Stanislaus National Forest was designated a federal wilderness, the place boasted all the characteristics Roderick Nash described as part of the cult of the American wilderness. Born of the social, environmental and economic conditions in the country at the turn of the 20th Century, this cult was an emerging, romanticized notion of the wild backcountry as a place to invigorate the body and spirit, one where man could rekindle his primitive virtues against the threats of modernity, a symbol of a lost frontier, and a source of aesthetic beauty and spiritual fulfillment. As a setting for physical connections to pre-modern activities, the Emigrant basin was a backcountry fishing paradise offering sportsmen and anglers miles of waterway in rugged country filled with hungry and healthy trout populations. It was designed and maintained by local sportsmen's groups as a testament to how conservation measures can facilitate these connections between man

⁴²⁸ Rothman, *Devil’s Bargains*, pg. 11.

⁴²⁹ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 57.

and primitive nature. Visitors and boosters regularly connected the wilderness to the country's mythic past, defining the area by the westward traveling groups who struggled with their wagons and animals over the treacherous mountain passes and who left traces of their successes and failures. Further, it remained a place with a ranching identity, still working as a grazing land for cattlemen and offering slice of small-scale, independent agricultural production rare in the state's history. In both these cases, largely missing from these symbolic frontiers were the names and stories of the indigenous peoples who traveled and worked the area before European and American colonization and the violence it wrought disrupted their lifeways to disastrous ends. The Emigrant Basin offered both the scenic and cultural aesthetics that combined these recreational activities with a popular frontier myth. Its picturesque landscapes blended broad and towering granite with the hues and textures of alpine meadows, tree groves and running water, filling its viewers and visitors with awe and spirituality informed by contemporary transcendentalist writers and thinkers. And the romanticized, western experience mirrored a popular country-and-western aesthetic long packaged and commodified by cultural institutions. As Nash stated of his wilderness cult, the Emigrant with these virtues could be an "antipode of civilization," set apart and protected from the progress and problems of modern existence.

And yet, this wilderness identity erased a history of colonial violence while it was also set in opposition to the very modern processes which helped create the basin's environmental conditions. Fred Leighton, himself a former employee of a dam building company and a man enthralled by water development, applied modern engineering and technology to expand the basin's lakes and keep flowing water in the mountain creeks during dry times. The fish which would thrive in those creeks and lakes themselves were raised and stocked through modern processes, with rearing ponds designed out of engineered environments and informed by rationalistic and scientific approaches to conservation. Even Kennedy Meadows, the gateway both to the Emigrant Basin Primitive Area and to the cowboy framework through which much of the public experienced it, was the product of hydraulic engineering as it was initially preserved and maintained as the future site of another reservoir.

These facts seemed reconcilable with the notion of the Emigrant Basin as a protected wilderness when the U.S. Forest Service, Congress and the White House considered a formal designation in 1972. A 1975 congressional committee report referred to the wilderness space as one which, "has superb mountain scenery and opportunity for solitude and primitive recreation,"⁴³⁰ with its "massive outcroppings of granite ... and more than 100 lakes in picturesque settings bordered by meadows and small groves of pine and fir trees."⁴³¹ The basin, the report continued, "has been a name familiar to numerous people for many decades," known not only for its alpine scenery but also for its "high elevation lakes, stocked with trout, (offering) real

⁴³⁰ Report No. 930989 [To accompany H.R. 12884], 93d Congress, 2d Session, April 11, 1974, 9, attached to "Memorandum for The President."

⁴³¹ Report [To accompany H.R. 12884], 93d Congress, 2d Session July 30, 1974, 7-10, attached to "Memorandum for The President."

challenges to fishermen.”⁴³² Continuing, the report points to its “primitive natural settings” coexisting with “several manmade developments” which included some cabins and barns as well as “a number of small, inconspicuous flow-maintenance dams and weirs made of natural rock and covered with moss and lichens. They are substantially unnoticeable.” All of these conditions, according to the committee report which recommended the wilderness designation for the Emigrant basin, suggested, “This distinctive area is characteristic of the untrammelled portions of central California's Sierras. It offers fine trout fishing, good hunting, wonderful scenery, and peace and quiet for those seeking solitude. Here, wilderness hiking, riding and camping are at their best.”⁴³³

Congress approved the proposal near the end of 1974, with President Gerald Ford signing the bill and officially designating the Emigrant Wilderness in 1975. At the time, the trout, cabins, check dams and horseback experience were all accepted by the designating body as consistent with its wilderness character. Active members of the public who visited the Emigrant basin also considered the notion of wilderness to be consistent with the human interventions within its borders, at least according to reports. A 1969 public hearing for the earliest version of the Emigrant Wilderness proposal included no discussion of the check dams despite their being listed as an important part of the area in the federal report. According to multiple publications, the main concern in terms of human works or interventions was the potential for expansion of tungsten mining activities in the area. As for the cabins, while some would come down, members of the public suggested at least some the structures should remain and could conform with the wilderness’ character.⁴³⁴

When the Emigrant Wilderness was established in 1975, the check dams, the pack trains and the well-managed trout population were not questioned in any major or systemic way as naturally part of the place’s wild character. Those questions would come later, as purity increasingly became the definitive characteristic of wilderness. But this would not happen before another wild place emerged in the region, one tied to the Emigrant in both history and circumstances. The Stanislaus River canyon, located below the powerhouse sitting at the heart of the hydroelectric system which Leighton helped construct, would in the 1960s and 1970s become the most popular river for whitewater rafters in the American West. And much like the Emigrant Wilderness, the wild river as imagined and experienced by its enthusiasts was compatible with hydraulic engineering and other traces of human interventions in the watershed.

⁴³² Ibid.

⁴³³ Ibid.

⁴³⁴ Julian Fein, “Wilderness Area Draws Support,” *Modesto Bee*, Oct. 1, 1969; “Concept Favored,” *The Daily Union Democrat*, Oct. 1, 1969; both in Fred Leighton Papers.

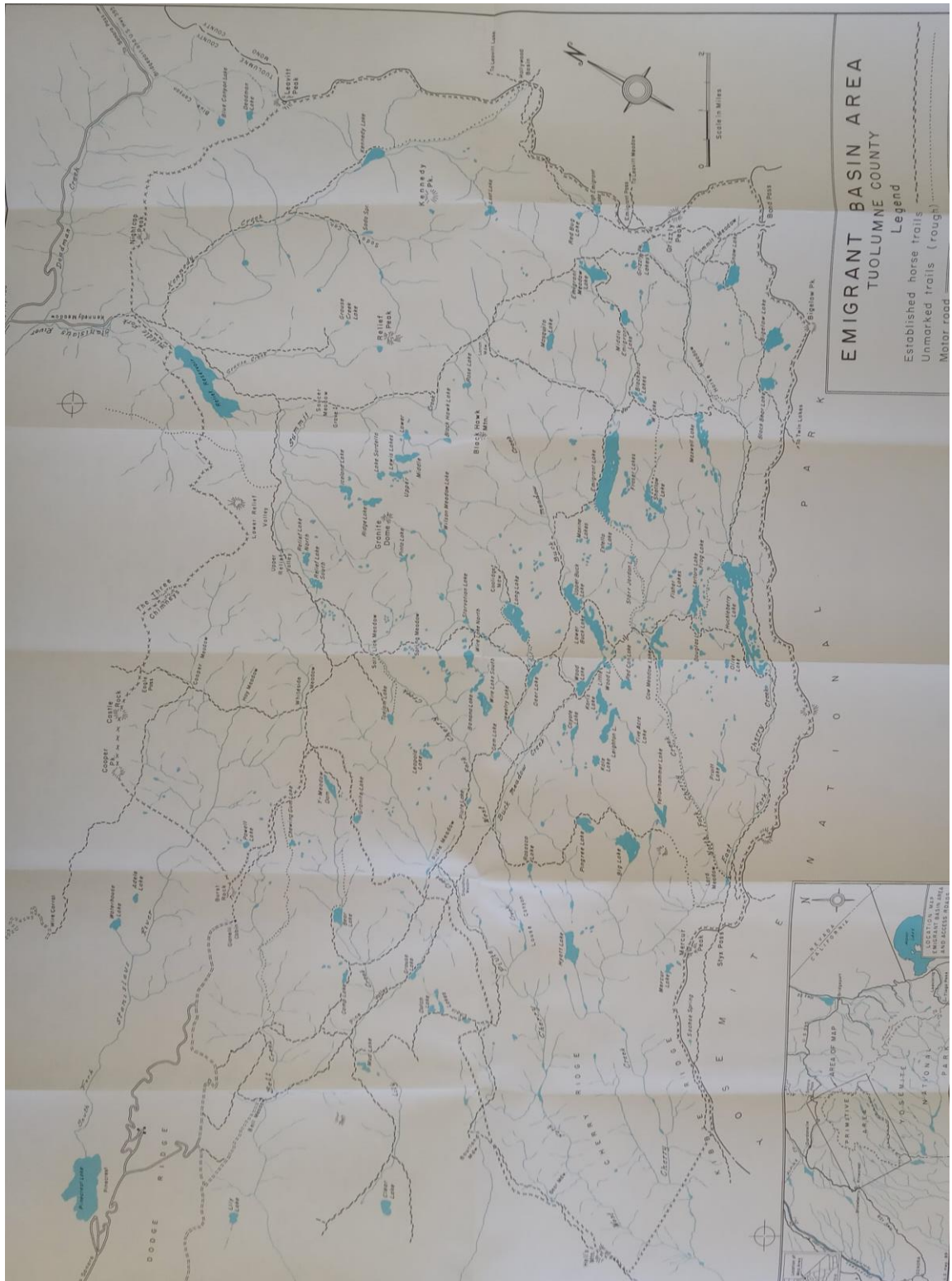


Figure 54: Map of Emigrant Basin trails and lakes for anglers. Courtesy of USDA Forest Service, Stanislaus National Forest.



Figure 55: Relief creek prior to construction of Relief Reservoir, adjacent to Emigrant Basin wildlands and similar in its scenery. Courtesy of Columbia College Library.

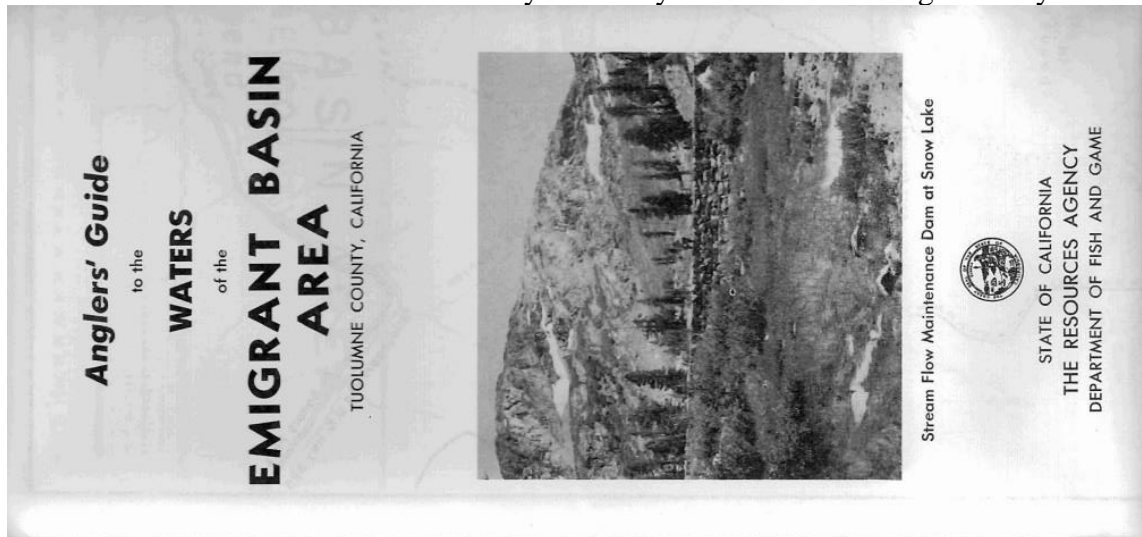


Figure 56: The Angler's guide to the Emigrant Basin included scenic images of the wilderness area's granite peaks and clear lakes. Courtesy of USDA Forest Service, Stanislaus National Forest.

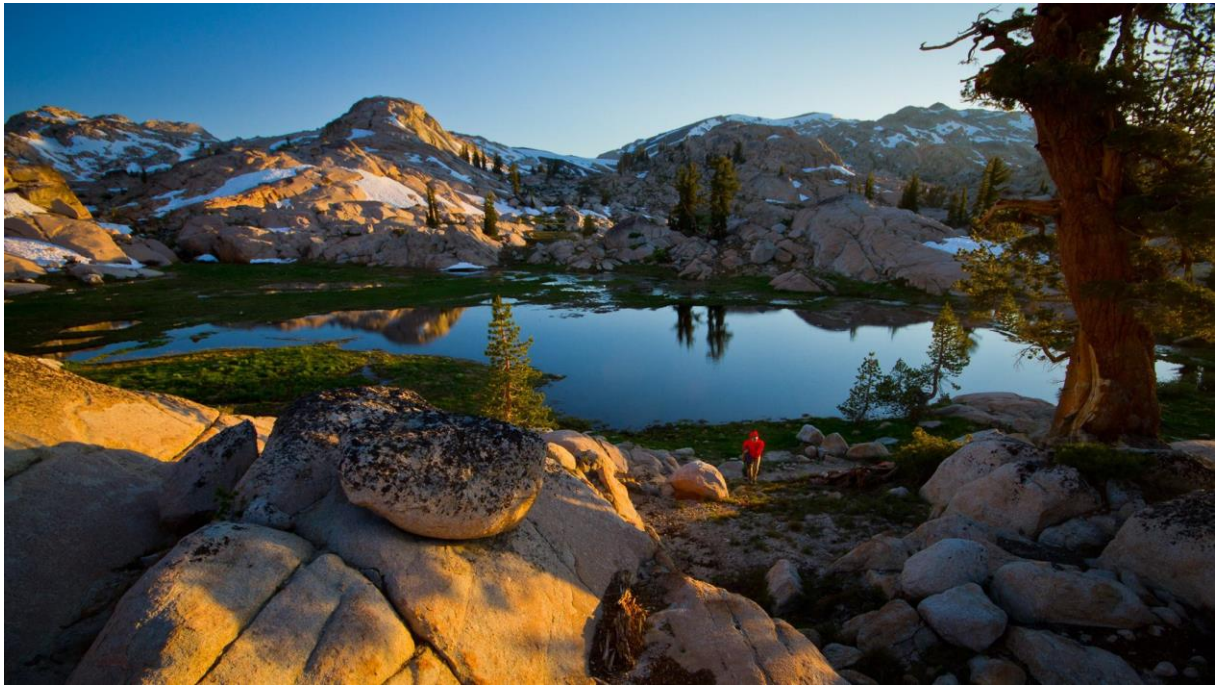


Figure 57: The scenic Emigrant Wilderness today is still popular with campers, hikers and anglers, 2016. Courtesy of WikiMedia Commons.



Figure 58: Fishermen after a successful trip in the Emigrant Basin, 1935. Courtesy of USDA Forest Service, Stanislaus National Forest.



Figure 59: The fish hatchery on Mormon Creek, photographed here, was located downstream from a mine and dam that helped supply the hatchery with cold water, 1926. Courtesy of Tuolumne County Historical Society.

7-15-30
Date - 7, 1930

FOR BAINBRIDGE TROUT PLANTING LIST. Revised to date.

STANISLAUS RIVER TRIBUTARIES. 1930 - FROM MONTANA CREEK HATCHERY, E. LANGRISH, MARIEN

STANISLAUS RIVER TRIBUTARIES	N.B.	I.L.	R.B.	PLANTING	PHOENIX LAKE
SAN DIEGO RESERVOIR			X	1500	500
FIVE MILE CREEK			X	5000	1000
ROSE CREEK			X	1500	1000
SOUTH FORK	5000 ✓				
SOUTH FORK, Via P.L.Co., R.R.	25000 ✓				
SOUTH FORK				1000	5000
SOUTH FORK	20000 ✓				
HARRIS CREEK, VIA BERT REED, P.H.			X	5000	5000
CO. CREEK			X	1000	2000
MILL CREEK. Man pack, <i>Medals, application</i>			X	200	
NIAGARA CREEK	5000 ✓				
CLARK'S FORK. Via Truck & P.H.			X	15000	
HALE RIVER. Large fish. Big water			X	25000	6000
KENNEDY'S CREEK, Via F. Kurni, P.H.			X	15000	10000
DEADMANS CREEK	10000 ✓		X	5000	7000
SUMMIT CREEK, Via F. Kurni, P.H.	10000 ✓		X	5000	
LION CREEK. Via Bert Reed P.H.			X	5000	7000
FOREBAY RESERVOIR. Via P.O. & R. Tram		10000 ✓			
SHU FLY CREEK (planted 1929)				1000	
Tuolumne Water Ditch				1000	
WHEAT MEADOWS LAKE. Via A. Burgeson.	5000 ✓				
BIG CANYON LAKES, Via F. Kurni P.H.			X		
SOUTH FORK. Via Bert Reed, P.H. Lakes below Cooper Meadows			X	7000	
DEER CREEK			X	5000	
			X	3000	

Figure 60: List of 1930 trout planting sites on the Stanislaus River featured modern infrastructure such as road crossings, dams, bridges and ditches. Courtesy of Tuolumne County Historical Society.



Figure 61: Fish and game officials examine fish in the Emigrant backcountry, ca. 1940s. Courtesy of USDA Forest Service, Stanislaus National Forest.



Figure 62: A group of backcountry tourists on horseback in Horse Meadow, 1928. Courtesy of USDA Forest Service, Stanislaus National Forest.

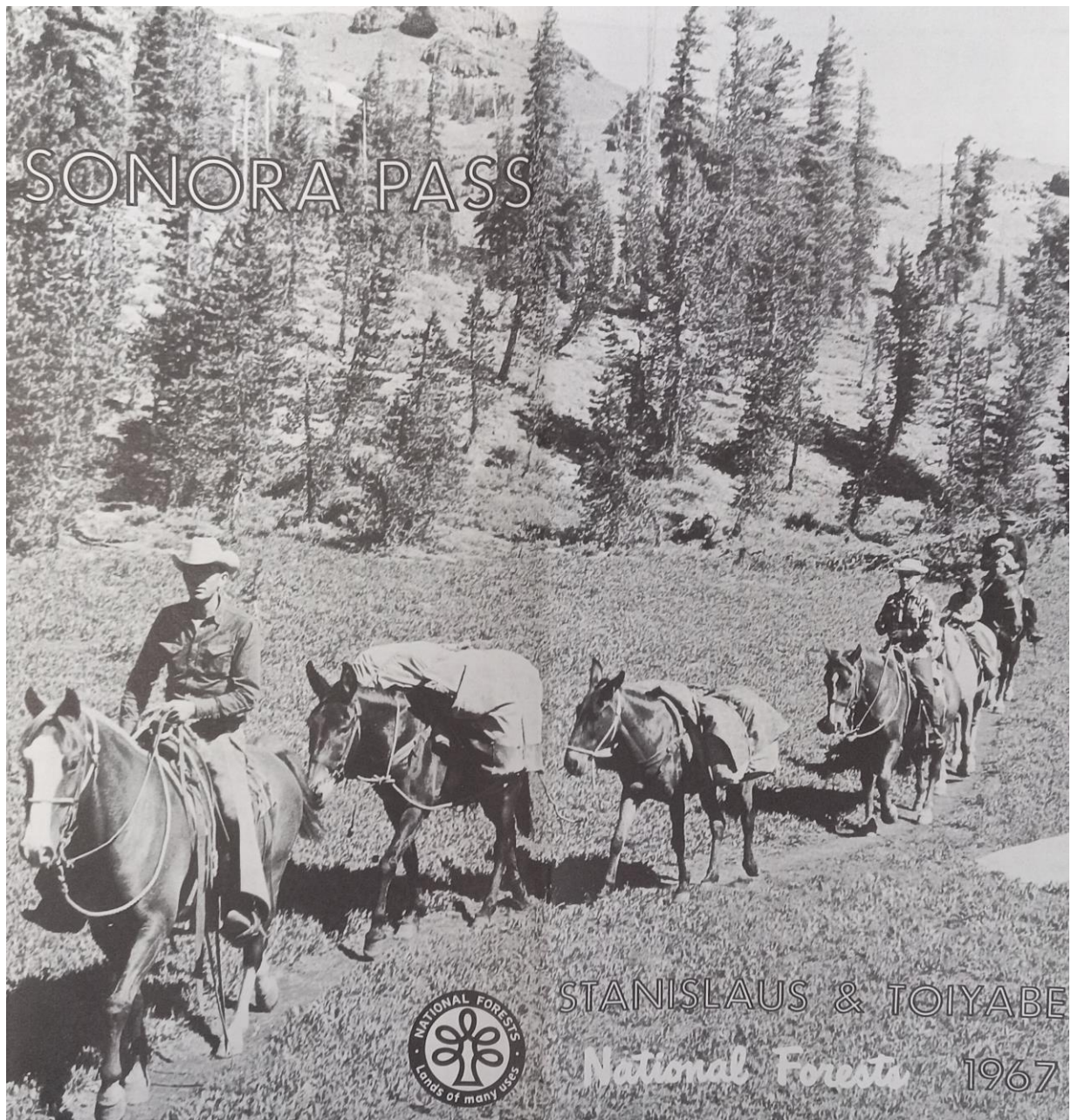


Figure 63: The cover of a tourist map of the Stanislaus National Forest featured horses, cowboys and a pack train like those that regularly traversed the Emigrant Basin, 1967. Courtesy of USDA Forest Service, Stanislaus National Forest.



Figure 64: Forest Service officials investigated reports of so-called Indian-trail trees, like this tree from 1976, though these reports were never substantiated. Courtesy of USDA Forest Service, Stanislaus National Forest.

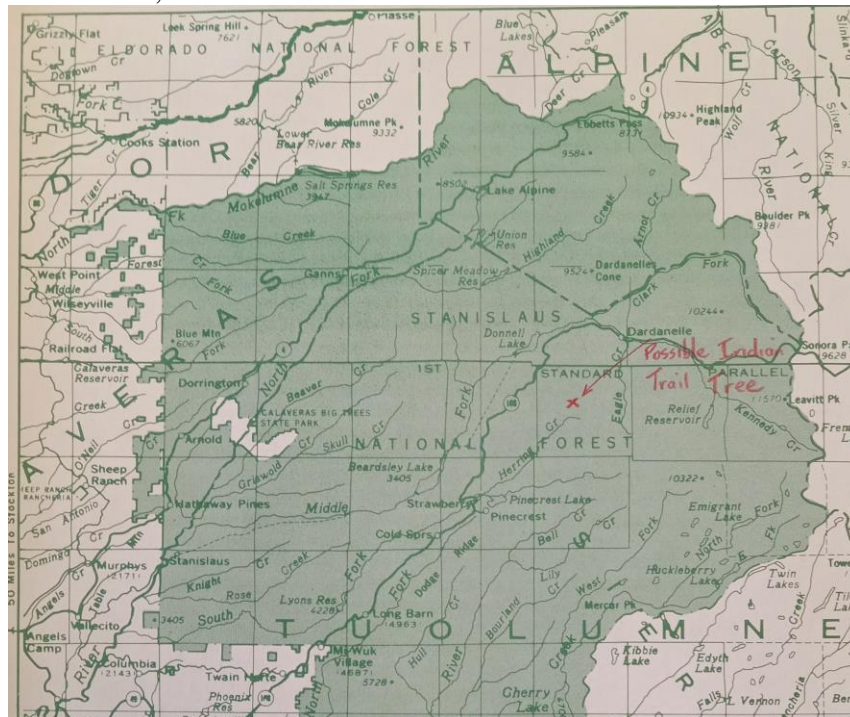


Figure 65: Forest Service officials investigated reports of so-called Indian-trail trees, like those indicated on this map from 1976, though these reports were never substantiated. Courtesy of USDA Forest Service, Stanislaus National Forest.

CHAPTER VI

THE CULT OF WILDERNESS AND THE STANISLAUS RIVER CANYON

Rafters enjoyed stopping at Duck Bar for a rest, a lunch, or to camp when taking a trip along the Stanislaus River. Its location was roughly equidistant between the rafting put-in at Camp Nine and the ending point for most rafters at Parrotts Ferry. For those taking a two-day trip, the beach-like gravel bar offered an open, peaceful and scenic spot for a break after an introduction to the world of running white water. But for river guide Richard Montgomery, the fig tree made Duck Bar an ideal lunch spot. (See Figure 66)

The tree would regularly offer shade to rafters and guides,⁴³⁵ among the only people who could reach it at such a remote location in the canyon. (See Figure 67) Some of the more daring and limber adventurers would sometimes try to climb the large tree during the stop. “The tree was huge, some branches thicker than two men, spreading out vast along the rocky banks of the river,” Montgomery recalled in 2010. “It had good water to drink all year long, so close to the river, deep roots, and plenty of sun. I remember the sting of its sap against my bare arms and legs as I climbed up and up.”⁴³⁶ For those running the river during the right time of year – typically late summer or fall – the tree would also offer a snack as it remained productive after as much as a century or more at that location. Montgomery, fellow guides, and other rafters would often pick, jar and dry the sweet fruit for their own uses. “That Fig bore enough fruit to supply many families,” he stated of the tree.⁴³⁷

The fig tree at Duck Bar also offered a kind of history lesson of the human heritage in the Stanislaus canyon. Figs are not native to North America, let alone the central Sierra Nevada foothills, and the tree was almost certainly planted sometime during the California Gold Rush by miners. Duck Bar itself was one of the most extensively and successfully mined spots in the canyon, with the bar made up at least partially of spent mining debris pulled from the river channel. Short walks from the tree around the bar often revealed materials from old ramshackle buildings and operations, with enough to be found that one long-term guide used that material to build a hidden treehouse in the canyon.⁴³⁸ Fruit trees planted by miners were commonplace in the canyon,⁴³⁹ and figs were thought in the 19th Century to have some medicinal value with the fruit manufactured into a tonic-like formula for stomach ailments.⁴⁴⁰ It remains unclear who planted the tree, especially with Duck

⁴³⁵ Richard Montgomery, “The Fig Tree,” Nov. 1, 2010, n.p., The Stanislaus River Archive, stanislausriver.org/document/the-fig-tree/ .

⁴³⁶ Ibid.

⁴³⁷ Ibid.

⁴³⁸ Ibid.

⁴³⁹ Roberta S. Greenwood, *Final Report of the New Melones Archaeological Project, California: Vol. V, Data Recovery from Historical Sites* (Salinas: Coyote Press, June 30, 1982), 59, 77, 192, 220.

⁴⁴⁰ Thorne Gray, “Digging Up Mysteries,” *Modesto Bee*, n.d., Stanislaus River Archive, stanislausriver.org/story/digging-up-mysteries-modesto-bee/ .

Bar's many owners in its early years as a mining claim. Italian and Mexican miners were common in the area, and fig trees were common in Mediterranean regions. But Montgomery's story of the Duck Bar tree usually involved some of the many Chinese miners in the area during the mid-19th Century. "As a young man, working the river, I had imagined a kind of Utopian colony of Chinese, hiding out, living for generations down by the river," he recalled. "This morning, in my 50s, I realize they must have been down there in the Canyon only a few years, towards the end of the Gold Rush, virtual slave labor, forced to dig rock out of rock, rock out of river, in the feverish search for gold."⁴⁴¹ Montgomery may or may not have been correct about the tree's origins. But like others who stopped under its branches for shade and a bite on their trip down the Stanislaus, the old fig tree conjured images of a wild place's human past.

The fig tree at Duck Bar also grew among some of the finest and most inspiring scenery in a river canyon known for its fine and inspiring scenery. The gravel bar was in some of the deepest stretches of canyon of the river, with the blueish-gray limestone almost cut vertically across the water from the popular site. One particular crag visible from the bar resembled the famous El Capitan in Yosemite, towering like a monolith hundreds of feet above the riffling water and often captured by photographers. A steep foot trail climbed out of the canyon near Duck Bar, providing access to popular caves known to harbor subterranean wonders like textbook geologic formations and even endangered critters.⁴⁴² Panoramic views awaited those who climbed the trail to the top of vertical cliffs above the bar, with these sites also captured at times by photographers and journalists and shared as arguments for the unique wonders of the place.⁴⁴³ Also just upstream was Dubois Pool, named for one of the river's most outspoken activists and considered one of its most peaceful stretches. "Along the banks are incense cedars, yellow pines, big leaf maples, willows, white alders, Oregon ash, live oak, digger pines, and one well hidden fig tree," a river guide book described of the area, later quoting a miner who spent three years at the spot trying to scrape some gold out of the river who called the location "the most peaceful place I ever lived in my life."⁴⁴⁴ And while peaceful, Duck Bar and the surrounding areas were filled with the din of "shouts of joy" from rafters and the "songs of the cliff swallows on the limestone canyons"⁴⁴⁵ that could often be heard while gazing up or down the canyon. But for Montgomery, the fig tree was a defining feature, as it outlasted the people who planted it and – if left undisturbed – would outlast his contemporaries. "The Fig made it on its own, grew huge, and blessed passersbys (sic) the river in the late summer with its fruit and its shade," he wrote of his favorite place,

⁴⁴¹ Montgomery, "The Fig Tree."

⁴⁴² William R. Elliott, "Cave Science Topics: Damming Up the Caves," *Caving International Magazine*, Nov. 10, 1981, The Stanislaus River Archive, stanislausriver.org/document/damming-up-the-caves-1981-article-on-caves-lost-to-new-melones/.

⁴⁴³ Larry Orman, Photograph of Mark Dubois, morning above Duck Bar, looking upriver, circa Aug. 10, 1980, Stanislaus River Archive, stanislausriver.org/document/article-part-1-last-run-for-the-stanislaus-cover/. According to note in archival data, this photo was taken with journalists writing an article on the Stanislaus which ran in *California Today* on Aug. 10, 1980.

⁴⁴⁴ Cassidy Et al., *A Guide to Three Rivers*.

⁴⁴⁵ Montgomery, "The Fig Tree."

which he now remembered when seeing the fig tree he planted on his own property upon the birth of his child.⁴⁴⁶

Like Lloyd Damin's trip into the Emigrant Wilderness, the resting spot at Duck Bar demonstrates ways in which the Stanislaus River canyon fits the cult of wilderness that emerged earlier in the century. Those same ideas, explored by historian Roderick Nash, contributed to the construction of wilderness along this riparian landscape in the 1960s and 1970s. Like the Emigrant as a fishing paradise for horse packers, the Stanislaus was largely known as a destination for recreation with whitewater boating dominating use and management in the canyon. Those boaters would experience a uniquely tactile and sensory relationship with the river's hydrology, both flowing with the water and fighting against it as they and their guides navigated it. Boating down the canyon would also mimic and reify aspects of the North American colonial project, like expeditions down the continent's great rivers by surveyors and explorers. The Stanislaus River rafters similarly reproduced the legacies of that colonial project – if unknowingly – as part of an environmentalist movement which long directed the priorities and values of American wilderness preservation.⁴⁴⁷

And yet, the rafting itself served as a kind of spatial framework for those environmentalists' own attempts to – however problematically – undermine that colonial legacy. For rafters, the river functioned as a pluralistic, outdoor museum that spotlighted and represented the region's multiethnic histories. Like the Emigrant Wilderness, the Stanislaus canyon would be both symbol and preserved slice of a long-gone frontier in the form of this imagined outdoor museum. Instead of completely erasing non-white legacies, the highlights of this experience went beyond a Eurocentric gold rush heritage to include multiracial and indigenous histories. Yet in the tradition of other European and American institutions of public memory, this natural museum through its implicit curation and explicit program would simultaneously legitimize those diverse histories while objectifying the traces left behind by the peoples who lived them. This was especially true with the canyon's indigenous heritage, which rafters would at times see, touch, imagine and romanticize as part of their mapped and scripted trip down the wild river. As with Montgomery imagining a Chinese immigrant utopia in the shade of the Duck Bar fig tree, the Stanislaus' rafters could both embrace and caricature objects of native culture with rafting as the ritualized framework to interpret these artifacts and settings. In turn, the peoples who created and used those objects and their settings would be interpreted both as part of nature and part of a static past instead of the living heritage of contemporary culture.

Finally, as with the Emigrant's awe-inspiring peaks and sweeping landscape vistas, the Stanislaus wilderness experience was an aesthetic one defined by rugged, Western beauty among the limestone cliffs and rushing water. The recreationists and

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁷ DeLuca and Deno, "Imagining Nature and Erasing Class and Race;" Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces*; Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness;" Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature*; Walter, "Settler colonialism and the violent geographies of tourism in the California redwoods;" Spence, "Dispossessing the Wilderness."

activists who sought to preserve this place considered it to be a slice of wild land in need of protection – an identity that mostly wouldn't conflict in their imaginations with its identities as an outdoor history museum or as an environment shaped by human engineering and labor. The canyon's picturesque scenes highlighted the verticality of the central Sierra, and its depiction by advocates would center a perceived spiritual connectiveness found within free-flowing river systems. Like with the museums to which this wild river was compared, and at times upon which the experiences of its visitors were modeled, the verticality and spirituality would create echoes of the monumental architecture and allusions to secular temples that are ubiquitous in the aesthetic discourse of museums. But this aesthetic experience also highlighted ambivalence, tension and problematic relationships between environmentalism and American indigeneity. Attempts to incorporate native worldviews and spirituality also resulted in essentialized romanizations of generic Indian spirituality and balance with nature, ultimately setting the campaigns to preserve the river apart from contemporary indigenous efforts to assert their own interests and maintain living connections with their own cultural heritage.

This chapter is an exploration of the Stanislaus River canyon that was constructed by the 1970s as a typical American wilderness. It will discuss the ways in which this river canyon fit Nash's definition of the American wilderness cult thanks to the capital, labor and ideological devotion to high modernism discussed in previous chapters. The river canyon, managed by the Bureau of Land Management in the 1970s, was by that decade the most popular destination for whitewater boating in the American West thanks to its location near major population centers in central California, to the access granted through reliable roads, and to the relatively predictable water flows from upstream dams and ditches. While many did visit the river for other reasons – research, fishing, hiking, mining for hobby – the increasingly popular recreational activity of whitewater rafting and kayaking dominated the identity of the canyon both for its advocates and its detractors. Yet the common traces left by miners, indigenous people and other figures from the past also informed the canyon's wilderness identity which many saw as one of an outdoor museum where visitors and boaters could touch situated remnants of the region's mythic past. Finally, the river setting with its towering cliffs, deep gorges and rugged solitude would confer a kind of spiritual significance to the place for its regular visitors, who often spoke and wrote of the river canyon as a sacred place in need of protection from the defilement of the modern world. Such visitors would become activists in the high-profile, national effort through the 1970s to protect the river with an official wild and scenic designation. Ultimately, the canyon's wilderness character and identity would be contested politically, rhetorically, legally and through other processes as the prioritization of purity became a more prominent influence on wilderness ideals.

“A lavish gift for capturing hearts:” Whitewater boating on the Stanislaus River

Most written profiles of the Stanislaus River focus on the river between Camp Nine and Parrotts Ferry. And often, this literature opens with the main storyteller and others in a vehicle on their way to Camp Nine along the only available road. “With

nineteen other initiates, I rattled over cattleguards and dropped into potholes that jarred my teeth,” wrote longtime professional river guide Rebecca Lawton. “A rough way to travel, hard on my teenaged dignity. Still, I felt glorious in the spring sun, wearing bikini top and cutoff jeans, making my first trip to a wild river.” Lawton’s first sight of the Stanislaus would come from high above, as the road slowly wound to the bottom of the canyon – “a long blue being flexing at the bottom of a steep canyon, where white shallows pulsed in the sun and indigo pools lay back in cliff shadow.” This was a place with “a lavish gift for capturing hearts.”⁴⁴⁸ Sometimes, the stories would begin at the end of that road. Tim Palmer, an author and longtime advocate for wild rivers, opened his book on the Stanislaus at Camp Nine where river rafter and activist Catherine Fox loaded up trip materials: “black waterproof duffels piled waist high, metal coolers that require two people to heft, army surplus ammunition cans for watches and cameras, the essential bailing bucket, an air pump in case our raft springs a leak, oars stacked like slabwood. The makings of a raft trip,” Palmer stated in 1979. “We are only one in a scene in the frenzy of activity at Camp Nine,” he later continued. “Incongruously for the entrance to an American Wilderness, the place hums high with human energy.”⁴⁴⁹

The approximately 9-to-10 miles of river canyon between that site at Camp Nine and the recreation area at Parrotts Ferry were only a small slice of the entire Stanislaus River system. Approximately 161 miles in total, the river drains a 1,195 square mile watershed⁴⁵⁰ covering multiple geographies and ecosystems from the spine of the Sierra crest to the lowlands of the Great Central Valley where the Stanislaus coalesces with the San Joaquin River. In all these stretches, there are many points of tourist interest and popularity: Kennedy Meadows, the Clark Fork and Strawberry in the high country; Melones, or the isolated South Fork via Italian Bar elsewhere in the foothills; the scenic Knights Ferry and Caswell State Park in the lowlands. While all these spots draw visitors for a variety of uses, the run from Camp Nine to Parrotts Ferry held the most interest of anywhere on the river, because of non-motorized, downriver boating, a form of outdoor recreation that grew in popularity through the 1960s. By the middle of the 1970s, thousands of people annually descended into the Stanislaus canyon to ride the rapids, whether they paid one of the many professional guide outfits or tested the waters on their own. Many of them went on to become guides and hobbyists on whitewater around the country. (See Figure 68)

Whitewater boating is unique among outdoor activities in that it creates for its practitioner an active, physical connection to the hydrology and geography of the river. The river current propels the boats, which boaters navigate through the hazards of boulders, holes, swift currents, eddies and falls using only body power and paddles. California whitewater is typically located in the mountains, making its temperatures frigid even into the summer due to its recent state as either snowmelt or water from the

⁴⁴⁸ Rebecca Lawton, *Reading Water: Lessons from the River* (Sterling: Capital Books, 2002), xiii.

⁴⁴⁹ Palmer, *Stanislaus*, 1-2.

⁴⁵⁰ NATIONAL OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION, “NOAA Fisheries, San Joaquin River Basin,” [fisheries.noaa.gov/west-coast/habitat-conservation/san-joaquin-river-basin#stanislaus-river](https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/west-coast/habitat-conservation/san-joaquin-river-basin#stanislaus-river).

bottom of deep reservoirs. This setup requires whitewater enthusiasts to be closely attuned to the river's conditions, as successfully navigating the water means a negotiation between the powers of the water and the people on it. The angle of approaches to rapids – called by one boater on the Stanislaus the “ferry angle”⁴⁵¹ – can make or break a run and be the difference between a smooth ride or an icy spill. A rafter cannot dominate the river but must be able to “read the water,”⁴⁵² with that legibility producing knowledge for where and how to move the craft along the perpetually flowing surface. One social scientist who completed a modern analysis of ecotourism in the form of whitewater boating explained one of the central experiences of the activity as achieving “flow.” Such a transcendent experience, he stated, involves: “extreme focus; a feeling of unity between oneself and the rest of the universe; a sense of wholeness and integrity; lack of awareness of the passage of time; spontaneous visceral reaction; intense pleasure.” This term as he described it easily translates to the experience of whitewater boating sought by those on the Stanislaus: “intense presence, a total focus on the moment at hand, resulting in a loss of awareness of extraneous phenomena, both of the passage of time and of oneself as a distinct, separate entity.”⁴⁵³ With connective and transcendent personal experiences defining river rafting, whitewater boating became popular especially among environmentalists and wilderness protectionists who increasingly sought such to connect with the country's dwindling wild places.

Achieving this “flow” on the Stanislaus River was out of reach to many Americans until the 1960s. Though downriver boating was practiced as a form of outdoor recreation, it was often limited to some of the more extreme thrill seekers on experimental boats, or to canoeists on more placid rivers like the lower Stanislaus. In the 1950s, Sierra Club members started exploring some of America's swifter rivers using kayaks that were increasingly popular in Europe and formed a River Touring Section of the environmental organization.⁴⁵⁴ A Bay Area chapter of that section organized trips on the Stanislaus putting in at Camp Nine in the early 1960s, though it's not entirely clear when the first organized trip took place. One of those early river riders was Bryce Whitmore, a car racer turned kayaker who turned to swift water rafting in the American West by the late 1950s. Whitmore reportedly first experienced the Stanislaus canyon in 1962, a year after he started heading commercial rafting trips down the Sacramento River. Located below Redding, these Sacramento trips lacked potential as they didn't have much “scenic beauty and whitewater excitement.”⁴⁵⁵ The Stanislaus had both, with the canyon and the Class-III rapids that were exciting but not overwhelming for inexperienced visitors led by guides.

⁴⁵¹ Gallagher, “Why Do They Want to Drown the Stanislaus?”

⁴⁵² Lawton, *Reading Water*, xv.

⁴⁵³ Robert Fletcher, *Romancing the Wild: Cultural Dimensions of Ecotourism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 80-82.

⁴⁵⁴ Dick Lindford, “Bryce Whitmore,” *Halfway to Halfway and Back: More River Stories*, Eds. Bob Volpert and Dick Linford (Bend: Halfway Publishing, 2018), 136.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 139.

But Whitmore, a pioneer in developing whitewater crafts, didn't yet have a boat to successfully take groups onto the river. His 24-foot skiffs constructed with seaplane moorings were not suitable for rough currents and the pontoons he used as rafts were too large for a smaller, more technical river. According to one biographer, nobody was making inflatable rafts for whitewater in the 1960s, so Whitmore experimented with military assault rafts, sea rescue rafts and other surplus equipment during his early years organizing guided trips on the river.⁴⁵⁶ Whitmore's company, Wilderness Water Ways, would see his business grow through the rest of the decade, along with general interest in boating the Stanislaus. Rafting popularity grew, and companies started manufacturing crafts for river running as early as 1964 when Rubber Fabricators – seeing military contracts dry up – designed and completed a line of 14-foot inflatable rafts for Whitmore. Wilderness Water Ways saw their summer-season boaters increase between 1962 and 1968 from 20 to more than 700. By 1972, eight commercial rafting companies operated on the Stanislaus.⁴⁵⁷

These increases corresponded with a general growth in whitewater rafting as a popular sport in the United States from the early 1960s through the 1970s. During this time, rafting “was quickly moving from an esoteric sport for the lunatic fringe to a mainstream recreation,” one writer put it. “Explosion is not too strong a word.”⁴⁵⁸ The popularity in the Stanislaus from Camp Nine to Parrotts Ferry would grow in kind. (See Figure 69) According to a 1973 Bureau of Land Management study on rafting in the canyon, about 12,400 visitors rafted down the Stanislaus from Camp Nine to Parrotts Ferry the year prior thanks to the main rafting companies that were in business on the river. The state study estimated that about 25,000 visitors total boated down the river after expanding the count to include some ancillary guide services as well as private boaters who did not pay for a trip with a company. The study also estimated more than 6,000 users who came for other recreational reasons, like fishing or hiking. The vast majority of those users came between Memorial Day and the second week of September.⁴⁵⁹ The commercial numbers grew by about 1,000 people the next year. According to the BLM, a total of 31,807 people floated down the river in 1973, and recreators who also included hikers, picknickers, gold panners and others generated a total of 71,807 visitor use-days on the same stretch.⁴⁶⁰ A use-day means one person present for up to one-day, so if a person is present for two days they would be counted as two separate visitor use-days. These numbers would only grow through the decade, as the canyon's popularity waxed in part due to its increasingly known status as a threatened river. In 1978, advocates estimated 35,000 boaters a year⁴⁶¹ though argued

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., 139-140.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 139-142.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., 142.

⁴⁵⁹ Brad Welton and Dick Harlow, “California BLM's White Water Use Study,” Sept. 14, 1973, Folsom District, Bureau of Land Management, 6, Box 18, Folder 4, Thorne Gray Collection.

⁴⁶⁰ Welton and Harlow, “White Water Use Study,” 9-10.

⁴⁶¹ Marty Mercado to Col. Kavanaugh, Feb. 5, 1981, Carton 10, Folder 17, Friends of the River Foundation records, BANC MSS 88/25, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

that boating was responsible for as much as 50,000 annual visitor days.⁴⁶² Another Bureau of Land Management Report estimated that in 1978, 39,000 people floated on the Stanislaus, with an additional 50,000 people also swimming, fishing, camping and hiking around the Parrotts Ferry area. The Colorado River at that time was drawing around 12,000 rafters a year, and the Rogue, the Snake and the middle fork of the Salmon rivers saw 8,300, 3,200 and 6,800 people, respectively.⁴⁶³ By 1980, as many as 30 companies were bringing people to Camp Nine, and as many as 60,000 rafters shot down the rapids.⁴⁶⁴ (See Figures 70 and 71) Visitors became so abundant that the Bureau of Land Management implemented a permit system by 1978.⁴⁶⁵

These numbers would help create the stadium-like atmosphere described in 1975 at the river near Parrott's Ferry, with busy weekends portending crowds and sometimes frenzied activity throughout the canyon. At Camp Nine, the traffic and congestion would reach a saturation point by 10 a.m. with cars, trucks and vans parked and rafting groups preparing along either the road or the 25-vehicle lot at the end of the road. "Once the user is on the river, an observer can almost hear a sigh of relief reverberate off the canyon walls," stated one observer.⁴⁶⁶ But even after heading downriver, rafters on busy days would face multiple points of congestion: Rose Creek, where rafters regularly stopped to swim and explore; accessible gravel bars and banks used by groups for lunch; the tops of the larger rapids as boaters jockeyed for position; popular cave sites; and historical sites such as old mining claims.⁴⁶⁷ A 1973 survey found that 15 percent of visitors complained about this aspect of the river, with traffic jams of rubber boats and full pull-off sites typical on a summer weekend. Still, 99 percent of the river guests gave overall positive impressions of the canyon.⁴⁶⁸

Parrotts Ferry, where most rafters finished their trip, was typically the most frenzied and popular point on the Stanislaus. Not only was this the place where most commercial and private rafters ended their runs, but it also was a relatively popular put-in for canoers and less experienced boaters wanting to run the milder, seven-mile stretch of river to the old mining town of Melones at Robinson's Ferry.⁴⁶⁹ "It is not uncommon to see 100-150 people on a Saturday or Sunday milling around the beaches and rocks within 300 yards of Parrotts Ferry Bridge indulging in such activities as picnicking, swimming, fishing, panning for gold, sunbathing, diving off rocks, and shooting the small rapids... in inner tubes,"⁴⁷⁰ one study stated of the site.

⁴⁶² "Fact Sheet Draft: Recreation," n.d. (circa 1978), Carton 10, Folder 17, Friends of the River Foundation records.

⁴⁶³ "Report on the Instream and Recreational Value of the Stanislaus River," Bureau of Land Management, Folsom District, Carton 10, Folder 28, Friends of the River Foundation records.

⁴⁶⁴ Cari Morgan, "A Game Changer for River Protection: The Loss of the Stanislaus," OARS, Angels Camp, June, 2016, oars.com/blog/game-changer-for-river-protection-the-loss-of-the-stanislaus/ .

⁴⁶⁵ "1978 Stanislaus Allocation System," US Department of the Interior, Folsom., n.d. (circa 1977), Carton 10, Folder 16, Friends of the River Foundation records.

⁴⁶⁶ Welton and Harlow, "White Water Use Study," 32-33.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 34-42.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 46-48.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

Even with the crowds and the economic activity, the rafters considered the Stanislaus to be a wild river in need of preservation from modern development. The depths of its limestone cliffs and height of its crags kept the place remote, and even if busy at times it was a rugged place only accessible via the river at Camp Nine or a couple steep, difficult foot trails. The activity of rafting specifically offered a unique river experience wherein enthusiasts interacted with the environment instead of just viewing or dominating it. That position was not limited to rafters, as California's powerful State Water Resources Control board in 1973 called the canyon "a unique asset to the state and the nation," in what was an unprecedented regulatory decision to limit the federal government's ability to inundate it.⁴⁷¹

But uniqueness does not make a place wild, and river advocates consistently referred to the river as a wilderness place because of its canyon environment and the free-flowing water between its banks and canyon walls. Poems, political signs, books and speeches, when discussing and advocating for the Stanislaus River, almost always referred to it as wild or part of a wilderness. The examples are almost endless. "A wild beauty. . . . No master gardener could have planned such a place," Rebecca Lawton called the river canyon of the 1970s in recalling her years as a rafter.⁴⁷² In contrast, "a dam changes everything about a river," Lawton later wrote, calling the damming of a river "death by drowning" while arguing that "nothing in a free-flowing river ever goes to waste."⁴⁷³ Shirts supporting the Stanislaus River campaigns announced, "I'm a wild River Lover!" in 1974 with rafters in the center of the image of a river surrounded by mountains, fishermen and hikers.⁴⁷⁴ Preservationists tried to use federal and state wilderness designations to protect the Stanislaus as wild and scenic, which would not necessarily remove many of its modern trappings but would prioritize the maintenance of a free-flowing corridor for scenic and recreational purposes. As with other places Roderick Nash's "cult" of wilderness, the Stanislaus was a wild river for its fiercest advocates because it was a rafter's paradise.

By the height of its popularity in the 1970s, the Stanislaus River from Camp Nine to Parrotts Ferry had become a place organized through a kind of deterministic experience. The river current and its canyon channel took every visitor on similar rafts in the same direction along the same route, and maps and guidebooks published by public and private sources marked the important sites, stops, rapids and exhibitions along that way.⁴⁷⁵ Those sites and their interpretation came with a kind of curation, from the guidebooks or from the personal guides themselves who would direct rafters to the most interesting artifacts and settings and offer stories of past peoples' works

⁴⁷¹ "Decision 1422: In The Matter of Application 14858, 14859, 19303 and 19304 to Appropriate from the Stanislaus River in Calaveras and Tuolumne Counties," California State Water Resources Control Board, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Petitioner and Applicant, April, 1973, Sacramento, Stanislaus River Archive, stanislausriver.org/document/decision-1422-of-the-state-water-board-1973/.

⁴⁷² Lawton, *Reading Water*, xiv.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

⁴⁷⁴ Don Briggs, Prop. 17 T-Shirt (photograph), Stan River Archive, June 15, 1974, Stanislaus River Archive, stanislausriver.org/story/prop-17-t-shirt-im-a-wild-river-lover/.

⁴⁷⁵ Bureau of Land Management, Stanislaus River Recreation Map; Cassidy Et al., *A Guide to Three Rivers*.

and ways of living in the canyon. Canyon regulars and preservation activists often referred to the place as a unique outdoor museum, one where visitors could experience both human and natural heritage along a wild river. While helping define the river as a wilderness playground, rafting itself would also contribute to that museum-like experience, offering what scholars have referred to as a ritual-like framework that stealthily turned the experience of viewing the canyon's unique objects and interesting settings into an act of construction.

“Miles of River that are like a trip back in time:” The Stanislaus as a symbol of the frontier

Much like with the Emigrant Wilderness, visitors and advocates associated the Stanislaus River canyon with what Nash referred to as America's “frontier and pioneer past,” the “frontier way of life” lived by the people whose traces were left behind along the river, and the kinds of “primitive conditions” that could be contrasted against both modern comforts and modern stresses. The writings and descriptions of the canyon often stressed the river as a place to escape the work-a-day life, and the river would offer to take its visitors back to a mythic past in multiple ways. That past first was experienced in the act of rafting itself, with its non-motorized propulsion in the midst of a picturesque, western landscape recalling the explorative trips down America's major rivers by its most famous and mythologized explorers. However, more instrumental to the canyon's place as a symbol of a lost past were the traces of peoples dating back thousands of years. Like the fabled fig tree of Duck Bar, these traces – grinding holes of the Miwok, the steam donkeys of the Gold Rush, terraces supposedly used by Chinese mining communities – were so central to the wilderness identity of the canyon that advocates used them explicitly as reasons to preserve the river. Preservationists and educators regularly referred to the canyon as an “outdoor museum” and a unique opportunity to see California's frontier history situated among nature. And unlike the Emigrant, which left all but the most minimal presence of native peoples out of its mythic history, the indigenous Miwok peoples were central to this reconstructed past in the Stanislaus canyon. But even with its inclusion, these indigenous histories were often portrayed as static and distant, frozen in the past and no longer vibrant or alive. This was despite contemporary Indian communities actively negotiating over the canyon's future at the same time. Thus, a trip down the river in the canyon was almost like ride at a park, turning back time and offering simultaneously intimate and distant access to people and places of the past.

In some ways, the ride on the raft itself was a trip back in time. In his social study of ecotourism, with emphasis on white-water paddling, scholar Robert Fletcher called the activity and others like it “a romanticized distortion of the historical experiences upon which it is based.”⁴⁷⁶ Trips along a wild river also functioned as immersive trips into the past as they often recalled the early colonial explorations along the world's rivers. Fletcher pointed out in his argument that specifically in the world of white water, enthusiasts and professionals often alluded to such explorers like

⁴⁷⁶ Fletcher, *Romancing the Wild*, 25.

John Wesley Powell, the famous one-armed war veteran who boated down the Colorado River in 1869. “Ecotourists commonly admit to finding inspiration for their endeavors in famous expeditions of the past,”⁴⁷⁷ he wrote. It was common for visitors and writers to associate their experiences on the Stanislaus with leaving behind the trappings and concerns of modernity in exchange for a novel adventure in rudimentary watercraft, where the only forms of power were human labor the water itself. This association between rafting and the past remained despite the rafts themselves being the product of modern invention developed by mid-century recreationists.

These colonial connections were at times explicit, as demonstrated in at least one trip in the 1980s organized by Friends of the River. Formed during the Stanislaus campaign, Friends of the River was a key advocacy group for preserving the canyon that lobbied and campaigned for river conservation through political organization and river trips even after New Melones was completed. In one case, Friends of the River organized a trip reenacting Powell’s Colorado River adventure with participants riding on similar wooden boats along the same stretches of river. (See Figure 75) Attendees could take the trip (a collection of lengthy, multi-day runs down scenic stretches of the Colorado River) with leading river conservationists and hear stories of the river’s history, ecology and hydrology. “Powell’s account of his experience is a classic of adventure literature. Now, 120 years later, a small group of modern travelers will retrace this historic journey,” one flier stated. “Friends of the River hosts this adventure to bring more attention to the current battles to protect the Grand Canyon,” it later continued.⁴⁷⁸ Rafters on the wild Stanislaus by taking similar rides on non-motorized craft would reenact such events, trying to recapture some vision of these rivers before they were conquered by colonization and reshaped by modernity.

But those trips down the Stanislaus also did other kinds of ideological work, as they created an experiential framework through which rafters interpreted the sites, objects and settings from the past. Scholarship on museums in Europe and America has critiqued the idea that museums are passive spaces that simply display important objects with aesthetic and historical value in a neutral setting. Instead, these institutions are analyzed as deeply social places that quietly intervene in the meaning-making systems created by guest, curator and exhibition. One way this occurs is through what academics have referred to as the “ritual” of the museum visit, wherein the arrangement of the objects and the architecture of the building, “organizes the visitor’s experience as a script organizes a performance. By following the architectural script, the visitor engages in an activity most accurately described as a ritual. Indeed, the museum experience bears a striking resemblance to religious rituals in both form and content. ... The visitor is prompted to enact and thereby to internalize the values and beliefs written into the architectural script,”⁴⁷⁹ Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach stated in one museum study. Duncan would expand on this elsewhere, noting how

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 30-31.

⁴⁷⁸ “Relive History in This Reenactment of John Wesley Powell’s Grand Canyon Epic (brochure),” Friends of the River, n.d., Carton 3, Folder 69, Friends of the River Foundation records.

⁴⁷⁹ Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, “The Universal Survey Museum,” *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*, ed. Bettina Messias Carbonel (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 53.

museum rituals are also performative, with that performance carrying a social and individual function that “renews identity or purifies or restores order” and which allows “museum visitors (to) come away with a sense of enlightenment, or a feeling of having been spiritually nourished or restored.”⁴⁸⁰ Such was true on the Stanislaus River, which had its own monumental architecture in the form of canyon vistas and its own architectural script in the form of running the river channel. That script set a ritualistic foundation for visitors viewing the traces of human past and helped elevate those traces to some of the more immediate and powerful symbols of the canyon itself.

Like those around the fig tree at Duck Bar, 19th-Century artifacts and sites were abundant along the canyon. (See Figure 72) Historical items and the places they were found were so ubiquitous that they became important pieces of the canyon environment and central to its identity as a wilderness place. There was the mining cabin of Ad Supan, located at Rose Creek. Those who wished could from the cabin hike up the creek and look for the remains of a claim mined by John Newcomer and Tom Dorsey who eventually broke off their partnership in a gunfight. Rafters who ventured there would have been wise to be careful should they come across abandoned shafts dug for rudimentary quartz mining.⁴⁸¹ At Otter Bar were cabin foundations and the remains of a steam engine used most likely to power a crane to move boulders for mining the site.⁴⁸² At Chinese Camp, deteriorating rock walls marked other diggings sites and the remains of a wagon trail, these walls much less engineered than the cleaner and sturdier rock retaining walls visible to rafters on the Camp Nine Road.⁴⁸³ (See Figure 73) Near the confluence of the Stanislaus River’s southern fork were remains of Pine Log, which at its height was a mining settlement that boasted as many as 1,500 people.⁴⁸⁴ The Three Springs powerhouse, built in 1898, was allegedly the first high-head, hydroelectric generator in the state.⁴⁸⁵ Then there were Abbey’s Ferry, where a pair of circus elephants infamously drowned, and Parrott’s Ferry, legendarily one of the more common hold-up sites for the famous bandit Joaquin Murrieta. The ferries were two of the historic and well-used river crossings before bridges replaced them.⁴⁸⁶ Beyond Parrotts Ferry were even more historic sites, traces and ruins: the remains of a bridge used by the old Sierra Railroad, the old settlement of Horseshoe Bend, multiple more ferries and the foundation of the gold mine mill in the town of Melones.⁴⁸⁷ These sites – mostly from the 19th Century and tied to the region’s mining and ranching heritage – were popular among visitors, many of whom would pull off, hike and explore like the lost ruins of an old civilization.

⁴⁸⁰ Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995), 10-13.

⁴⁸¹ Cassidy Et al., *A Guide to Three Rivers*, 108-109.

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*, 111.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*, 117-118; Craig Rieser, "Rock Walls at Chinese Camp" (photograph), 1976, Stanislaus River Archive, stanislausriver.org/story/rock-walls-at-chinese-camp/; Tim Palmer, "Mining diggings at Upper Chinese Camp" (photograph), 1975, Stanislaus River Archive, stanislausriver.org/story/mining-diggings-at-upper-chinese-camp/.

⁴⁸⁴ Cassidy Et al., *A Guide to Three Rivers*, 118-120.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 121-122..

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 122-123, 128-129.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 131-145.

Those traces of human past according to guides and rafters were very much seen as important parts of the wilderness experience on the Stanislaus River. One guide, named Edward Patrovski, described in 1978 the interpretation of historical and archaeological features of the canyon as a “favorite duty” for him as a rafting guide. “The Stanislaus River is a living museum out in the outdoors, and it's a natural place, and I hope I can keep on interpreting features to passengers,”⁴⁸⁸ Patrovski said, who also used the common comparison between the canyon and an outdoor museum. Curtis Hinman, another river guide on the Stanislaus, described his role as an interpreter of the landscape’s history as one that may surprise people who painted pictures in their minds of a typical whitewater enthusiast as a “thrill seeker.” Interpretive history is “another picture of what I do,” Hinman said. “Children... they get excited,” he continued:

That's a real good time, to take that hike through that meadow, and, say, go to a steam donkey and watch that family, especially the children, playing on that, running through it, through the pipes, exploring. It's what made this thing work. Why was it here? What were the people like when they were mining or building their homes or whatever? You see, they are getting in touch with a past history, our history. Getting in touch with different ways of life, what it was like back then. I sit back and I get tremendous joy out of just watching those people wander and explore those places.⁴⁸⁹

This connection between human heritage and the river’s wild character were so enmeshed that a widely circulated public letter advocating for preserving the canyon directly appealed to it. “The spectacular Stanislaus River canyon is full of limestone cliffs and caves, archeological and historical sites and the most popular whitewater in the West.”⁴⁹⁰ Leading river preservationist David Kay also pointed to the river’s history in his wilderness advocacy. “The rapids of the Stanislaus are not a separate reality,” Kay said during a May 1978 public hearing on the river canyon. “They are part of the marvelously interconnected spectrum of creation, embracing major components of evolution, both natural and human. The white water boater runs the Stanislaus as much to make contact with his or her heritage as to enjoy the excitement of the rapids. Indeed, the river is all the more unique because it offers a natural way to express this heritage.”⁴⁹¹ In many ways, trips down the Stanislaus resembled experiences at historic parks – which themselves often functioned as outdoor museums – with guides telling the stories of people long gone and

⁴⁸⁸ Hearing for the New Melones Project re: cultural mitigation (transcript), Dept. of the Army Corps of Engineers, Angels Camp, May 31, 1978, Box 19, Folder 2, Thorne B. Gray Collection.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁰ Friends of the River to Editor, n.d. (circa 1974), Carton 3, Folder 30, Friends of the River Foundation records.

⁴⁹¹ Hearing for the New Melones Project re: cultural mitigation, Dept. of the Army Corps of Engineers.

their deeds, with little left but the remains of old buildings and some old equipment. These trips took place in settings described as a wild river, and the traces of human past were important parts of that wilderness experience and the character of the place. One guide, Dave Dickson, stated as much:

The historical sites give one an appreciation of what it was like to try and mine gold from that canyon. By walking through the flumes constructed at Chinese Camp, or by looking at the stone roads built along the river, one gains an understanding of these people who came to California in search of gold and who are responsible for what eventually became a society as we know it now in California.⁴⁹²

For those who used them, the regular allusions to museums and the suggestion that the wild Stanislaus also functioned as one helped legitimize both the place on its own and the collection of wilderness exhibits that it boasted. With the rafting course functioning as a kind of ritual foundation of a spatial script for the trip through the canyon, both the place's supposed natural architecture and the artifacts among it were elevated as ideologically important pieces of regional heritage. Just as museums are often held up as secular analogues to temples – sacred establishments within which people perform rituals that inform their collective worldviews – the canyon-turned-museum was regularly described by preservationists in sacred terms, making the artifacts, places, scenes and exhibitions historically significant due to their presence within it. By participating in a kind of museum ritual through their rafting, and observing these sites of regional heritage, visitors were “prompted to enact and thereby to internalize the values and beliefs written into the architectural script” in a way that would equate the objects of their ritual gaze with “traditional ceremonial monuments.”⁴⁹³ The fig tree at Duck Bar, wagon trail at Chinese Camp, or the mining equipment strewn throughout carried increased weight and meaning, infused with “aesthetic and moral powers” by their setting,⁴⁹⁴ which itself legitimized and was legitimized by the objects exhibited. “What is accepted as knowledge, and the power to which many accede, are both easily articulated and constantly affirmed in the exhibitions that museums produce for their visiting publics,” wrote one museum scholar.⁴⁹⁵

In advocating for the canyon's protection, preservationists would work to make that connection between these objects and places, and their socio-political legitimacy, while leveraging the canyon's human history seen in the visible traces of the past. In some cases, they had legislative tools which allowed for categories of waterways to be protected as wild and scenic rivers. In both the California and federal version of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, rivers can be protected in their “free-flowing state” and

⁴⁹² Ibid.

⁴⁹³ Duncan and Wallach, “The Universal Survey Museum,” 53.

⁴⁹⁴ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 13.

⁴⁹⁵ Timothy W. Luke, *Museum Politics: Power Plays at the Exhibition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xiii-xiv.

classified in multiple categories allowing a range of development from “recreational,” to “scenic” to “wild.”⁴⁹⁶ In the federal act, language also allows for a river’s explicitly historical values to qualify for protection,⁴⁹⁷ and Stanislaus advocates embraced those values with campaigns for protection increasingly utilizing the canyon’s rich human history as a rallying cry. During testimony in the House of Representatives, one advocacy group pointed to the canyon as, “one of the best preserved and most valuable concentrations of archaeological remains in the Far West ... 700 archaeological and historic sites have now been identified ... eligible for the National Register of Historic Places...”⁴⁹⁸ Also testifying to the U.S. Congress, Friends of the River representatives pointed to federal protection as a process that would balance the human and ecological functions of the river and allow for this “outdoor museum” to remain accessible. “Is it worth it to this nation to destroy over 400 National Register historical and archaeological sites for a .03 % increase in electrical energy output?”⁴⁹⁹ No longer just a canyon, this stretch of the Stanislaus would carry more ideological heft against the economic logic of use and development when imagined as a temple of heritage.

River preservationists also rallied around historic site research in the reservoir footprint during a time of shifting approaches to cultural resource regulations and mitigation for major dam projects.⁵⁰⁰ Teams of archaeologists and historians combed the canyon ahead of the dam’s completion, and as the scheduled inundation neared, those seeking to keep the river flowing utilized such studies as a “lever” against flooding by calling for delays and threatening legal action to prevent destruction of historical and archaeological sites.⁵⁰¹ The river’s place as a symbol of a mythic American past and its potential as an outdoor museum were not only reconcilable with its identity as a wild river, but they were used strategically in attempts to preserve it as such. With advocates working to discursively transform the canyon into both wild river and outdoor museum, they forced questions over human history and its presence in protected wild places. These conflicts, then, were over what it meant for the

⁴⁹⁶ Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, Pub. L. No. 90-541, (1968), Sec. 1-2, National Wild and Scenic Rivers System (rivers.gov), Wild And Scenic Act and Amendments, rivers.gov/act.php; California Wild and Scenic Rivers Act Enacted 1972, California Legislative Information. Public Resources Code, Div. 5, Sec. 1-3, leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displayText.xhtml?lawCode=PRC&division=5.&title=&part=&chapter=1.4.&article .

⁴⁹⁷ Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, 1968. Sec. 1.

⁴⁹⁸ Comments on Stanislaus River Wild and Scenic System Values, Heritage, Conservation and Recreation Service, National Parks and Insular Affairs Subcommittee of the House Interior and Insular Affairs Committee, Aug. 25, 1980, Box 29, Folder 1, Thorne B Gray Collection.

⁴⁹⁹ Testimony of Patricia Schifferle, Heritage, Conservation and Recreation Service, National Parks and Insular Affairs Subcommittee of the House Interior and Insular Affairs Committee. Aug. 22, 1980, Box 29, Folder 1, Thorne B. Gray Collection.

⁵⁰⁰ James West, “New Melones – Public Interpretation of the Archaeological-Historical Record,” *Dam Good Archaeology: The Bureau of Reclamation’s Cultural Resources Program*, 23: 1, 31.

⁵⁰¹ Ward Sinclair “U.S. Reservoir Becoming Test of Historic Preservation Law,” *Washington Post*, March 11, 1979; Yvonne Baskin, “Archaeological Sites Offer Last Hope to Halt Flooding,” *The San Diego Union*, Nov. 11, 1979; Thorne Gray, “Melones Digging, Archaeologists want to start over,” *Modesto Bee*, Nov. 15, 1979.

Stanislaus to be wild in the first place and whether that meaning should include organized traces of human heritage.

This relationship between the wild character of the Stanislaus canyon and its embodiment of America's mythical past in many ways mirrored that of the Emigrant Wilderness. For both, 19th Century expansion played an important role in the heritage-based identity of the places – gold mining for the canyon, and emigrant wagon trains in the high country. Seeing and touching traces of those pasts functioned as common and integral wilderness experiences for visitors. But a major difference remained – the centrality of indigenous people in those identities and experiences. The Emigrant Wilderness' narratives of the country's lost frontier seemed to have little space for the native peoples who traversed those mountains, creeks and lakes. Stanislaus rafters instead embraced the canyon's rich and long indigenous past and used it to construct its wildness identity. But they would try to do so without shedding the weight and baggage they also carried of the region's colonial past. While centering the canyon's indigenous legacy and working to legitimize it as an important part of the identity of both a wild river and outdoor museum, river activists also romanticized and objectified physical indigenous artifacts and images of indigenous spirituality, appropriating them into the cause to save the Stanislaus. Indigeneity itself became part of the natural aesthetics of the wild river, reflecting a long history of American conservationists and the perpetuation of racial ideologies of settler colonialism.

“A spiritual basis, and a heavy existential foundation:” Aesthetics and indigeneity along the river

Visitors didn't even have to get to the river before coming across its indigenous history, as the river's name is a reference to a man who led an indigenous resistance in the 1820s. Named after a Polish saint, Estanislao was raised at Mission San Jose before he and a group of Yokuts, Wintus and other regional peoples held off multiple military advances organized by the Mexican government along the labyrinthine wetlands and thick, riparian woodlands of the river's lower stretches.⁵⁰² That native heritage stretched backwards and forwards as well, with human habitation dating back as far as 8,000 years according to archaeological evidence⁵⁰³ and continuing well after the genocidal violence and traumas brought to the region by the Gold Rush. Indigenous groups settled and harvested food along the river's entire stretches, with bands of Yokuts and Miwok peoples being the dominant linguistic groups when the Spanish arrived. Those groups would at times find shelter from colonial violence and illness in the steep and rugged canyons, parts of the river utilized for seasonal hunting or processing the food staple acorns as well as a handful of more permanent villages.⁵⁰⁴

⁵⁰² Sanchez and Pina, “The Revolt of Estanislao;” Bauer, “First People: Estanislao.”

⁵⁰³ Michael J. Moratto, “Cultural History of the New Melones Reservoir Area, Calaveras and Tuolumne Counties, California,” *Essays in California Archaeology: A Memorial to Franklin Fenenga, Contributions of the University of California Archaeological Research Facility*, 60, 2002, 25-54.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

Those peoples also left behind traces along the canyon, spanning spatially both from above Camp Nine to near the mining town of Melones and ranging temporally from the earliest inhabitation through today. Those traces for many who visited the canyon were important pieces of the recreational river experience. Perhaps the most common examples of this were the grinding holes found throughout the canyon along the rocky, riverside outcrops. These holes were communal mills, scattered along the river but easy to find in many places, typically located at sites of both seasonal and permanent habitation. The acorn has long been a food staple for central Californian peoples, though it requires grinding and boiling to leech out unwanted chemicals in the nut and create a meal for bread. This process took place on the rocky banks of the Stanislaus, with people grinding the nuts with smooth cobbles and creating mortar holes that remain today. (See Figure 80)

Visitors and river advocates regularly cited such holes as windows into the past, often describing the grinding rocks as quintessential sights to experiencing the human history of the Stanislaus. “By sitting at an Indian grindstone, looking at the free-flowing river, under the shade of a live oak, which may have at one time provided the acorns for this Indian grindstone, one gains a unique insight into the particular site that transcends time; it is a sense of sharing that cannot be obtained by any museum or any roadside historical marker,” said one river advocate Dave Dickson.⁵⁰⁵ Terri Church, another river recreationist, offered a similar vision. “To sit on the edge of the riverbank and being surrounded by oak trees, and to discover an old Indian grinding stone in the natural environment is a learning experience that is incomparable to otherwise seeing this grinding stone sitting stagnant in a showcase of a museum,” she said in 1978.⁵⁰⁶ Much like the traces left from gold miners who came west as part of American expansion, rafters described the experience of seeing and touching these traces of indigenous life in their environmental contexts to be integral to the wild river experience. Drawing on the idea of the canyon as a museum-like place, they claimed the heritage value of these materials rivaled that of any formally curated materials and artifacts in their comparisons to the river and those institutions of collective memory.

The important role of the indigenous peoples in this wilderness heritage along the Stanislaus wasn't solely represented by these grinding holes in the riverside rocks. Various materials published for river runners and advocates feature Miwok sites, lore and stories. A popular guidebook for rafters on the river highlighted Miwok history throughout its pages, and the book even included a recipe for acorn-based foods long made alongside the river.⁵⁰⁷ A poster map sold to raise funds for campaigns located the river's cultural sites and heritage, featuring indigenous stories and images throughout.⁵⁰⁸ (See Figure 74) And a regular destination for rafters and hikers in the canyon was a collection of rock paintings, the petroglyphs having most likely having been either etched into the riverside boulders by the regional ancestors of the Miwok

⁵⁰⁵ Hearing for the New Melones Project re: cultural mitigation, Dept. of the Army Corps of Engineers.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁷ Cassidy Et al., *A Guide to Three Rivers.*, 3-8 115-116, 131-133.

⁵⁰⁸ The Mapmakers, "The Stanislaus River – a poster map," 1978, Stanislaus River Archives, stanislausriver.org/story/the-stanislaus-river-a-poster-map-image-only/

peoples or by other peoples who also used the river corridor for food and trade. (See Figure 80)

Educator and nearby resident Melinda Wright perhaps best described this indigenous cultural landscape when advocating for river protection. As the Mother Lode region – a common term for the Sierra’s central foothills – continued to grow and become populated with transplants and through unchecked modern development, it was important to keep places like the Stanislaus River wild not just to preserve an outdoor playground but to maintain an environmental archive, Wright would say.

We have miles of river that are like a trip back in time. In the canyon we see and feel the same things the original Californians saw; the climate, the insects, the plants. We experience the changes brought on by each season, unaltered by the inventions of man. One site especially illustrates my point. There is a grinding stone a few miles below Parrotts Ferry that is under the water most of the year. That grinding stone was used in the fall and winter, but not needed in the spring. What is there in any interpretive center or museum that can strike us so forcefully with the feeling of living by the seasons?⁵⁰⁹

For Wright, the grinding rocks were just pieces of a larger socio-environmental landscape, one that could remind its visitors of past relationships between peoples and natures. The Miwoks who lived in and maintained these landscapes were central to Wright’s vision of the canyon, inextricable from the cultural heritage and wilderness character of this place. And trips running down the river were opportunities to step back to these lost times and places.

Between pieces of the Stanislaus canyon’s mining heritage and the traces of its indigenous history, the river for those who visited it was a strong symbol of the past. Children could play along the steam donkeys used by argonauts in the river’s gravel bars. Visitors could sit among the riverside grinding rocks and muse about the native peoples who used them before their culture and the natural places where they lived and worked were irrevocably changed by the engineering and extraction brought west to violently supplant them. With such human history and cultural resources of the past situated in their environmental context, visitors and advocates would describe the canyon regularly as an outdoor museum where one could take a trip backwards in time to experience with their senses these mythologized moments of westward expansion when the onslaught of industrialized modernity had yet to change the social and natural environments of the West.

And yet their place in a wild river museum also created a problem, as the preservationist rafters in these instances were both objectifying native heritage in ways that decontextualized the meanings of these items and settings and appropriated them into a new ideological struggle for wilderness preservation. Imagining the river as a museum in turn created objects out of these artifacts and settings of indigenous

⁵⁰⁹ Hearing for the New Melones Project re: cultural mitigation, Dept. of the Army Corps of Engineers.

history. The museum, if nothing else, is a “treasure house” along with being an “educational instrument” and “secular temple” – a place where people go with the expectation of looking at “visually interesting objects”⁵¹⁰ taken out of their original contexts often through violence or force. In the case of the wild river museum of the Stanislaus, the objects – be they grinding rocks, petroglyphs (See Figure 80) or others – remained in their physical contexts. But the new historical and cultural contexts of the wild river changed what they signified, as the meaning of a museum object represents a kind of interplay between the ideas, values, and purposes of three sources: the culture from which the object comes, the arrangers of the exhibition (here, the system of guides, maps and leaders that direct the museum ritual), and the viewers themselves (with all their “cultural baggage of un-systematic ideas, values and, yet again, highly specific purposes”).⁵¹¹

Through these systems of signification, preservationists would impose their own ideas of spirituality and aesthetic value onto these indigenous items and settings, appropriating them as part of a wilderness environment where the indigenous legacy was simultaneously part of a static, dead past and free to be used by a new generation of mostly white adventurers. Preservation advocates would use these objects and settings as resources, leveraging those resources as part of the process to protect the river as wild while also appropriating them with the canyon’s unique and ruggedly inspiring scenery to construct a kind of aesthetic and spiritual identity for the wild river. This objectification and appropriation – despite the romanticization and seemingly positive intentions by the preservationists – would in turn obscure the legacies of colonial violence and subjugation that helped facilitate wilderness conditions in the canyon. The spiritual and aesthetic significance of the indigenous artifacts, settings and general presence in the canyon for river preservationists would at times diverge from their significance for contemporary indigenous communities, who would pursue negotiations with federal authorities over their ancestral sites on their own terms.

Around 1978, environmentalist, river advocate and filmmaker named Don Briggs made a short documentary on the Stanislaus River canyon. The opening two minutes offered what amounted to the quintessential aesthetic components of the wild river. Brief shots clearly out of the river canyon, each a few seconds in length, alternated between scenes of flowing water. Some of the water trickled along at a leisurely pace, while some rushed and roared with foamy white over boulders. Above the water were canyon walls, some made up of towering, vertical limestone crags and peaks, while others were more gradual inclines covered in oaks, pines and grasses. The sounds of birds singing and rushing water mingled with the circular, rolling strum of a guitar. Unidentified voices started a verse over the images, clips and sounds. “It starts in the mountains as just a small trickle a few drops of fresh melted snow / Jumps o’er the boulders, laughin’ and playin’ as it heads for the valley below / The Stanislaus

⁵¹⁰ Michael Baxandall, “Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects,” *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 33-34.

⁵¹¹ *Ibid.*

River so wild and so free / I hope for all times that you will be / A free flowing river that men cannot end / I'll remember you always my friend," sang one. "It's hard to find a more beautiful setting in the entire mother lode area of California. It's a natural canyon. The hills are verdant and green in the springtime. It's an incredibly beautiful area to explore," spoke another, softly, as if to mind its manners amid the sounds of the river and the critters. "The Stanislaus is unique above all other rivers," stated a third, more official voice.⁵¹² Though just one piece of just one film, Briggs' opening to *Parrott's Ferry is the Limit* highlights two of the dominant themes found in the myriad poems, photographs, stories and songs produced by wild river enthusiasts to highlight the river's wild character: the deep, canyon scenery, and its river's free-flowing water.

These two elements, the frenetic and foaming water constantly moving with trickles and rushes, and the steep, towering and picturesque mountains landscapes as viewed from the bottom of the thousand-foot gorge, made up much of the Stanislaus Canyon's aesthetic identity as a wilderness place. Much like the Emigrant Basin, though in different ways, the environment was dominated by water and rock, with forested groves and grassy meadows adding variation and texture to the landscape. Such scenes would rival those referenced by Roderick Nash when discussing the aesthetic component of the American cult of wilderness. This was undoubtedly "wild scenery," as Roderick Nash called the images of mountains and rivers during the turn of the 20th Century and beyond that "enthralled Americans."⁵¹³

Yet, such scenery and flowing water were not the beginning or end of the canyon's pull for those who loved it and worked to preserve it. Like with the Emigrant Wilderness, that scenery would merge with its more human, historical and mythical elements to form its unique aesthetic appeal. While the Emigrant drew on its pioneer, cowboy cultural roots, heavily romanticized by American tourism, the Stanislaus canyon had a more spiritual element for many of its advocates. This spiritual element drew on romanticized and essentialized images of native peoples, their perceived connectedness with nature, and their supposed settings in pre-modern Edenic paradise. With this, rafters and wild river advocates would cast the river as a uniquely sacred place, one that was "a source of beauty and spiritual truth."⁵¹⁴

In many ways, that spirituality materialized in the form of river advocates imagining an existential connection between themselves and the indigenous Americans they constructed as part of the canyon's past. The river for some of these advocates was not just a museum, or even a trip back in time, but a place where one could have a kind of uncanny, transcendent experience more closely connecting them to nature. In imagining these connections, they created romanticized visions of indigenous peoples being much closer to nature than the place's more modern, or historic, inhabitants. Melinda Wright alluded to this spiritual connection when expanding her statements about Miwok grinding stones. Beyond those traces, she

⁵¹² *Parrots Ferry is the Limit*, Directed by Don Briggs (Friends of the River, 1976), 18:44, film accessed through YouTube (youtu.be/z9ih3F1svec) and Stanislaus River Archive (<https://www.stanislausriver.org/document/link-to-full-version-of-parrotts-ferry-is-the-limit-movie/>).

⁵¹³ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 157.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

stated, visitors would connect with the “true materials of Miwok culture” like buckeye or willow trees, manzanita and elderberry bushes.

It is possible to get a feeling for the past, to sense that people once lived very differently than we live and yet we are still very real people, to stretch our minds and our vision beyond the way things are now, to appreciate the vast range of human experience, to see ourselves in a broader context. We need this sense of alternative, this sense of what was and what could be, ... It makes me feel better to know that our own way of life has not intruded everywhere and wipes out all vestigates of the past. ... Here, as in so few other places, a person who called the place home a thousand years ago would still recognize it today.⁵¹⁵

Though not directly described as spiritual, Wright’s experience connecting with a native American past in the canyon was part of a larger experience connecting with a more natural world, one where material culture was forged straight from the land and plants. Much like sitting in the presence of other spiritual forces, experiencing that connection with one’s own senses allowed visitors to stretch their mind and imagine new, alternative ways of knowing how to be in the world.

Mark Dubois, the Stanislaus Canyon’s most iconic activist, described that connection in even more uncanny and spiritual terms. While the whitewater was often a “magic experience” for people, there was something else – something more difficult to put into words – that made the place wild and unique. “There's so much more magic and so many things going on there. There's our heritage. Our touch with the past. ... Our touch with the Native Americans, and how they lived much more lightly on the land than us, and (it's) locked up in the middens of old Miwoks,” he said in 1979, not long after chaining himself to the riverbed in protest of its inundation. “I think touching those things, as well as all the flora and fauna, all the little critters that live there, all the wildflowers that live there ... it's something only seeing and touching it will let you know really what those things are. ... We seek words, any culture seeks words to understand what it can't know. And it's obvious that ‘Mother Nature’ is our only way (of) describing that which we know is there, and yet we've been out of touch with.”⁵¹⁶ Dubois had just days prior to that statement made the following in relation to the idea of filling the New Melones Reservoir: “Of course you couldn’t agree when I asked what reason there could be to destroy this priceless canyon before we stop that waste and see what we really need. Who said ‘We are not yet so poor that we that we

⁵¹⁵ Hearing for the New Melones Project re: cultural mitigation, Dept. of the Army Corps of Engineers.

⁵¹⁶ Coni Beeson, “Mark Dubois statement after chaining,” recorded June 4, 1979, streaming audio, on SoundCloud and Stanislaus River Archive, stanislausriver.org/story/mark-dubois-statement-after-chaining/.

must burn our cathedrals for firewood?’ They were accurate.”⁵¹⁷ For both Wright and Dubois, the connection to a lost past – a pre-modern, more natural past personified by the native peoples who left their traces behind while maintaining a closer connection to wild nature – was a formative piece of the Stanislaus’ unique wilderness character.

A large, public art piece produced in 1979 materially linked the spiritual component of the canyon’s wilderness aesthetic and romanticized images of indigenous peoples. (See Figure 76) Local artist Richard Close led the piece’s construction, which included a large, circular clay sculpture, designing it to be an installation set in the canyon and eventually covered by the reservoir waters. He called it “Timepiece,” intending the piece to be a modern form of the ancient indigenous rock paintings for future generations to find if and when the river ever ran through the canyon again. From its inception and construction, its material and design, Close’s “Timepiece” was to be a physical manifestation of the spiritual connection between the river preservationists and the past peoples of the river. It was a piece of “shamanistic art,” one that was made of clay for its “primitive, basic properties,” and was meant to be one of the many “fragments” of the canyon’s lost past along with the rock art and other traces left behind. “We attempt to find wholeness by piecing together the fragments of our ancestors,” Close said. “Petroglyphs are mostly known for the unknowness. We know nothing about them. Except that some aborigine inscribed at some time in history on the banks of the Stanislaus River a bunch of images on rock. ... We are so easily susceptible to that kind of thing because we really want connection to that. We just must have it. And we don't. So when we see a signature from thousands of years ago, we just look in awe.”

This piece was meant to be a similar signature, one that has “a spiritual basis, and a heavy existential foundation” almost as long across as a man, bearing images of the river, the canyon, of human hands with open palms. Inscribed on it were words of connection, a prayer etched into the clay: “O River of Time / O Children of the Future / We, the natives of troubled waters / pay tribute to you / and to our first brothers and / sisters of this sacred land. / When the river is again wild, / then we shall all sit / in council / Peace / Be with us.” Close and a group of river advocates dedicated the piece in an undisclosed location along the river in the early summer weeks of 1979, holding a kind of baptism and prayer. “The time piece asks the question, ‘Why are we here? And what are we doing to our earth?’ Close would say. “We look at the distant past and see those brothers and sisters who lived there. We are the same race. The same people. And we look at ourselves, and see that we are natives. This is our land. Our home. That we are not merely residents, but we are natives. We live here.”⁵¹⁸

The statements of Wright and Dubois, as well as the artwork of Close, are just some examples of how a generic notion of indigenous peoples’ connection to nature informed the Stanislaus Canyon’s wilderness aesthetic. River advocates would point to

⁵¹⁷ Mark Dubois, “A Letter to Colonel O’Shei, US Army Corps of Engineers,” May 20, 1979, Stanislaus River Archive, stanislausriver.org/story/a-letter-to-colonel-oshea-us-army-corps-of-engineers-from-mark-dubois/.

⁵¹⁸ *Time Piece*, Produced by Martin Blake (Mother Lode Media, 1979), from DVD Copy. All quotes from previous paragraph taken from this film.

the traces of indigenous presence, the river's wild character and their own ideas about environmental advocacy as part of a vague, but connected, history of living in harmony with nature. Much like the static histories told by plundered objects in a museum, such a history would be set apart from modern ways of living and understanding the world. These notions painted past native inhabitants as essentialized, romantic ideals of peoples who held more balanced relationships to the wild, and thus were themselves more natural. They also appropriated the canyon's indigenous past into a political fight for wilderness preservation, rhetorically placing contemporary environmentalists side-by-side with past indigenous communities as either people with a similar lineage or at least another group working to re-capture a piece of that essence.

But this was not the first instance in the region of public land preservation advocates appropriating generic ideas about indigenous cultures into their visions of ideal nature. Historian Mark Spence's study of Yosemite's Indians tracks how an indigenous community persisted in the Yosemite Valley through its growth as a tourism destination until the 1930s. A group associated with the Southern Sierra Miwok clans often called the Ahwahneechee became "integrated into the tourist economy"⁵¹⁹ shortly after the Mariposa Battalion drove a number of them out in 1851, holding together livelihoods as service workers and guides for the iconic park's earliest tourists. These arrangements, which lasted into the 20th Century, allowed them to maintain connections with their homelands and exert cultural and economic autonomy in a rapidly changing social and environmental landscape. Yet those options were only confined to the service of growing white populations and visitors. This setup would be largely reproduced throughout the region,⁵²⁰ almost certainly including in the Stanislaus canyon, though Yosemite served as a less hostile place for the indigenous people living and working there than the rougher parts of the region. The park's physical remoteness and its establishment as a symbol for wilderness preservation meant its native inhabitants would both be less threatening and would serve as novel attractions for patronizing white tourists seeking an authentic Western experience.⁵²¹ In the words of Spence, "The association of Native Americans with wilderness (in Yosemite) was especially strong in the minds of early tourists."⁵²²

That association went a long way in helping create an anomaly in Indian relations during the early years of managing state and national parks. Park officials not only allowed them to maintain a presence in the increasingly popular Yosemite Valley, but park managers early on recognized a "moral right"⁵²³ to the land held by these groups. Yet that right came with significant caveats as time passed, largely that the remaining native presence be part of the natural spectacle of Yosemite in their deeds and appearance. According to Spence, "By the end of the century, Indians had become an important part of the Yosemite experience for tourists, whether as laborers in the

⁵¹⁹ Spence, "Dispossessing the Wilderness," 32.

⁵²⁰ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵²² *Ibid.*, 34-35.

⁵²³ *Ibid.*, 41, 52,

tourist industry or as an authenticating aspect of a tourist's encounter with the 'wilderness.'"⁵²⁴ The price for being able to stay in their homelands after those lands became a nature preserve was to allow themselves to be essentialized as authentic parts of nature itself and become part of the scenery with their own "exotic naturalness."⁵²⁵ But that association between the Indians and the wilderness brought with it a problem beyond the dehumanizing element of essentializing the native community as part of nature. After Yosemite came under federal management in the 1890s, questions by visitors and managers about the local Indians' place in the valley would grow. Those questions were often associated with their perceived incompatibility with the emerging wilderness ideals, whether tied to dressing, hunting, or comporting themselves in ways the tourists and park managers didn't find authentically Indian⁵²⁶ or wild enough. "The longer the Yosemite persisted in the park and refused to 'vanish,' the more such attitudes became commonplace and began driving park policy and eclipsing concerns about the Indians' 'moral right.'"⁵²⁷

The relationship between the preservationists in the Stanislaus canyon and the place's indigenous past resembles in many ways the relationship between Yosemite Indians and the park's managers and visitors. One exception is significant, though, as the canyon's visitors and the curators of its supposed museum built this relationship with material traces of an indigenous past, whereas in Yosemite that relationship was with living native people. But many of those dynamics remain comparable, between the objectification of indigeneity as an observable novelty, the romanticization of the balance and spirit of a kind of generic indigenous culture, or the essentialization of Indians as uniquely natural by associating them with the place's very wildness. In both instances, visitors, leaders and tourists centered indigenous people and cultures as part of a place's identity and character in new and unprecedented ways. But actual Indian communities lost agency and control over their own identities and heritages, as these were assimilated and shaped to suit the interests and ideologies associated with wilderness preservation in ways that would obscure the foundations and erase the legacies of colonial violence upon which the preservation movement could be built.

In the Stanislaus canyon, these divergent interests were evident as those native communities contemporary to the Stanislaus preservationists interacted and negotiated with dam builders. Rafters, hikers and cavers may have viewed the grinding rocks and rock art to be part of a trip back in time that forged a spiritual connection to nature. In that, the inundation to the canyon was the destruction of a heritage of which they imagined themselves to be spiritually a part. But the Miwok peoples who still lived in and around the Stanislaus watershed during the New Melones campaigns had other priorities, especially concerning the remains of their actual ancestors and those of larger geographical networks of indigenous communities. In the case of New Melones, they asserted some agency in ways that diverged from the dwindling Indians of

⁵²⁴ Ibid., 38.

⁵²⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁵²⁶ Ibid., 47. For visitors and park managers, this included a more "generic representation of plains Indian culture."

⁵²⁷ Ibid., 42.

Yosemite in the 1930s. The local bands of Miwoks who remained living in the region were not vocal or official supporters of the dam, which makes sense considering the contentious relationship between federal reclamation agencies and indigenous peoples. But as dam completion inched closer, and inundation of the area seemed increasingly likely, local Miwoks and other indigenous groups pursued negotiations with the federal government specifically focused on how to deal with the problem of burial sites and sacred caves being subjected to archaeological excavation and eventual inundation. By the late 1970s, teams of archaeologists and some historians had been studying sites in the reservoir footprint for the relatively new and untested National Historic Preservation Act of 1966.⁵²⁸ Included in that footprint and part of a massive federally funded study were thousands of American Indian sites dating back thousands of years, locations of settled villages and – particularly pertinent to the contemporary Miwok peoples – burial sites and other sacred places. (See Figure 77)

Negotiations focused on two main issues. First, the archaeologists contracted to study the cultural heritage of the canyon brought with them particular ideas about the production of scientific knowledge that clashed with the traditions and wishes of the local indigenous groups. The scholarly experts overseeing the projects were interested in conducting lab-based analysis of artifacts and remains, including human remains found at grave sites, which required pulling those remains out of their terrestrial contexts, moving them to a clean study site and applying the latest scientific tools to generate data on categories like age and health. (See Figure 78) Tribal leaders with multiple bands of Miwok and other indigenous groups were opposed to this across the board, as the field of archaeology and its intrusive methods had long ties to destruction of indigenous cultural heritage and sacred sites, as well as theft of material artifacts. Second, once the cultural resource work was completed and the reservoir filled, many of those sites would be flooded, leaving native communities for whom those remains were significant with a difficult choice of allowing the sites to drown or moving the remains.

These leaders, archaeologists on the project, and federal officials all discussed and debated these issues through 1982. These negotiations were necessary for a supposedly mutually beneficial outcome and in some cases went on without much precedent, as the passage of national laws and associated regulations for studies of native sites, remains and artifacts was still years away. Opinions within the indigenous communities were not unified. Some leaders wished for all remains to be left undisturbed and unstudied, reservoir or no reservoir. One representative said that he and many other older members of the group were totally opposed to the excavation of any burials or disturbance of any human remains, and to archaeology and history studies in general, wishing to see “their culture die with them.”⁵²⁹ At most, those who wished to leave the remains as-were sought only to cover the known burial sites with

⁵²⁸ Sinclair, “U.S. Reservoir Becoming Test of Historic Preservation Law;” Baskin, “Archaeological Sites Offer Last Hope to Halt Flooding;” Gray, “Melones Digging, Archaeologists want to start over.”

⁵²⁹ IAS Task Force Leader to Joe Nagel, Dec. 12, 1979, Box 19, Folder 1, Thorne B. Gray Collection.

rocks to prevent their disturbance after the reservoir was filled.⁵³⁰ But some participating members of local indigenous groups showed interest in allowing at least some study of sites and remains, so long as a system was in place to give Miwok representatives both access to the study sites and control over whether and how to handle them.⁵³¹ Ultimately, while the federal government claimed the “final decision regarding treatment of human remains in accordance with existing legislation and Department of the Interior policies,”⁵³² reports indicated that the projects had observer programs that accepted input from on-site members of the local native groups. Remains usually were left on-site and disturbed as little as possible. If need was determined to study them out of environmental context, they were reportedly “removed temporarily, stored on-site, and reinterred upon completion” with the observers present to direct the process.⁵³³

The spiritual and material interests of the river preservationists and the local indigenous leaders seemed to diverge as the dam project’s completion neared. River recreationists focused much of their attention on riverside rock art and grinding stones as foundations for the indigenous spirituality. Such items were not only impossible to move, but they needed to remain in their riverside context to remain analogues for museum exhibits and static representations of a long-past way of life. Any inundation would completely cut off the river advocates’ connections to these traces, and efforts focused on preventing the completion or mourning the losses. But in negotiating with the federal agencies, the Miwok peoples and their indigenous allies – while understanding how a major dam would upend much of their heritage and rupture in many ways their connections to the ancestral sites and remains in the canyon – could maintain some agency in how their significant sites and remains would be handled, studied and potentially transplanted. For these groups, one goal was to prevent that inundation from destroying their collective heritage in the same way that it would for the river preservationists. With Miwok representatives negotiating with the federal agencies, the river preservationists found their interests allied with the archaeological firms that sought more time to excavate and study the remains in the canyon. Both groups had shared interests in delaying inundation. If these sites of spiritual consequence were also historically and scientifically significant, they needed full study and required more time before the reservoir was filled. But the indigenous perspective seemed, as they expressed it to federal authorities, much more concerned with whether and how their ancestral remains and material traces of their cultural heritage would be handled, who would retain ownership of them, and where they would end up than the

⁵³⁰ Judy Myers Suchey to Burt Kallman and Eli Mishuck, Jan. 29, 1979, Box 19, Folder 1, Thorne B. Gray Collection.

⁵³¹ Dorothea Theodoratus, Clinton Blount, James Gary Maniery, “Native American Consultation, New Melones Archaeological Research Program,” Department of the Interior, Interagency Archaeological Service, Heritage and Conservation and Recreation Service, Washington: D.C., April 15, 1981, , Box 19, Folder 1, Thorne B. Gray Collection.

⁵³² “Report on the Development and Implementation of the New Melones Burial Policy, New Melones Dam and Reservoir, California,” Interagency Archaeological Services, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, April 20, 1982, Box 19, Folder 1, Thorne B. Gray Collection.

⁵³³ *Ibid.*

binary question of whether to fill the lake. The local Miwok bands and regional indigenous groups engaged with the federal government to pursue their own interests related to the spiritual import of their material heritage.

This divergence in interests between contemporary native groups and river preservationists, and their relationship to the spiritual identity of the canyon, was perhaps most evident during a May 1978 public hearing in the small town of Angels Camp, Calif. Hundreds of people had descended on the local veterans' hall to argue about both the importance and the fates of these sites, remains and materials proposed to be flooded by New Melones. Much of the continuous hearing featured statements by federal dam builders defending their proposals, archaeologists and heritage workers calling for more time and resources to conduct proper studies, and preservationists arguing that the items and places in the context of the canyon were uniquely valuable. Or in other words, the main arguments voiced at the hearings included the following: we're ready to move forward with the dam and are properly documenting the native heritage for posterity; we're not properly documenting and studying the native heritage for posterity, and this project needs more time and effort lest we miss out on vital knowledge about the past; we should leave the canyon as a wild river, as those sites only maintain their full value when they can be seen, touched and explored in their existing environmental context. For the preservationists, spiritual connection was part of that final argument. One of them, Jerry Kreger, described cultural heritage as a "spiritual, economic, political interaction between land and people." Emphasizing the spiritual, Kreger compared the preservation of important natural resources with that of important cultural ones, arguing that both are vital for the spiritual health of the nation.

The health of the land; the river, the watershed is reflecting the physical, mental and spiritual health of our people. The land and the people of America are one, and that which hurts any portion of either, hurts us all. From before the birth of this nation, our people have looked with beauty and the balance of all places. The forests, the mountains and the rivers have given us sanctity, peace and inspiration. This contact between the American land and our foreparents has made us a strong and beautiful people. It has been said that freedom is the thing of the spirit and that freedom is a spiritual child that tends beauty. The freedom and spirit of our people are America's most valuable resource. And the preservation of natural beauty is man's highest art. Let us be liberal in our efforts to preserve the life, beauty and balance of this river and her watershed. Let us be conservative in the use of our power to destroy it.⁵³⁴

Of the hundreds in attendance, two spoke representing local or regional indigenous communities. Luna Wessell spoke for the Tuolumne Indian Council, focusing his concerns on handling and treatment of burial sites. Excavation, Wessell

⁵³⁴ Hearing for the New Melones Project re: cultural mitigation, Dept. of the Army Corps of Engineers.

stated, was something “we prohibit explicitly.” It was also something local indigenous communities dealt with before the dam proposal. “We have problems in our area where gravesites are being dug up and people looking for artifacts and those types of things.”⁵³⁵ The second, a representative of the American Indian Council of Marin named Coyote Flower, offered perspective that overlapped a bit more with preservationists, expressing concern with the inundation of the grinding stones and saying that loss of the canyon’s historical resources would generally be a loss to all. Reading a poem written after attending a ceremony to bury Miwok remains disinterred for supposed “progress,” Flower compared the buried remains and the burial of history with the burial of the Stanislaus under the waters of a reservoir. In doing so, Flowers directed critical questions to both the federal government and the archaeologists on hand. “Are you going to bury this river, are you going to bury it? What are you going to do with the bones of the people that you have to disinter? What are you going to do?” Flower said.⁵³⁶

The connections and divergences between the rafters of the Stanislaus canyon and the Miwoks were complex when it came to cultural heritage, spirituality and the place’s aesthetic identity. The rafters and recreationists centered native culture and history as they constructed and reinforced the identity of the river as a wild place and an outdoor museum. This culture was portrayed as part of a lost frontier, images of a long-lost past that would remain statically behind them; not a thriving, living culture, but one kept safe as a collection of interesting objects for viewing. The indigenous spirituality was an aesthetic component of the canyon, offering intense meaning to the place. But it was still part of the scenic milieu, aligning the river activists’ interests with those who wanted to ultimately prevent inundation. Furthermore, the embrace and portrayal of native peoples in the canyon was at times romanticized and caricatured, highlighting images of seemingly prehistoric peoples with some kind of mystic and spiritual connection with the wildlands. These mirrored historical portrayals that essentialized indigenous peoples as more natural and less rational as their supposedly modern usurpers. The local indigenous groups also viewed the development of the reservoir as fundamentally harmful to their cultural heritage and their spiritual connection to the canyon. Yet, those connections transcended aesthetics and scenery, and their priorities focused more on preserving the material remains of their ancestors than preserving the beauty of the place for future visitors.

“Save this Wild River!” An engineered wilderness in the Stanislaus canyon

As the Stanislaus River canyon became increasingly popular as a rafting river, the place reflected the three main characteristics Roderick Nash described as part of the cult of the American wilderness. Born of the social, environmental and economic conditions in the country at the turn of the 20th Century, this cult was an emerging, romanticized idea of wilderness as a place that could invigorate the body and spirit by rekindling man’s primitive virtues against the threats of modernity, a symbol of a lost

⁵³⁵ Ibid.

⁵³⁶ Ibid.

frontier, and a source of aesthetic beauty and spiritual fulfillment. Thanks to past human engineering and the popularity of rafting and kayaking along the country's rivers, the canyon became an ideal stretch of whitewater for beginners and advanced boaters alike. That identity as a whitewater river would almost singularly define the canyon, both making it the most popular of such rivers American West and directing the ways in which the federal Bureau of Land Management regulated it. Those activities would help construct the wild image of the Stanislaus, as the non-motorized and seemingly primitive nature of rafting and kayaking offered a sensory experience of struggle and flow with the conditions of the river. Embracing the place's pioneer heritage, recreationists and organizers would regularly center both the California Gold Rush and indigenous histories in portrayals and constructions of the canyon experience. The traces of these pasts, from abandoned mining equipment to ancient rock art, became features in what proponents would describe as an outdoor museum where visitors could see and touch artifacts in their environmental contexts. Finally, the Stanislaus River offered both scenic and spiritual components that created an aesthetic experience that functioned as Nash's "antipode of civilization" and that verged for many on the sacred. But that sacred identity at times conflicted with the sacred identity some indigenous groups attached to specific sites in the canyon, and while river preservationists often evoked generic notions of indigenous spirituality when attaching sacred values to this wilderness place, those indigenous groups pursued their own interests in preserving heritage while trying to maintain continuity with, and respect for, their ancestral remains in ways consistent to their own values.

With all three dynamics – recreational import, mythic human heritage, and aesthetic and spiritual uniqueness – the Stanislaus was a wilderness for those who sought to protect it. In fact, the campaign through the 1970s to protect the canyon from New Melones Dam signified an important shift in the public, legal and bureaucratic imagination of rivers in general. That shift saw people replacing notions that rivers existed for instrumental use and economic and social development with ideas that rivers have intrinsic value in their natural - and even wild - states. The most well-remembered and well-documented scenes from the fight over the Stanislaus are tied to the river's purported status as both wild and free-flowing. Graffiti in and around the canyon, on bridges, signs and retaining walls, for years included calls for, "Wild River Status Now!"⁵³⁷ (See Figure 79) Much of the campaigns' efforts throughout the 1970s focused specifically on protecting the canyon through designation as a wild and scenic river, regulatory designations that would prevent certain types of uses on and around the river in order to preserve the river's wilderness values. "Stop the destruction of our wilderness!" demanded a political sign lofted behind California Governor Jerry Brown at a May 1979 rally.⁵³⁸ And even though the efforts to preserve the river canyon as a wilderness did not prevent its inundation, the Stanislaus remains today a symbol of

⁵³⁷ Martin Blake, "Protest signs at Parrott's Ferry Bridge" (photograph), July 12, 1978, Stanislaus River Archive, stanislausriver.org/document/protest-signs-at-parrotts-ferry-bridge/.

⁵³⁸ "Governor Jerry Brown calls for halt to filling of New Melones Dam in May 1979" (photograph), *Sacramento Bee*, May 23, 1979, Stanislaus River Archive, stanislausriver.org/story/gov-jerry-brown-calls-for-halt-to-filling-of-new-melones-dam/.

wild rivers everywhere. That symbolic wildness would keep space for modern human uses, engineering and industrial history through much of the wild river campaigns, only to be replaced by ideals of purity in nature pursued later through political, scholarly and ideological discourse.



Figure 66: The fig tree at Duck Bar, located on the lower right of this photo, 1978. Bruce Raley, courtesy of Stanislaus River Archive (stanislausriver.org).



Figure 67: The fig tree at Duck Bar was a popular spot along the river canyon for meetings like this one, 1976. Bill Center, courtesy of Stanislaus River Archive (stanislausriver.org).



Figure 68: Rafters take on a rapid on the Stanislaus River, 1975. Courtesy of Columbia College Special Collections.



Figure 69: Rafters below the popular Mother Rapid, 1978. Martin Blake, courtesy of Columbia College Special Collections and Stanislaus River Archive (stanislausriver.org).




Figure 72: River guides on the Stanislaus often brought visitors to relics and ruins from the canyon's human history, including this mining equipment, 1979. Don Briggs, courtesy of Stanislaus River Archive (stanislausriver.org).



Figure 73: River guides on the Stanislaus showed visitors places where the canyon's human history was visible, including this rock wall, 1981. Courtesy of Stanislaus River Archive (stanislausriver.org).



Figure 74: This poster map highlighted many of the river’s natural and historic sites, as well as native locales and stories, 1978. The Mapmakers, courtesy of Stanislaus River Archive (stanislausriver.org).


Friends of the River
ADVENTURE RIVER TRIPS

**RELIVE HISTORY IN THIS REENACTMENT OF
JOHN WESLEY POWELL'S GRAND CANYON EPIC**

In 1869, John Wesley Powell and a party of nine boarded four small wooden boats and set off to explore the virtually unknown canyons of the Green and Colorado Rivers. The voyage was chaotic, and Powell was unable to collect all of the data he had expected. So he made the journey again in 1871. Powell's account of his experience is a classic of adventure literature. (Find a good synopsis in Marc Reisner's *Cadillac Desert*.) Now, 120 years later, a small group of modern travellers will retrace this historic journey.

The Colorado River has changed since Powell's time. It has been the site of some of our nation's most famous conservation victories. Yet, the river is still threatened by several dam projects and damaging dam-releases. Friends of the River hosts this adventure to bring more

attention to the current battles to protect the Grand Canyon.

Three of the nation's leading conservationists will join us on different parts of this trip: David Brower, Martin Litton, and Luna Leopold. These men and others share credit for the creation of Dinosaur National Monument, which surrounds miles of the Yampa and the Green Rivers, and for preventing Marble and Bridge Canyon Dams from being built in the Grand Canyon.

This trip will not be an exact replica of Powell's expedition. Our wooden dories are designed for the magnificent rapids. Our guides know the canyon. These same guides are consummate chefs, storytellers, and experts on the geology, biology and history of the river canyons.

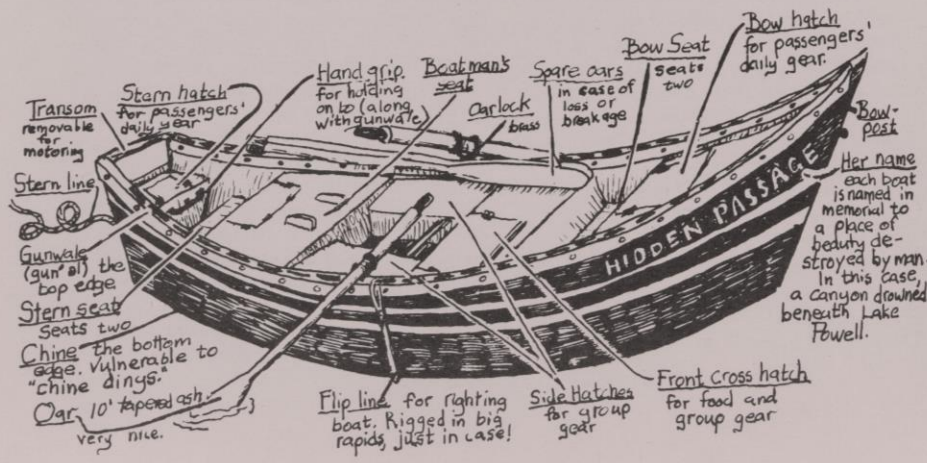


Figure 75: Though not for a Stanislaus tour, preservationist group Friends of the River organized trips to relive famous pioneer journeys like this one modeled after John Wesley Powell's run down the Colorado. Friends of the River, courtesy of Bancroft Library.



Figure 76: Local artists created an installation called Timepiece, which both commemorated the Stanislaus canyon and claimed connections between modern preservationists and the river's indigenous history, 1979. Ron Pickup, courtesy of Columbia College special Collection and Stanislaus River Archive (stanislausriver.org).



Figure 77: Archaeologists pumped water from excavation site in the Stanislaus Canyon, 1979. Courtesy of Stanislaus River Archive (stanislausriver.org).



Figure 78: Archaeologists analyzed material from Stanislaus canyon excavation sites in lab environments, 1979. Coni Beeson, courtesy of Stanislaus River Archive (stanislausriver.org).



Figure 79: Protesters demanded protection of the wild Stanislaus River canyon, 1978. Don Briggs, courtesy of Columbia College Special Collection and Stanislaus River Archive (stanislausriver.org).



Figure 80: Canyon visitors regularly associated Miwok grinding sites with the place's indigenous heritage, 1979. Don Briggs, courtesy of Stanislaus River Archive (stanislausriver.org).



Figure 81: Petroglyphs in the canyon were popular sites for rafters, 1979. Don Briggs, courtesy of Stanislaus River Archive (stanislausriver.org).

CHAPTER VII

PURITY IN THE CALIFORNIA WILDERNESS

In both the Stanislaus River canyon and the Emigrant Wilderness, efforts to keep the existing conditions wild by preserving the rapids and the check dams, respectively, ended abruptly.

In the Stanislaus canyon, where wild river rafters revered the popular whitewater rapids, that final moment was around the beginning of 1983. The still waters of New Melones were by then fully impounded behind a completed federal dam, finally reaching capacity and inundating the river canyon up to Camp Nine. This moment followed a few years of partial inundation followed by receding waters, as well as some final conflicts over the elevation of the water line. (See Figure 82) But by 1983, the tactics and strategies of river preservationists and wilderness advocates had all failed. Multiple public and legislative appeals to protect the river as wild and scenic were defeated, some by voters and others by state and federal legislators. A victory at the U.S. Supreme Court which granted the state of California some say over management of the federal reservoir and its water only delayed the final outcome. And while successful in the moment, the most famous act of defiance against the reservoir only prevented flooding for a brief time. The final floodwaters rose to the reservoir's capacity less than three years after activist and river guide Mark Dubois chained himself to a large boulder at an undisclosed location and promised to drown should the lake be filled. (See Figure 83)

But in comparing the Stanislaus River canyon to a cathedral set for wanton destruction in his 1979 letter to the Army Corps of Engineers,⁵³⁹ Dubois showed the future direction that the river preservation movement would steer their discourse as they continued to set priorities for wilderness activism. For much of the campaign, wild river activists worked to protect the canyon as a hybrid place where human engineering and nature could coexist. But eventually, the campaigns and actions to stop the dam became protests of the inevitable and public acts of mourning for wilderness. "We will make sure the burial of the lower canyon will be the most public destruction of a wilderness area in history. We must also make sure that all of our statements and actions express why we are there," river advocates stated in an invitation to one of such encampments.⁵⁴⁰ Rallies and drives to raise money and signatures became gatherings to witness the burials of different sections of the river. And in the wake of these events, discursive tensions existed between hybrid visions of nature and notions of nature as sacred and pure in its essence. Nature was increasingly imagined in some pure, idealized form – either divine cathedrals which must be

⁵³⁹ Dubois, "A Letter to Colonel O'Shei."

⁵⁴⁰ "The Witness and Encampment (flier)," Friends of the River, 1979, Stanislaus River Archive, stanislausriver.org/story/a-description-of-the-witness-and-encampment/.

protected from the consumptive demands of society, or autonomous beings threatened by a modern rapaciousness.

For the Emigrant Wilderness, the end of a wild place sustained by small, handmade check dams was less physically dramatic. In many ways it's still ongoing, though it became a foregone conclusion in the summer of 2006 when a federal judge released a decision barring either forest managers or private parties from maintaining those structures in the wilderness. Environmental groups had been protesting and challenging for decades the existence of such structures in wild places, including the Emigrant Wilderness which received its official distinction in 1975. Sportsmen's groups, area businesses, and other local governments and collectives worked during those times to defend the fishing dams in the wilderness. (See Figure 84) The groups raised funds and worked diligently to make sure forest regulations allowed for their existence and maintenance, striving to add them to official registers as protected historic places.

But like with the Stanislaus canyon, those lengthy legal and regulatory campaigns failed. A federal judge backed the argument for purity in the Emigrant, and those structures were deemed incompatible with the wilderness values imposed by federal law. "The repair, maintenance and operation of the dam structures ... are clearly and unambiguously contrary to the provisions of the Wilderness Act,"⁵⁴¹ Judge Anthony Ishi stated in a final order in the case. "The area manifested its wilderness characteristics before the dams were in place and would lose nothing in the way of wilderness values were the dams not present. What would be lost is some enhancement of a particular use of the area (fishing), but that use, while perhaps popular, is not an integral part of the wilderness nature of that area,"⁵⁴² Ishi would state later in the order. The check dams would have to deteriorate slowly over time. While the process would take longer than filling a reservoir, the wild Emigrant Basin as it was envisioned, built and experienced since the 1920s would eventually be no more.

The reasons for these two places' fates were in some ways quite different – even diametrically opposed. Advocates for protecting the Stanislaus River ultimately were unable to secure federal or state protection in the form of a wild and scenic river designation. That designation would have been key in preventing the canyon's inundation and protecting its steadily flowing whitewater. But for the Emigrant Wilderness, the kind of federal protection sought by Stanislaus River activists ultimately doomed the check dams. While the small dams were maintained and operational when the basin was designated as wilderness, the regulations changed over time in ways that made those manmade structures incompatible with wilderness management. Thus, the wilderness protections that would have potentially saved one place ultimately doomed a central part of what made the other place wild. The Stanislaus campaign was also a nationally known effort, embraced by larger

⁵⁴¹ *High Sierra Hikers Association et al v. United States Forest Service et al*, 1:05-cv-00496-AWI-DLB, EL1 (E.D. Cal. 2005), at 123, PACER, Anthony Ishi, Memorandum Opinion and Order, June 8, 2006, 17.

⁵⁴² *Ibid.*, 24.

environmental movements spanning an entire decade. And while involving some lawsuits, that movement was mostly a part of a political battle with each side dedicated to persuading electorates and their representatives to support them. The Emigrant Wilderness struggle was more parochial in many ways, and despite its consequences for wilderness management across the country it has lacked widespread, national attention. It was also set in regulatory and legal systems with its primary discourses focused much more on precedent, existing legislation and the legal meanings of particular terms than to political persuasion.

But both campaigns still dealt with the central question of whether you can have dams in the wilderness. Such attempts to reconcile human structures built to change or control nature with wilderness character intersect with a central concept in environmental history – purity in nature. Environmental scholars in the humanities and social sciences study both how human systems change the environment and how environmental systems influence people and societies. Environmental baselines are necessary to track such change, and often those baselines are associated with a primordial nature that functioned with its own autonomy before civilized people arrived and shaped it for their own instrumental uses. With rivers, these stories have long resembled declension narratives that begin with an unspoiled waterway and end with industrialized aquatic wastelands polluted beyond recognition. People have built dams and diversions to control water for economic production, so dams and diversions are often central tools in these stories of river decline.

This chapter will examine the ways in which this concept of purity in nature, specifically represented and understood as waterways unspoiled by dams, emerged and eventually prevailed in these two case studies of wilderness construction. For decades, recreationists and advocates embraced both places as hybrid wilderness shaped by dams, access roads and other forms of human engineering. This notion of wildness did not seem like a contradiction until it was contested and challenged by actors favoring ideals of natural purity in the same spaces. Such discourses distinguished purity from hybridity, pushing at times for the prohibition or removal of waterworks from protected wildlands and at other times using those waterworks as evidence of despoilment – the binary opposition of purity. After their users transformed them from industrial places of extraction and development in the early 20th Century to wilderness places for beauty and recreation in the mid-to-late-20th Century, both the whitewater flowing through the Stanislaus canyon and the running creeks of the Emigrant Basin came to represent something impure. In some ways, this phenomenon fits an ongoing and persistent critique in environmental scholarship that the purity ideal is both an artificial construct and a tool to undermine restorative environmental ethics and sustainable environmental practices.

While this chapter will explore this critique, it will also discuss how these stories also complicate critiques of purity by deconstructing these places' wildness. Instead of being an essential or timeless condition, purity emerged in each instance through dialectical processes which largely took the form of political, legal and rhetorical negotiations. In wielding and weaponizing purity-in-nature discourses, opponents of preserving both the rapids and the Emigrant check dams were not

arguing *for* a comprehensive vision for pure wilderness. They instead argued *against* a vision of wilderness that allowed space for human agency in the form of dams. Furthermore, the arguments against these dams often reinforced aesthetic and recreational ideals that fit the economic and ideological interests of the people and organizations making them. For both places, purity didn't win as much as hybridity lost. Or, at least particular visions of hybrid wilderness were successfully defeated through the weaponization of purity-in-nature discourses.

Appeals to purity in both wild places – while sincere in many ways – were also strategic acts in political, legal and rhetorical contests. In the case of the Stanislaus canyon, opponents to preserving of the rapids were themselves pro-dam and pro-development actors who wanted New Melones completed and filled to capacity. In arguing against the dams as legitimate components of a wild river, they used a purity ideal to undermine preservationists' attempts to protect the canyon as a wilderness place. And yet, pro-dam voices did publicly appeal to what they suggested was a purer, or more ideal, version of the Stanislaus that they argued could only be restored and preserved *with* the dam. This version was what they described as a restored lower Stanislaus, which was the subject of the plan completed by the Army Corps of Engineers just a few years prior. What is remembered today as a struggle to save a wild river in many ways was at the time a struggle over multiple definitions of the most natural version of the river, and in turn which version the public should restore and protect.

In the Emigrant Wilderness, the struggle over purity seemed slightly more straightforward. Wilderness preservation groups sought to remove the dams in what they argued would be a restoration of the basin to its pre-human state. But an aesthetic ideal still drove those actors, who prioritized solitude over modern civilization and considered visible traces of human agency in nature to be unappealing and obtrusive. To achieve these modern aesthetic ideals and impose purity, wilderness preservationists in the Emigrant Wilderness utilized the modern legal system, undermining the very arguments legitimizing hybridity that the preservationist community made decades earlier to try and save the Stanislaus. In both cases, purity functioned more as the means than the ends in these contests over wilderness management.

A critique of purity and the central Sierra Nevada

Scholars in the environmental humanities and social sciences often interrogate a Western-centric search for a pre-spoiled, pure state of nature. This is especially true in past works of two historians who directed potent critiques at this environmental purity ideal – William Cronon and Richard White. Their work includes Cronon's critique of the problem with wilderness and White's study of the Columbia River. But the scholars also pursued similar ideas in other texts, such as Cronon's expansive history of the city of Chicago and White's essay critiquing the separation of human work from pure nature. They both argued that the ideal of purity in nature doesn't allow for people to be historical agents on the landscape, and in both cases they suggested that purity ideals require peoples' erasure from a place's past and present.

Cronon's allegations relate specifically to human history in wilderness, a kind of place that under a purity ideal exists outside of time and reaches back before some Judeo-Christian fall from paradise. Cronon calls this an "escape from history" and a "flight from history,"⁵⁴³ arguing that the myth of virgin wilderness erases human histories from the landscape. This is especially true of indigenous historical agency, as the image of unspoiled wilderness required the removal of native populations who lived on and shaped the environments for millennia.

For White, this critique of purity focused more on human work and labor, which he argued modern environmentalists ignore at their own peril. He suggested that environmental movements have mistakenly failed to grasp "how human beings have historically known nature through work" and instead have tended to compartmentalize work from ideal nature. "They call for human connections to nature while disparaging all those who claim to have known and appreciated nature through work and labor," he stated.⁵⁴⁴ White's work here also argued that the very work environmentalists often disparage helped produce environmental knowledge that contributed to modern ecological consciousness.⁵⁴⁵ Without diminishing Cronon's critique of wilderness as an erasure of indigenous histories, White also suggests that the earliest explorers and settlers who dispossessed those indigenous peoples from the land become part of the mythology of natural purity as their initial descriptions and reflections on the environment became baselines for environmental restoration. "Those first white men are fascinating and sympathetic historical figures in their own right, but my concern with them is as cultural figures constructed by environmentalism." White stated. "They are made into viewers of a natural world 'as ... it existed outside of human history.' But it is not nature that existed outside of human history; it is the first white men who do so. For environmentalist writers depict not how these travelers actually saw the natural world, but instead how we would have seen it in their place."⁵⁴⁶

These critiques have yet to be directed at the wild Emigrant Basin of the central Sierra Nevada mountains or along and adjacent to the Stanislaus River watershed, let alone both. But the history of this region involves deep, contentious and influential public debates over the very ideas of purity in the forms of wilderness and wild rivers – debates that in many ways reinforce these critiques. In these public, legal and regulatory battles over wild rivers and wild landscapes, preservation-focused environmentalists and wise-use conservationists squared off over the very notions of wildness, purity and nature. And throughout these battles, the arguments for nature's purity reinforced the nature-human binary that continues to undermine a sustainable environmental ethic to this day. Furthermore, both White and Cronon have argued that imposing an unnatural notion of purity onto modern nature ultimately cedes rhetorical space in environmental debates to anti-environmentalist forces like participants in the wise use movement, who claim to seek conservation of landscapes through private

⁵⁴³ Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 80.

⁵⁴⁴ White, *The Organic Machine*, x.

⁵⁴⁵ White, "Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?" 172.

⁵⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 176.

property and development.⁵⁴⁷ In both of these cases, pro-development and anti-development forces fought over the future of natural resources, and in both cases each side used its own version of pro-nature or pro-environmental discourses to pursue their agendas. Environmentalists lost the Stanislaus to modern development at least in part because of their inability to square for voting publics this construct of purity with the canyon's human history of water engineering. And while purity won out in the Emigrant Wilderness, the place remains a battleground and symbol for wise-use conservationists to criticize what they argue are the excesses of environmentalism. To this day, highly partisan political actors use both the Stanislaus River and the Emigrant Wilderness as tools to score political points in polarized debates over environmental management.⁵⁴⁸

Still, these stories of the rise and fall of hybrid wilderness in the central Sierra Nevada mountains also complicate purity critiques in various ways. First, in both instances purity wasn't as much an ideal driving the conflict toward a preferred outcome as it was a strategic approach to opposition against a particular aesthetic and ideological version of wilderness. In the case of the Stanislaus River, this conflict materialized when pro-dam advocates publicly argued against the purity of the river canyon during wild river campaigns. (See Figure 88) In calling the wild river a hoax, these pro-development voices instead advocated publicly for the dam as the best way to restore and preserve ecological systems and recreation opportunities on the lower river. Here, the purity ideal and ensuing debate were not over whether to restore some version of essential nature on the river. The debate instead was over which version of the river – the upper canyon rapids or the lower valley waterway – was most natural and legitimate. That legitimacy was tied to economic, ideological and recreational interests.

In the battle over check dams in the Emigrant Wilderness, some three decades after the end of the canyon rapids, the ideological associations with purity flipped. Wise-use conservationists – including groups that had supported New Melones – argued then for a vision of hybrid wilderness which would allow for hydraulic engineering and modern control. Preservationists now made the case for the purity ideal, leveraging the legal system to dictate that dams had no place in the wilderness. Yet this plea for purity was still dialectical, arguing on aesthetic terms against the value of a conservationist approach to wilderness construction while also relying on legal discourses related to precedent and rhetorical interpretation to impose new wilderness management regimes on the landscape and waterways. In both cases, the discourses on all sides ceded space for dams in their definitions of ideal wilderness, depending on when and at what places those discourses were instrumentalized. While hybridity ultimately lost in both cases, purity was as much the product of the terms of the contest as it was some fundamentalist ideal imposed onto the land and its management.

⁵⁴⁷ Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 81-86; White, "Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?" 173-174.

⁵⁴⁸ This will be explored further in the Afterward.

“Dam or Wild River?” New Melones and contesting purity on the Stanislaus

In November 1974, the Stanislaus River’s future was on the California state ballot. By this point, the issue of the New Melones dam had reached national interest. Much like the Dinosaur Monument controversy in the 1950s and the Glen Canyon fight in the 1960s, this political battle over damming a wild river seemed to be the latest fight between environmentalists and pro-development forces over water use and environmental policy in the American West. The campaign against New Melones by this point had included federal lawsuits by environmental groups, statewide petitions and a precedent-setting water rights designation that would eventually end up in the U.S. Supreme Court.⁵⁴⁹ In the fall of 1974, that battle was focused on Proposition 17 – a state level voter initiative that would designate the river as wild under California law. Proponents saw this as a major step toward preventing the reservoir’s completion and protecting much of the river in its existing state. Leading up to the November vote, the issue was one of the most ubiquitous in print media and television across the state. Major California newspapers and some national publications ran editorials and feature stories about the issue. Most political organizations, politicians and even local governments stated official positions on the proposition. (See Figure 85)

Those defending the river had among the most vocal presence in the media, filing opinion pieces in local newspapers with appeals for conservation and preservation. Mark Dubois and Jay Power, two leaders with the organization Friends of the River, decried the “needless destruction of the 9-million-year-old ... Stanislaus Canyon,” in one letter to the *Sacramento Bee*. The “spectacular canyon” shouldn’t be flooded by the dam, “with its 1,500-foot limestone cliffs, numerous caves, abundant wildlife and riparian habitat and many archaeological sites plus the most popular whitewater recreation river in the West,” they argued.⁵⁵⁰ Dubois, Power and their colleagues at Friends of the River had successfully placed Prop. 17 on the ballot, thanks to a well-organized, widespread petition campaign that called the river a “unique and extraordinary river resource, possessing unusual and valuable caves and geological formations, the state's most heavily used whitewater boating area, spectacular limestone cliffs, and an important trout fishery,” as well as “an outstanding example of a Central Valley River, possessing large expanses of riparian habitat, valuable canoeing waters, many historical sites and a noteworthy salmon fishery. It is one of a very few such rivers remaining in California.”⁵⁵¹ Campaign material also described the Stanislaus as “born in the Emigrant Wilderness above Yosemite National Park,” cascading down “from the High Sierra through ancient stands of redwoods, steep limestone canyons, powerful rapids and a series of excellent trout streams.” Its advocates stated in an appeal to voters that, this year, “some 80,000 visitors will enjoy its bountiful gifts” from the “mighty Stanislaus” that now has a “questionable fate” as

⁵⁴⁹ *California v. United States*, 438 U.S. 645 (1978).

⁵⁵⁰ Jay H. Power and Mark Dubois, “For Proposition 17,” *Sacramento Bee*, Oct. 30 1974, Box 21 Folder 16, Thorne B. Gray Collection.

⁵⁵¹ “Proposition 17: A Fact Sheet,” Friends of the River, Sept. 1, 1974, Carton 1, Folder 33 Mark Dubois Papers, BANC MSS 2003/314 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.:

the dam “would bury most of the history and lore, the caves and canyons, the mines and rapids, the trout fishery and the spiders – under 20 square miles and 3 billion tons of reservoir water.”⁵⁵²

Friends of the River was not the only advocacy group with representatives asking voters to help “save” the Stanislaus River. Another was the Yokuts Wilderness Group of the Sierra Club, which was a local chapter based in nearby Modesto, of the national environmental preservation organization. Group representative Ruth McClusky in a letter to the *Modesto Bee* newspaper argued, “There are too many small dams on the river now, which are responsible for the mess it's in.” Voters should, “help (reduce) pollution in the 55 miles of river,” that people enjoy and, “enhance the environment” with what could be a “string of parks and wildlife preserves along the river,” adding that “the River should be for everyone.”⁵⁵³ Similarly, Cliff Humphrey, the founder of the group called Ecology Action, also called for “saving” a 55-mile stretch of the river in a way that would allow for a “four-mile Olympic caliber kayak course,” and provide protection for riparian caves, “protection of 3,500 acres of riparian habitat, rejuvenation of the salmon fisheries, introduction of a steelhead fishery and construction of 11 parks, a day of canoeing apart.”⁵⁵⁴

Despite them all seemingly arguing for the same cause – that of saving and protecting the outstanding environmental values of the Stanislaus River – they were fierce opponents over Prop. 17. Dubois and Power wanted voters to approve the proposition and prevent the completion of New Melones, as they and their Friends of the River colleagues were working with other environmentalists to slow dam building and development they saw as disastrous to the environment. On the other side, McClusky and Humphrey were among the voices who opposed Prop. 17 and wanted the federal government to complete and fill New Melones. McClusky’s local Sierra Club chapter gave qualified support to the dam, while Humphrey was an active participant in overtly pro-dam organizations like Friends of New Melones formed to lobby for its completion. Both sides used conservation logic and environmentalist rhetoric to back their causes, as the pro-dam side suggested to voters that the project would improve, not destroy, the river’s environment. Both sides suggested they supported the option that would conserve and improve the beleaguered Stanislaus River as a habitat, water source and recreation destination, despite being in opposition over the ballot measure and the dam.

Prior to much of the Stanislaus campaign, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had released the lower river plan that called for comprehensive restoration and management of the river’s stretch below New Melones. This seemed to make the major, multi-purpose dam an integral part of the river’s environmental protection and restoration for both the Army Corps and the Bureau of Reclamation, the latter of which would manage and run the dam once completed by the Army Corps. Driven

⁵⁵² Ibid.

⁵⁵³ Ruth McClusky, “The Whole River, *Modesto Bee*, Nov. 3, Box 21 Folder 16, Thorne B. Gray Collection.

⁵⁵⁴ Paul M. Pitman, “New Melones,” *Fresno Bee*, Oct. 30, 1974, Box 21 Folder 16, Thorne B. Gray Collection.

both by recent changes in environmental laws and regulations, as well as public pressure to incorporate environmental concerns into their project planning, the lower-river plan represented a new direction for the agency that had spent much of its existence reshaping and controlling America's waterways. This proposal suggested that the dam, with its increased cold water flows, would make possible a four-pronged approach to restore, protect and maintain the lower-river environment: a maximum flow rate of 8,000 cubic feet per second for flood control, water quality and predictable planning; protection of riparian habitat adjacent to the river for wildlife and recreation; preservation and restoration of in-river habitat for fish species like salmon and steelhead; and construction of a string of riverside parks for boating, camping and picnicking.

Pro-dam voices would use the plan as a kind of strategic cudgel as they pointed out how upstream river conditions favored by environmentalists and rafters were the product of almost a century of industrial use and engineering, undermining claims that the river was wild. This argument also offered a different vision of river restoration along the Stanislaus that dam proponents would claim as more legitimately natural than the canyon rapids. Each side squared off in defense of their ideal vision of the Stanislaus River, with whitewater advocates seeking to protect the canyon country and dam advocates focusing solely on the much-maligned lower river. In many ways, this was a contest not over whether dams were good, but over which conditions created by dams were more natural. And in pushing for an ideal state of nature, each site was implicitly tying particular visions of purity – or lack thereof – to their arguments as they pursued their political, ideological and economic interests.

This battle over which version of the Stanislaus River was purer and more legitimate spanned most of the ten-year political contest over New Melones. But it was perhaps most focused and intense during that 1974 election, when Prop. 17 was one of the biggest items on the state ballot. Representatives across the political spectrum ran hundreds and thousands of editorials, news features, advertisements, letters, and other advocacy items in state and national publications leading up to the November vote. Not all coverage offered a nuanced picture of two versions of a hybrid river squaring off. Observers at times referred to the contested river as an example of binary opposition, like “Dam or wild River?”⁵⁵⁵ “Searches for water” collided with “untouched wilderness.”⁵⁵⁶ Pro-dam arguments often leaned on this binary vision of the Stanislaus, placing the canyon on the opposite side of wilderness. The river through the canyon was not wild but a creation of human engineering, they would say, arguing then that preservationists were more interested in protecting their own aesthetic and economic interests than the river's natural environment. The river's ecological health and recreational value, they stated, would be better served by the New Melones reservoir and the lower river restoration. “Stop the Wild River Hoax!”

⁵⁵⁵ James K. Staley, “Dam or Wild River: The Puzzling Prop 17,” McClatchy News Service (*Fresno Bee*), Nov. 3, 1974, Box 21 folder 16, Thorne B. Gray Collection.

⁵⁵⁶ Carl Irving, “The Question is Clear in Proposition 17,” *S.F. Sunday Examiner & Chronicle*, Nov. 3, 1974, Box 21, Folder 16, Thorne B. Gray Collection.

proclaimed the slogan of one pro-dam campaign, echoed on highway billboards⁵⁵⁷ as well as in editorial pages.⁵⁵⁸ Ruth McClusky called the wild river proposal a “rip-off,”⁵⁵⁹ and a representative from the local council of the AFL-CIO called it a “con.”⁵⁶⁰

These attacks on the preservation proposal coincided with claims that a new dam was the key to restoring the lower river, claims that major media embraced and echoed. “Opportunity To ‘Save the Stanislaus’ Lies in the Completion of New Melones,” declared the headline of one editorial. Without the dam, the editorial continued, “There would thus be no releases for water quality or the improvement of the fish and wildlife habitat of the lower river. The Stanislaus, in fact, would continue to be the sickly stream of summer and there would be no need or justification for the string of river parks and public access points which have been designed into the model.”⁵⁶¹ Whether an ironic twist, a strategic move, or both, pro-dam organizations in their case for New Melones created and reinforced a binary, claimed that the entire Stanislaus system failed the purity test, and argued for state-managed restoration and recreative use to achieve ideal river conditions. Since there were no real wild rivers left, the argument went, this plan would balance scenery, wildlife, beauty, and recreation with the utilitarian and economic needs of those who used the Stanislaus’ water and riparian lands for production. The move was relatively effective, and the campaign split pieces of the environmentalist movement. Local chapters of the typically preservation-minded Sierra Club and Audubon Society backed the dam for the lower river plan,⁵⁶² and the 1974 proposition to preserve the river canyon as a wild river ultimately failed in a close vote.

River preservationists have claimed the pro-dam argument to be cynical and disingenuous. Accusations of dishonesty and propagandistic rhetoric persist to this day in the river preservation movement, within which the Stanislaus fight still holds important, mythical status.⁵⁶³ But intentions notwithstanding, the arguments by those trying to protect the canyon, its rapids and its free-flowing status ultimately struggled to articulate for voting publics how a hybrid system can be a wild river. Legally and

⁵⁵⁷ Thorne Gray “The Vote where ‘Yes’ Means ‘No,’” *Modesto Bee*, Nov. 3, 1974, Box 21, Folder 16, Thorne B. Gray Collection.

⁵⁵⁸ Richard J. Bosio, “Fits the Need,” and Albert Davis, “Bad Legislation,” *Modesto Bee*, Nov. 3, 1974, Box 21, Folder 16, Thorne B. Gray Collection.

⁵⁵⁹ McCluskey, “The Whole River.”

⁵⁶⁰ Keith Thurston, “Avoid the Facts,” *Modesto Bee*, Nov. 3, 1974, Box 21, Folder 16, Thorne B. Gray Collection.

⁵⁶¹ “Opportunity To ‘Save the Stanislaus’ Lies in the Completion of New Melones,” *Sacramento Bee*, Aug. 14, 1974, Box 21, Folder 14, Thorne B. Gray Collection.

⁵⁶² *Ibid.*

⁵⁶³ Dakota Goodman, “The Personification of Natural Waterscapes: A Brief History of Friends of the River (1970-1992)” (U.C. Berkeley, 2017), 21, Stanislaus River Archive, stanislausriver.org/document/the-personification-of-natural-waterscapes-a-brief-history-of-friends-of-the-river-1970-1992/; Alexander Gaguine, “The Campaign to Save the Stanislaus River — 1969-1982 and Its Historic Importance,” April 18, 2009, Stanislaus River Archive, stanislausriver.org/document/the-campaign-to-save-the-stanislaus-river-1969-1982-and-its-historic-importance/. Gaguine in the essay calls the pro-dam campaign “deceptive,” while Goodman in the thesis makes a connection between the pro-dam efforts to twist the messaging and Prop. 17’s loss.

regulatorily, there were very few issues – the Stanislaus, with all its engineering and human manipulation, still qualified under federal and state legislation for wild and scenic designation. The laws included recreational, scenic and historical values as worthy of protection, as well as wild, flowing and pristine waters.

But most of the campaigns for and against the federal dam were political, fought in the courts of public opinion as each side courted votes from citizens and legislators. In those rhetorical arenas, preservationist-minded activists struggled to make the case for the hybrid river as a wild river, acknowledging the material realities of the engineered waterways that it shared with nearly every river in California by the 1970s. (See Figure 89) “The truth is that there is not a single wild river in California; there are only residual fragments at best, and of all the Sierra foothill rivers the section of the Stanislaus between Camp Nine and Parrott’s Ferry – the stretch we stand to lose under the New Melones reservoir – is as beautiful as any, and much more primeval than most.,” stated one advocate named Martin Litton. “The Beauty and natural functions of most of the Stanislaus are gone, primarily because of the dams that already exist along its course, but is that a good reason for destroying what remains?” Litton would continue.⁵⁶⁴ “The truth is that the Stanislaus is a beautiful free flowing river that qualifies for State Wild and Scenic River status,” members of Friends of the River stated in an open letter to editors of dozens of news outlets across the state, attempting to rebut the idea that the river’s flow being “controlled by upstream dam” undermined their wild river proposal. “Dams don’t create rivers any more than they save rivers,” they would state in a clumsy defense of hybridity.⁵⁶⁵ Preservationists had to concede that California’s rivers were almost universally bereft of purity, though they did not explicitly interrogate what purity or wilderness even signified in the first place. This was not an argument about saving or despoiling a pure river as much as it was an argument over which version of a manipulated and controlled waterway should be protected or restored. Their political and ideological opponents – including organizations and individuals who would later back the maintenance of dams in the Emigrant Wilderness – were the parties who projected a purity ideal as part of their argument against wild river protection.

Despite the political defeat in 1974 and the failures of selling a hybrid vision of a wild river to the voters of California, preservation voices continued to try and thread hybridity into their wild river activism for much the rest of the decade. (See Figure 86) They continued to acknowledge that upstream dams created conditions on the water while leveraging the river’s historical resources as potential wilderness values in need of protection. And they argued for the utilitarian and economic disadvantages of the dam over the maintenance of the hybrid wilderness. But later in the effort to save the Stanislaus, as inundation seemed increasingly inevitable, Stanislaus canyon advocates increasingly seemed to imagine their wild river as a pure environment, soon to be lost to the march of modern development.

⁵⁶⁴ Martin Litton to Editor, the Chronicle, Oct. 15, 1974, Carton Folder 30, Friends of the River Foundation.

⁵⁶⁵ Friends of the River to Editor, n.d. (circa 1974), Carton 3, Box 30, Friends of the River Foundation Records.

Such images of a lost wilderness often took the form of personification. (See Figure 87) Multiple events and rallies mirrored funerals and wakes organized to “witness” the burial of a wild place. Fliers depicted the river as a blindfolded prisoner with a gun to its head.⁵⁶⁶ Dubois’ famous chaining incident – followed by other, less-publicized acts of chaining by dozens of his friends and allies in the following months – helped mythologize the river as a pure body tragically lost, reinforced by his rhetoric of spiritual clarity and comparisons to sacred places like cathedrals. “Will you be able to visit any of the beautiful wild places in the Sierras in 1985? We can still leave room for the unspoiled Stanislaus River for everyone to enjoy,” radio advertisements stated late in the campaigns. “The Stanislaus River is the most popular wilderness recreation area ever to be faced with premature destruction. The killing (of) the Stanislaus is scheduled to begin in November, but there's still time to stop it. ... We're running out of rivers, out of wilderness, and out of time.”⁵⁶⁷

After final inundation, and the river fully buried under hundreds of feet of still waters, the Stanislaus canyon was codified in the imagination of wilderness and river preservationists everywhere as a pure river lost. It would long function as a kind of natural Alamo, symbolizing what preservationists would fight for moving forward. Marc Reisner in his monumental book on dam building in the American West, *Cadillac Empire*, compared these doomed efforts by Dubois and his allies to the battle and massacre at Wounded Knee and wrote that people compared Dubois after the act of civil disobedience to monks incinerating themselves in Vietnam. Reisner was one of the many experts and scholars to point to the flooding of the Stanislaus as a final act in the era of big dams, and he pointed to the mythologizing of both Dubois and the wild river as the environmental movement moved through the 1980s as part of that end’s cause. “So many factors have played a role that it’s hard to judge which mattered most. You have to give some credit to Mark Dubois: Like Rosa Parks climbing defiantly aboard her segregated bus, he started something that couldn’t be quelled. Millions of people who had never seen the Stanislaus River found themselves feeling upset, if not infuriated, over its loss. Among environmentalists, ‘Remember the Stanislaus’ is what ‘Stay the Course’ was to the Reagan faithful.”⁵⁶⁸ In the remaining years of the Stanislaus battle, as floodwaters waxed and waned through the canyon leading up to the final inundation of 1983, the messaging largely shifted from a case for hybrid wilderness to loss of a pure, sacred and wild river.

“Not a purist manifesto:” A flip of the script in the Emigrant Wilderness

In the Emigrant Wilderness, people like Steven Brougher, Peggy Dylan and Thomas Suk were among the first to call for purity to be a priority. All three visited the Emigrant in the 1970s or 1980s, shortly after the federal government officially

⁵⁶⁶ “Let them live” (flier), n.d. (circa 1974-1982), Friends of the River, Box 3 Folder 35, Friends of the River Foundation Records; “Burial of the Stanislaus River,” 1979, Stanislaus River Archive, stanislausriver.org/story/burial-of-the-stanislaus-river-canyon-begins-flyer/.

⁵⁶⁷ Public Service Announcement (transcript), Friends of the River, Aug. 4-28 Carton 3, Folder 44, Friends of the River Foundation Paper.

⁵⁶⁸ Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 525-530.

established the wilderness designation, either as hikers, forest rangers or both. Part of a rising wave of wilderness visitors energized both by the recent American environmental movement and wilderness protection, these backpackers saw ideal wildlands with more narrow visions than as places to recapture a primitive spirit, rediscover a past frontier and to touch the spiritual or serene. Instead, these new kinds of backcountry visitors sought complete escape from mankind, with wilderness functioning as a place to forget the trappings of humanity's modern flaws and its flawed histories.

The wilderness experience was meant to be one purely defined by peace, solitude, beauty and quiet,⁵⁶⁹ and such visitors saw human constructions like the check dams as diametrically opposed to this experience. "These structures impose not only a permanent human presence on the wild landscape, but when operated they alter natural ecological processes and create aesthetic impacts," Brougher would state.⁵⁷⁰ "At many of the dam sites, I have observed the 'bath tub ring' effect on the landscape (caused by unnaturally drawing down the water levels in the lakes). This visual effect of the dams absolutely shatters the natural scenery of the area," Suk would reiterate.⁵⁷¹ Perhaps Dylan would most directly describe the structures' impacts for these purists, referring as far back as her first hike into the Emigrant Wilderness as part of a field trip in 1975. From her visit to Long Lake that weekend, to her subsequent visits to the other Emigrant Wilderness lakes through the 1990s, Dylan claimed her experience was always the same. "I was shocked at the intrusion on this pristine landscape and the effect it had on my experience of this area. The dam and old cable and other metal objects lying about created a real sense of human presence and the exposure of the shoreline created a very unnatural setting. This, in turn, compromised my experience," she would state.⁵⁷² (See Figure 90)

All three critics of the check dams were members of preservationist groups like Wilderness Watch, and through such groups they would aid an effort to remove those dams from the landscapes and waterways of the Emigrant Wilderness. In 2005, Wilderness Watch aided a lawsuit filed by the High Sierra Hikers Association against the federal government. According to their accusations in the lawsuit, the dams and the small reservoirs they formed were not compatible with the concept of wilderness character enshrined in the federal Wilderness Act. Wilderness was meant to be a place without man's permanent traces, one where impacts on the pristine and primordial landscape and waterways should not be detected. This was stated to be true despite the role of dams in making the Emigrant Basin a popular wilderness destination as a fishing paradise, despite their existence upon the official congressional designation of the Emigrant Wilderness, despite their inclusion in the federal wilderness proposal for the Emigrant Basin,⁵⁷³ and despite the U.S. Congress' and National Forest Services' knowledge of their existence and contribution to the place's identity at the time. A

⁵⁶⁹ *High Sierra Hikers Association et al v. United States Forest Service et al*, at 57-7.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, at 94.

⁵⁷¹ *Ibid.*, at 96.

⁵⁷² *Ibid.*, at 95.

⁵⁷³ "A Proposal -- Emigrant Wilderness, Stanislaus National Forest, California," USDA, 7, 11.

form of scenic beauty tied exclusively to natural purity, not one to a mythic past, sporting vigor or other aesthetic virtues, should define the wild places of the country, according to these preservationists. The check dams spoiled and threatened such beauty. “These things have no place in this Wilderness,” Dylan would tell federal court officials as part of the lawsuit. “The ugliness created by these structures has caused me to avoid those lakes that have them because I greatly value the experience of a pristine environment, rather than a reservoir surrounded by dead trees and muddy shoreline. ... These structures clearly damage the Wilderness.”⁵⁷⁴

The appeals against check dams were not the only points of contention over purity in the Emigrant Wilderness. In 1979, Fred Leighton’s relatively famous and increasingly iconic Yellowhammer Camp, located in the the Emigrant Wilderness, was the focus of a management controversy as the forest service weighed the fate of backcountry cabins.⁵⁷⁵ The basin had been designated a primitive area since 1931, with the designation a kind of precursor to official wilderness status that carried with it some regulations for the area’s management. Leighton’s completion of Yellowhammer – and the federal permit he was granted in 1920 to build and maintain it – predated the primitive designation.⁵⁷⁶ As it was a lifetime permit, and with the Emigrant Basin officially becoming a wilderness 1975, Leighton’s death in 1979 spurred questions of whether the family, sportsmen and conservationists could continue to use the camp as a base for wilderness trips, land management, and for maintaining the check dams. (See Figure 91) Upon completion of the permit, many officials suggested, some or all of the camp should be abandoned and dismantled to return the area to a more primitive state. Even the permit implied this to be likely, as it was not meant to be transferred upon Leighton’s passing.⁵⁷⁷ The federal Wilderness Act, passed about a decade earlier, demanded structures which are not deemed historically significant or are not necessary to manage or administer the wilderness be removed or allowed to deteriorate, forest managers would say.⁵⁷⁸ The removal of these cabins was inevitable, and those calling for purity in the Emigrant cheered these moves. “This camp should be destroyed and the area returned to its natural state,” stated one backcountry enthusiast in a public letter, later making a broader appeal for removing human presence. “It is an insult to hike many miles back into the mountains and come upon these cabins, mines, old

⁵⁷⁴ *High Sierra Hikers Association et al v. United States Forest Service et al*, at 95.

⁵⁷⁵ Blaine L. Cornell to Norman Shumway, Aug. 27, 1979, Drawer 2, Folder 2702:121 (Special Uses, 1212 Leighton, Fred W. Residence), Stanislaus National Forest historical archives, Sonora; Frank Waldo, “Memo and Action Plan for the Removal of Yellowhammer Camp,” June 22, 1979, Drawer 2, Folder 2702:121, Stanislaus National Forest historical archives.

⁵⁷⁶ “Report on Applications for Special-Use Permits and Rights of Way, Uses” and attached documents, Sept. 3, 1919 and Feb. 18, 1920, Feb. 7, 1940, Drawer 2, Folder 2702:121, Stanislaus National Forest historical archives.

⁵⁷⁷ Blaine Cornell to George Nokes, Aug. 2, 1979, Drawer 2, Folder 2702:121, Stanislaus National Forest historical archives, Sonora, CA. in FS Images

⁵⁷⁸ Blaine Cornell to Jayne West, Oct. 3, 1977. Drawer 2, Folder 2702:121, Stanislaus National Forest historical archives.

trucks, machinery, 50 gallon drums, etc. scattered about. They don't belong there.”⁵⁷⁹ The check dams were not part of this conversation at the time. And to the extent that they came up, it was to assure constituents that any plans moving forward included intentions to maintain and/or preserve them. “We fully intend that the dams and the value they produce shall continue,” a forest supervisor stated in 1977.⁵⁸⁰

But an increasingly purist approach began to bother some who saw the camp, and other backcountry cabins built decades prior by purported pioneers, as inseparable parts of the place’s backcountry character. Even before his death, Leighton was recognized by a plaque and signage placed along a trail at the entrance of the wilderness area for his work on the check dam projects, adding to the Emigrant Basin’s existing wilderness heritage.⁵⁸¹ (See Figure 92) And multiple federal officials in the U.S. Congress started inquiring about Yellowhammer’s fate as Leighton’s aging status suggested the question would soon become very relevant.⁵⁸² “I feel it would be a great loss to the history of the Tuolumne County Primitive Area if these structures at Yellowhammer were to be destroyed,” a concerned commenter named Jayne West, of Modesto, stated in a 1977 letter to federal authorities. “I believe that there is great public interest (local interest) in the preservation of historical monuments such as Yellowhammer,” West also stated in the letter.⁵⁸³

When Leighton did pass away in his mid-90s, the issue became one of immediate concern for both the sportsmen conservationist community and public land managers. The executor of his estate fired a letter to forest officials less than a month after his death. “Mr. Leighton's contribution to the propagation of trout in the area by the construction of stream flow maintenance dams is well known. He is widely recognized as an ardent conservationist whose lifelong efforts and accomplishments as such will long be remembered,” the letter stated, asking for a delay in any actions regarding the camp. “Many local citizens have emotional feelings about the camp -- some for historic reasons and some for sentimental feelings in respect to Fred Leighton's memory.”⁵⁸⁴ Leighton had seemingly come to represent not just the Emigrant basin’s status as a backcountry recreation destination. He had increasingly come to symbolize a conservationist approach to the meaning of wilderness. Even within the federal forest service, officials moving forward on plans to remove the camps and structures raised concerns over the structures’ connection to Leighton and his connection to wilderness values. “This action is really going to get the local pot

⁵⁷⁹ Gary Poste, “Yellowhammer Finale,” *Union Democrat*, 9-16-77, Drawer 2, Folder 2702:121, Stanislaus National Forest historical archives.

⁵⁸⁰ Blaine Cornell to Jayne West, Oct. 3, 1977. Drawer 2, Folder 2702:121, Special Uses, Stanislaus National Forest historical archives.

⁵⁸¹ “The Sierra Lookout,” *Union Democrat*, July 29, 1964. Drawer 2, Folder 2702:121, Stanislaus National Forest historical archives.

⁵⁸² Douglas Leisz to Senator Hayakawa, Nov. 10, 1977, Drawer 2, Folder 2702:121, Stanislaus National Forest historical archives.

⁵⁸³ Jayne West to Senator Hayakawa, July 5, 1977, Drawer 2, Folder 2702:121, Stanislaus National Forest historical archives.

⁵⁸⁴ Irving Symons to Blaine Cornell, July 9, 1979, Drawer 2, Folder 2702:121, Stanislaus National Forest historical archives.

stirred up,” one forest manager stated in 1979 about the plan to dismantle Yellowhammer, before stating in the same letter that Leighton's check dams are a more “adequate testimonial to his work and ideas.”⁵⁸⁵ While those engaged assumed the dams to be legitimate environmental features, debates over backcountry structures and the purity of wildlands occurred even before the Emigrant Wilderness check dams became controversial.

As conservationists aligned with Leighton argued for mankind's place in the wilderness in the form of backcountry camps, they did have their own visions of purity even if scaled back from a more preservationist approach. And that vision could exclude purely extractive industrial operations and the infrastructure that was required to support them. In 1953, a mining company called Tuolumne Tungsten Mines Inc. proposed expanding a tungsten operation into what was at the time remote reaches of the Emigrant Basin Primitive Area. Under this operation, the company would build 15 miles of backcountry road, where they would mine and haul the industrial metal. Both the suggestion of a major road transporting heavy machinery, and the landscape transformation that would come with open mining in the backcountry, were too much for the sportsmen and conservationists who frequented the Emigrant.⁵⁸⁶ Even in a hybrid, partially constructed landscape, some level of wildland purity was necessary to maintain the character of the place that they had come to love. The mine proposal received pushback from sportsmen and business organizations in the area, with representatives in one report fearing the operation would “destroy one of the last uncivilized beauty spots in the Sierra.” Continuing with the same report, one correspondent from a local newspaper called the wildlands under their current conditions “one of Tuolumne County's best assets ... devoid of roads and is a mecca to hunters, fishermen, campers, hikers and pack train parties.”⁵⁸⁷ Much like the river preservationists on the Stanislaus canyon, who simultaneously cast the place they sought to preserve as a wilderness and hybrid nature, wildland conservationists in the Sierra high country approached management questions balancing purity and use with some ambivalence.

These questions, and the controversies that surrounded them, grew in the decades following the official wilderness designation in 1975. Though the 112,000-acre wilderness would eventually be protected as a place “unimpaired” and “undeveloped”⁵⁸⁸ by mankind, it also saw increased attention, regulation and management by government bureaucracies. Within a couple years of the wilderness designation, the National Forest Service began drafting long-term management plans for the Emigrant Wilderness.⁵⁸⁹ While these plans and their various drafts did include

⁵⁸⁵ Tom Beck to Blaine Cornell, circa 1979, Drawer 2, Folder 2702:121, Stanislaus National Forest historical archives.

⁵⁸⁶ “Tuolumne Groups to Fight Road into Sierra 'Paradise,’” Stockton Record, June 13, 1953, Folder 1, Fred Leighton Papers.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁸ “Emigrant Wilderness Management Direction, Draft Environmental Impact Statement,” United States Department of Agriculture, March 11, 1996, 1, Google Books.

⁵⁸⁹ “Emigrant Wilderness Management Direction, Draft Environmental Impact Statement,” USDA, 2.

discussion of some historical extractive uses like mining, logging, water development and grazing, the check dams were eventually central concerns for managing the Emigrant Wilderness. These concerns grew as the backcountry was increasingly seeing a new kind of visitor in the 1970s beyond those riding on the back of a horse guided by a cowboy, or lugging fishing and camping gear on pack mules. These visitors packed lighter, typically hiked on foot, and were not as concerned with the place's traditional uses and character. Longtime, experienced campers in the Emigrant noticed the differences with these new, "other kind" of visitors. Some called them "footburners – those hardy individuals who hike into the wilderness rather than go on horse." One pack guide said in the 1960s that he saw four such campers in the backcountry in one season, a notable amount for him.⁵⁹⁰ Wanda Spicer, who worked for decades for the forest service dating back to the 1930s, recalled her last horseback trip into the Emigrant around 1973. The pack trip was the first one for her in a while, and she noticed significant changes to both the quantity and quality of hikers.

What I got a kick out of was the amount of people. We went back in those days and maybe you would see one outfit, a pack outfit. But you didn't see anyone else. When we went back, it was like Grand Central Station. Here would come 40 Scouts; and here might come a whole group of grown-ups. One group, I will never forget this man because I got off the trail with the horses. He was packing, a great big guy - twice as big as I am - he had shorts on and tennis shoes, socks up to about here; hairy legs and all. He had a little straw hat on and a little thin shirt and he was carrying an aluminum ... a regular yard chair; it was light to carry. When he stopped to rest, he'd put it down and sit in it. I nearly died.⁵⁹¹

As visitors to the Emigrant expanded in numbers and diversified, so did concerns and feedback to the federal government on how the wilderness area should be managed. Increasingly, complaints and concerns became commonplace about the check dams and their relationship to ecology and recreation. Criticism grew over the impacts of livestock and pack trips on the trails and the backcountry experience, with a new generation of wilderness advocates questioning whether those structures that had previously helped define the Emigrant as a wilderness even belonged there in the first place.

These complaints ultimately culminated in a major legal battle over the dams in federal court. In 2005, the federal lawsuit against the government argued that the National Forest Service was ultimately violating the law by allowing the check dams and by not completing more thorough environmental reviews required for them to maintain the structures. The legal move capped off many rounds of environmental preservationists providing comments and criticisms to the U.S. Department of

⁵⁹⁰ Matthews, "'Cowboying' is Dying Out - but Packing in Campers is 'Grand,'"

⁵⁹¹ Hines and York, Wanda Spicer Oral History.

Agriculture over their inclusion of the check dams in their management plans for the Emigrant Wilderness. As a centralized bureaucracy run under the USDA, the National Forest Service drafted regular, long-term plans for the Stanislaus National Forest and multiple wilderness areas managed within the forest's borders. Those included management plans and draft reports in 1979, 1988, 1998 and 2003.⁵⁹² And over the time that these plans came up for review, renewal and revision, wilderness preservation groups became increasingly hostile to human constructions like dams or buildings in the American backcountry. Major legal challenges to such structures and other human activities in these protected areas found success largely on the basis of the Wilderness Act's original language that these places should keep mankind as a temporary visitor and strive for untrammeled nature.⁵⁹³ Despite the Emigrant Wilderness' long history as a hybrid place and the law's allowance in some cases for historic structures, the check dams were under attack on legal and regulatory fronts.

Arguments in the federal lawsuit over the dams – despite functioning in the legal realm more than the political realm – practically mirrored as negatives of those just a few decades earlier over the Stanislaus River and New Melones. But this time, the preservation-minded environmentalists and the development-friendly conservationists flipped sides. Backed heavily by sportsmen groups and local, development-friendly governments, the conservationists stood strictly opposed to implementing and imposing an idealistic notion of purity onto the Emigrant Wilderness. These historic structures were tied closely to the human heritage of the high Sierra, something to which the designers of the Wilderness Act were not opposed, they argued. “The references to ‘improvements,’ ‘installations’ or ‘structures’ in the Wilderness Act are neither a prohibition of all structures nor a mandate for removal of existing structures. The Wilderness Act is not a purist manifesto which demands all wilderness lands be rendered ‘pristine’ wilderness by affirmative acts,” check-dam supporters stated in a legal filing, co-signed by conservation groups like California Trout, Tuolumne County Sportsmen, Back Country Horsemen of California, as well as the Kennedy Meadows Resort and Pack Station.⁵⁹⁴ Instead, they argued for a more hybrid approach, claiming that federal wilderness regulations can and should allow for features like check dams and quoted some management documents which themselves critiqued the prioritization of purity. “Do historic structures and other cultural resources need to be removed from Wilderness Areas to protect Wilderness values?” the parties asked in their brief, quoting a management white paper. “Wilderness lands rarely if ever lack at least some alteration and artifacts of mankind, and holds not all structures are incompatible with wilderness, is the correct one and not the zealous-purist contention.”⁵⁹⁵

Echoing some of the high-modernist rhetoric applied to the natural landscape decades earlier, the conservationists also defended the dams as structures that

⁵⁹² *High Sierra Hikers Association et al v. United States Forest Service et al*, at 57-7.

⁵⁹³ “Historical Structures in Designated Wilderness: A review of Federal Case Law,” Wilderness Watch, 2016, wildernesswatch.org/essays-and-whitepapers.

⁵⁹⁴ *High Sierra Hikers Association et al v. United States Forest Service et al*, at 108.

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

improved the waterways and associated ecosystems, making them healthier and more diverse by keeping water in these aquatic systems year-round.

The secondary impact of the dams is to alter the stream flow downstream in a beneficial way. That is, the overriding, paramount and essential element of aquatic habitat is water. Without it aquatic species cannot survive. ... So what does that mean? It means the dams add to biodiversity and “health” of the lake and stream habitat within Emigrant Wilderness by increasing habitat. While a purist would argue, beneficial or not these are still changes and not on that account desirable, the effect is not artificial.⁵⁹⁶

Furthermore, they argued, the dams themselves were both built with native materials and produced approximately 190 total acres of water, which was .0016 percent of the wilderness.⁵⁹⁷ Not only were these dams consistent with a long-held, traditional vision of American wilderness, they argued, but they made the wilderness and the nature protected within it better. Such a rhetorical position often mirrored that of the river preservationists who worked in vain to save the Stanislaus River from Parrotts Ferry to Camp Nine. Not only was it possible to reconcile the concept of wilderness with dams, but the histories, physical traces and legacies of human work actually improved the wilderness by making it more legible and usable for recreation.

And the same held true for their opponents. The wilderness preservationists, backed by groups like the Sierra Club and Wilderness Watch, bolstered much of their case with legal precedent and regulatory discourse. But their argument at its core mirrored that of the pro-New-Melones parties and organizations who had previously sought successfully to undermine a hybrid vision for wilderness use and management. An approach allowing for dams to be part of the wilderness was anathema to both the spirit and the letter of federal environmental law, they stated in their legal filings. The waterways these dams created or augmented, the ecosystems they helped sustain, and the fish species they supported, were not natural or native at all, they would claim. These dams changed the “natural lakes” and creek systems of the Emigrant Basin by “artificially” changing water flows, “unnaturally” shifting sediment distribution in the waterways. This created conditions for self-sustaining fisheries where the lakes were previously oligotrophic, and in turn harming native frog and toad species now competing with and being hunted by these fish populations in the changed hydrology of the basin. Furthermore, they argued, the dams violated the aesthetic aspects of the federal Wilderness Act, which defines wilderness as “an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primitive character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions,” and “where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man.” The law prohibited human-built structures, “except as necessary to meet minimum

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid.

requirements for the administration of the area” as wilderness, they argued. Despite the Emigrant Wilderness’ close ties to the Leighton story and the construction of the check dams, these structures, they stated, did not meet such a standard. The government was “violating federal laws by deciding to maintain, repair, or operate (the dams), by preparing a deficient analysis of the environmental impacts of doing so, and by illegally harming wildlife in the wilderness,” the preservationists claimed. “The aesthetic, recreational, and scientific interests of Plaintiffs and their members have been and will continue to be adversely affected and irreparably injured” if the dams remained.⁵⁹⁸ The preservationists’ arguments carried the day, and on June 8, 2006, a federal judge ruled the dams would have to slowly deteriorate over time. “The area manifested its wilderness characteristics before the dams were in place and would lose nothing in the way of wilderness values were the dams not present,” the judge stated in the opinion.⁵⁹⁹

There are clear differences in terms of the material fate of both wild places in this study. The Stanislaus rapids were flooded under hundreds of feet of water impounded by a major dam, one much larger than the upstream facilities that helped construct the previous conditions in the canyon. The canyon’s fate came quickly with its full and final inundation happening in one, wet winter. The fate of the Emigrant Wilderness check dams would come with their disappearance instead of the construction of new dams. And it would come more gradually as the court ordered they deteriorate slowly with time despite preservationists’ requests they simply be removed. The dams remain mostly in place today, though their structure and function weaken with every freeze and thaw. But a key similarity between these two cases remained. In both the Emigrant Wilderness and the Stanislaus canyon, people and systems in charge of their management rejected hybrid visions of American wilderness. There was no room for dams and all they signified in these wild places.

Complicating the purity critique in the wilderness

In many ways, these two case studies on the construction of wilderness along California waterways reinforce the critique of environmental scholars like White and Cronon on the idealization of purity in nature. In both cases, purity was not some essential or self-evident quality as much as it was a product of environmental movements which shifted perceptions of nature and prioritized solitude and scenic beauty over the more complicated, earlier “cult” discussed by historian Roderick Nash. This cult, as Nash explained, was a lens through which Americans saw wilderness not only as a symbol of purity and beauty, but also as a place to rediscover their primitive instincts through sport and a symbol of a lost frontier. Purity in both cases was an idea, unobtainable in the real world and set in opposition to a hybrid vision of American wildlands that held space for human work, human history and the traces of both to remain and be recognized. Furthermore, the use of purity discourses in conflicts over

⁵⁹⁸ *High Sierra Hikers Association et al v. United States Forest Service et al*, at 57-7. All quoted text in this paragraph before this note excerpted from this source.

⁵⁹⁹ *High Sierra Hikers Association et al v. United States Forest Service et al*, at 93.

environmental preservation ultimately became tools for development-friendly voices in American politics. This was perhaps clearest in the Stanislaus River debate, where pro-dam campaigns strategically used idealized notions of purity to undermine the case for preserving the canyon and its popular rapids. It also remains true for the Emigrant Wilderness, where the uses dating back to the 1920 remain a cultural and political symbol set against what some have suggested are the excesses of an uncompromising, purity-driven vision of environmental protection. Conservative lawmakers have worked to pass conservation laws that specifically allow for historic uses in the Emigrant Wilderness despite the dams' legal and material fate. Typically these are the same conservative lawmakers who decry the kinds of environmental organizations that both worked to protect the Stanislaus canyon and remove the Emigrant dams, including Rep. Tom McClintock who sponsored legislation in 2014 to codify into law that horse packing, commercial outfitting and guiding, camping, pack stock grazing; and associated campfires, tent locations, and social trails are legally allowable in the wilderness area.⁶⁰⁰ Local governments, including Leighton's home of Tuolumne County, made an even clearer connection between wilderness recreation and the dams. "The goal of this bill is simple: to protect the traditional activities in the Emigrant Wilderness. Unfortunately, since this wilderness designation in 1975, efforts have been successful in eroding some of the Emigrant Wilderness's character such as the check dams," members of the local county legislature stated in a letter to federal officials.⁶⁰¹ Striving for an unnatural state of purity might indeed stoke political rancor, and in turn empower the most partisan.

But these two cases of constructed wilderness also complicate some of the critiques of purity. Though not completely incompatible with these critiques, the relationship between purity ideals and environmental preservation here offers a more complex image of purity than the word and its critics suggest. First, and perhaps most central to this project, is the fact that purity here functioned in both cases as a strategic tool for various ends. Those ends served both sides of what has long been considered a binary opposition to environmental contests. Pro-development conservationists and wise-use proponents, long associated with the anti-environmental right wing of American politics, used the purity ideal to defeat river preservationist campaigns along the Stanislaus River. Anti-development wilderness preservationists, long associated with the environmentalist left wing of American politics, utilized the same purity discourses to defeat the wise-use conservationists seeking to preserve the dams of the Emigrant Wilderness. At times, the arguments were virtually identical on both sides as they sought institutional, legal and political victories. So, while Cronon, White and other critics of purity in nature remain relevant in environmental debates, there is not always a clear association between the material purity ideal in nature and an ideological purity of environmental activism.

⁶⁰⁰ Emigrant Wilderness Historical Use Preservation Act, HR 3606, 113th Congress, H. Rept. 113-595, Nov. 21, 2013, congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/house-bill/3606.

⁶⁰¹ John Grant to Senator Feinstein, July 21, 2015, Board of Supervisors, County of Tuolumne, tuolumneco.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view_id=5&clip_id=164&meta_id=25363.

These case studies also show a potentially more nuanced relationship between purity, nature preservation and recreation than these critiques suggest. Both White and Cronon discuss recreation, scenery and sport in the wildlands as inauthentic representations of the work people conducted in nature for subsistence and survival. Their depictions are similar to other critiques of the commodification of Western landscapes, like Hal Rothman's study on tourism. Here, activities such as fishing, boating or horseback riding (or skiing, hunting or camping) seemed to mock legitimate human labor that helped people understand nature by shaping it. Recreation in this critique is a dress-up game for which these seemingly pure landscapes and waterways would be preserved. Such relationships forged through recreation were ultimately artificial, these critiques posit, or at least less meaningful or authentic than the relationships forged through real work or more meaningful labor on the land. "Why, for instance, is the 'wilderness experience' so often conceived as a form of recreation best enjoyed by those whose class privileges give them the time and resources to leave their jobs behind and 'get away from it all?' Why does the protection of wilderness so often seem to pit urban recreationists against rural people who actually earn their living from the land (excepting those who sell goods and services to the tourists themselves)?"⁶⁰² Cronon asked in his essay on wilderness. White echoed those sentiments in writing about purity, work and nature. "Modern environmentalists often ... ignore the ways that work itself is a means of knowing nature while celebrating the virtues of play and recreation in nature. ... Work once bore the burden of connecting us with nature. In shifting much of this burden onto the various forms of play that take us back to nature, Americans have shifted the burden to leisure," White stated. "We have implicitly presumed that the journey of first white men must have been one long backpack across the West," he continued. "But they did not gain knowledge of nature through play; they knew and connected with the world through work."⁶⁰³

But the two case studies in this project offer a more complicated relationship between work, recreation and nature than these purity critiques suggest. First, the recreation associated with these wild places – the very activities that helped identify and construct their early wilderness character – was not associated with purity at all. Instead, they took place on waterways and landscapes that the recreationists embraced as hybrid forms of nature where human engineering and ecological processes intermingled as part of complex, socio-ecological systems. The purity ideal pushed and pursued by activists on either side was not meant for pure, untrammelled wilderness. Instead, that purity undermined the central forms of wilderness recreation in these wild places. Second, both on the Stanislaus and in the Emigrant, those recreational activities for many constituted real work and real labor in the wilderness, as both the whitewater community and the backcountry pack community created working economies of guides and service providers earning livelihoods in the wilderness. Though Cronon does acknowledge this, the critique implicitly seems to

⁶⁰² Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness, or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," 85.

⁶⁰³ White, "Are you an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?" 172-177.

relegate this kind of service work to less-important status and does not allow for these wilderness places to also function as working landscapes and working waterways.

Finally, and perhaps most profoundly, the critique of these recreational activities – regularly associated with the privileged racial and economic classes who seek to preserve natural purity in some form – ignore an important and underserved population in landscape preservation discourses. The differently abled have long fought for access to both private and public spaces in the United States, with the country’s wilderness often functioning as a network of places off limits to those with physical and cognitive limitations. But both the Stanislaus canyon and the Emigrant Wilderness were accessible to communities with varied abilities long before legislative and regulatory correctives required public places to accommodate them. Because of the roads, boats and robust guide systems, the Stanislaus was considered one of only wild rivers in America regularly rafted by differently abled. “The New Melones Dam would destroy a completely unique six-mile stretch of mile rapids which are used for rafting and nature excursions for people with disabilities,” Edward Roberts, of the state Department of Rehabilitation, stated in a letter to then Governor Jerry Brown during the campaign to save the Stanislaus. “This not-too-fast, not-too slow section of the Stanislaus is one of the only suitable areas for rafting trips for able-bodied or disabled nature lovers. To lose it would mean that countless people, including blind, deaf and otherwise disabled Californians would miss a thrilling, inspiring experience.”⁶⁰⁴ A representative of the Disability Law Center called the river canyon “the only easily accessible roadless wilderness experience in the state. . . . for most people, it is an experience which has been, not rare, but non-existent.”⁶⁰⁵

And in the Emigrant, the availability of horses and pack animals has long offered individuals and groups access to the high granite of the Sierra backcountry who would otherwise have difficulty navigating the landscapes due to physical limitations. One of them, a Reno man named Dennis Syfers, told a Modesto newspaper columnist in 1991 that he started packing the Emigrant with animals exclusively after his then-wife injured herself on the hike a decade prior. Since then, for excursions which required him to pack out the gear and assist her, he started riding horses to the basin lakes for overnight trips. “Never again,” Syfers said of hiking by foot. “Now I get back here and I’m refreshed.”⁶⁰⁶ So while critiques of wilderness purity rightly connect recreation with racial, gender and class privilege, they do not account for a more complex relationship between recreation, nature and the wide spectrum of human experience tied to physical abilities.

In both the case of the Stanislaus River canyon and the Emigrant Wilderness, the ideal of purity in nature eventually dominated preservation discourses in political and legal settings even though the two wilderness places were long experienced and managed as hybrid natures. In both cases, the very environmental conditions that helped construct their identities as ideal wilderness places – the consistent flow of

⁶⁰⁴ Edward V. Roberts to Jerry Brown, March 27, 1979, Carton 1, Folder 31, Dubois Papers.

⁶⁰⁵ Rita Townsend to Congress, Oct. 19, 1979, Carton 10, File 29, Friends of the River Foundation Records.

⁶⁰⁶ Jardine, “I’ll Be A Cowboy All My Life.”

water supplied through human-engineered dams – became liabilities in contests over the definition of legitimate nature. In many ways, these case studies in the construction of wilderness can reinforce the ongoing critiques of discourses idealizing purity in nature for environmental management. But they also complicate those critiques, as purity discourses functioned for, and were utilized by, actors seeking various and often opposing ideological and material outcomes. Furthermore, these places offer more complex ways to think about the relationships between nature, recreation and the perceptions of ideal nature as they relate to accessibility for all groups, including those long kept out of the country's wildlands by the very efforts to prevent human engineering in the backcountry.



Figure 82: Water fills the canyon behind the New Melones Dam, 1979. Ty Childress, courtesy of Columbia College Special Collections and Stanislaus River Archive (stanislausriver.org).



Figure 83: Water from New Melones disrupted existing riparian ecosystems. John Sensor, courtesy of Columbia College Special Collections and Stanislaus River Archive (stanislausriver.org).



Figure 84: In 2003, the U.S. Forest Service released a comprehensive report on the aging check dams in the Emigrant Wilderness and plans to maintain them or let them deteriorate. Wilderness activists challenged the plan to allow some of the dams to remain in the wilderness. Courtesy of USDA Forest Service Stanislaus National Forest.



Figure 85: Governor Jerry Brown stood with wilderness activists when calling for halt to filling of New Melones Dam, 1979. Sacramento Bee, courtesy of Stanislaus River Archive (stanislausriver.org).

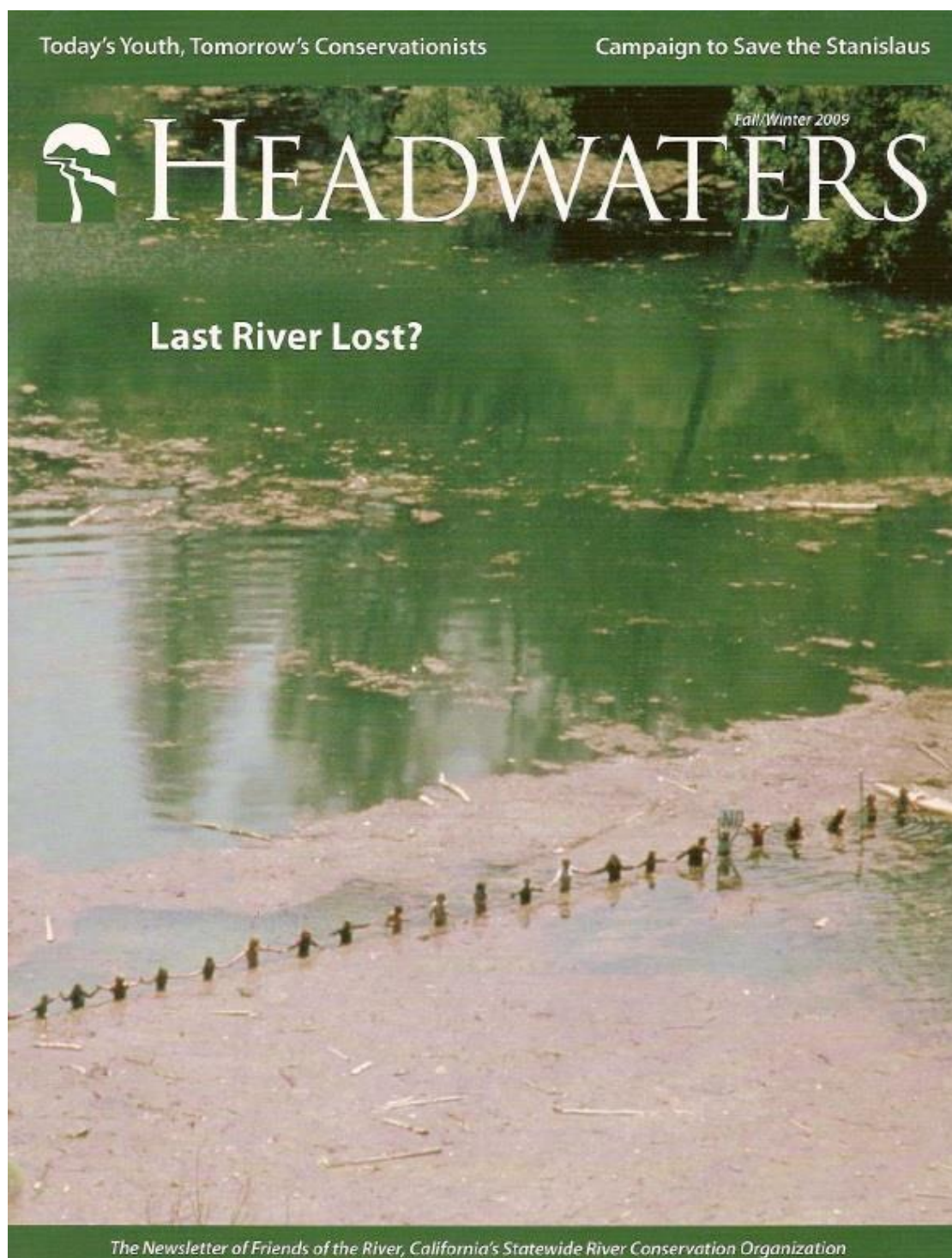


Figure 86: The Stanislaus River campaign became a national campaign to preserve wilderness, and today the river remains a symbol for how dams destroy wild nature, 2009. *Headwaters* magazine, courtesy of Stanislaus River Archive.



Figure 87: River campaigns increasingly personified the Stanislaus in literature and rhetoric, calling campaign events opportunities to witness the end of the river's life and burial, 1979. Don Briggs, courtesy of Stanislaus River Archive (stanislausriver.org).



Figure 88: River preservationists faced off with pro-dam protesters, many of whom disputed claims that the Stanislaus River was wild, 1980. Al Golub, courtesy of Stanislaus River Archive (stanislausriver.org).



Figure 89: A crib dam and water pipe behind the put-in at Camp Nine remained in the 1970s as part of the Stanislaus power system, though major structures like the old powerhouse were gone, 1971. Larry Orman, courtesy of Stanislaus River Archive (stanislausriver.org).



Figure 90: Wilderness preservationists in the 1990s and early 2000s started claiming the check dams in the Emigrant Wilderness damaged the environment as well as wilderness character and experiences, ca. 2006. Courtesy of *High Sierra Hikers Association et al v. United States Forest Service et al.*



Figure 91: Yellowhammer Camp, located in the Emigrant Wilderness and built by Fred Leighton, became a symbol of the place's pioneer past for some and of its negative human presence for others. National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, courtesy of USDA Forest Service, Stanislaus National Forest.



Figure 92: A sign was placed at the entrance to the Emigrant Basin wildlands celebrating Fred Leighton, his check dams and their contribution to wilderness recreation and ecology, 1964. *The Union Democrat*, courtesy of USDA Forest Service, Stanislaus National Forest.

CHAPTER VIII

AFTERWARD

At its heart, this dissertation may simply be a response to an obscure passage from one book published almost 40 years ago. The book itself – *Rivers of Empire* by historian Donald Worster – remains despite its age monumentally influential for both environmental historians and scholars of water in the American West. Its materialist approach to the history of irrigation and agriculture in the arid region helped spur the rise of a new generation of historians who sought to center both the environment in their analyses of social change and society in their analyses of environmental change. Worster rightfully identified rivers as ideal settings for such approaches, as the history of irrigation and other forms of environmental control along the world’s flowing waterways cannot be studied without examining its relationship to the domination of people.

But Worster opens his book with a flawed example, moving forward on a false premise. Perhaps the best place to begin a study connecting environmental control with social control in the West, he claimed in his opening pages, is “by sauntering along one of its irrigation ditches,” like “the Friant-Kern Canal coming down from the Sierra foothills to the desert lands around Bakersfield in the Great Central Valley of California.” This stream of flowing water is “vastly different” from more natural rivers, like the Sudbury and Concord that helped inspire Henry David Thoreau’s writings on both nature and society which in turn helped invigorate transcendentalist and romantic thought and a new form of American environmental consciousness. The “Friant-Kern, in contrast, is a work of advanced artifice, a piece not of nature but of technology. . . . There is no freedom for nature itself, for natural rivers as free-flowing entities with their own integrity and order,” Worster observed, just “ecological and social regimentation.”⁶⁰⁷ He continued:

Here then is the true West which we see reflected in the waters of the modern irrigation ditch. Were Thoreau to stroll along such a ditch today, he would find it a sterile place for living things. The modern ditch is lined along its entire length with concrete to prevent the seepage of water into the soil; consequently, nothing green can take root along its banks, no trees, no sedges and reeds, no grassy meadows, no seeds or blossoms dropping lazily into a side-eddy. Nor can one find here an egret stalking frogs and salamanders, or a red-winged blackbird swaying on a stem, or a muskrat burrowing into the mud. Quite simply, the modern canal, unlike a river, is not an ecosystem.⁶⁰⁸

⁶⁰⁷ Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 4.

⁶⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

That description and its interpretation of environmental conditions doesn't hold true for the millions of people whose formative experiences were among the landscapes shaped by the artifice and engineering Worster critiques in his book. Since the construction of this canal, the thousands of miles of canals and ditches like it, and the dams and additional infrastructure built to control the remaining rivers, generations of central California residents and visitors learned about and experienced nature in these places Worster described on such unnatural terms. Children fell in love with aquatic ecosystems among the very infrastructure he claimed was lifeless and sterile, catching fish in canals and ditches and chasing tadpoles in irrigation gates among the walnut and almond orchards. They caught prized bullfrogs in the shallows of water district reservoirs, and they photographed endangered cranes along the engineered landscapes shaped for California agribusiness. While capitalism and human engineering have transformed the landscapes of California's interior, and in turn have helped shape its economic, social and ideological landscapes, they have not destroyed nature for many of the people who would visit and live among it. They've just created new versions of it. This dissertation, then, is an attempt to show how such natures are constructed both physically and socially and to narrow the separation between Thoreau's Concord and Worster's canals.

Furthermore, while not engaging directly with it until now, this study may add to what has been a significant rift in environmental history that scholar Andrew Isenberg described as "the struggle over how to define the field."⁶⁰⁹ That rift separates what Isenberg called the "materialists" like Worster, who use structural critiques of capitalism to track environmental and social change, from the "idealists" who do the same from a more postmodern, cultural perspective.⁶¹⁰ Scholars of the latter collective included Cronon and White, both of whom have critiqued Worster for his rigid and deterministic frameworks and have instead called on scholars to consider the ways in which culture allows expansive and varied interpretations of nature across space and time. These idealist environmental historians call on people not to merely look at hydrological engineering and see artifice over nature. Instead, they suggest that forward-looking environmental approaches should consider studying dams and formal, modern infrastructure as parts of processes that change nature but do not annihilate it. For the idealists, nature cannot be annihilated. It both exists on its own terms and is what people decide it is. Those decisions have lingering and reverberating consequences both for the humans and non-humans of the world.

But this study, and all the work invested in it, fails to make that point as clearly and profoundly as an obscure, 12-minute film viewed by a few thousand people on the Internet. In the film, four young men go fishing in central California. "They're not biting," says one of the men as he casts a lure with his spinning reel into small body of water. "How'd you hear about this place?" asks a companion. "The guy at the tackle shop," comes the response. "I know it's survival, survival out here in the wilderness,"

⁶⁰⁹ Andrew C. Isenberg, "A New Environmental History," in *Oxford Handbook of Environmental History*, ed. Andrew C. Isenberg (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3-9.

⁶¹⁰ *Ibid.*

says another of the four. “Totally. Those city folk don’t understand this kind of stuff,” said another.⁶¹¹ The scene would be a familiar one for fishermen in the region, as it mimics mundane but typical conversations that occur along the region’s streams and rivers. But this conversation doesn’t take place along the wild Stanislaus River or the pristine creeks of the Emigrant Wilderness. The men in the clip – all members of a rock band called Granddaddy – are standing and sitting around a suburban swimming pool, complete with concrete ground, wooden fence and gas barbecue grill.

At first glance, the scene’s absurdity and humorous tone suggest that these musicians share a similar view of human dominance over nature as Worster. The pool is obviously not “a perfect bass habitat... I mean, a perch... and stingray habitat,” as one of the fishermen states before the men share fish stories of catching trophy televisions in past trips. To a neutral, first-time observer, the satire oozing from the scene suggests a commentary on how suburban development replaces nature with sterile, human artifice and lifeless technology. These musicians are clearly not romanticizing the landscapes of suburban America.

Still, the band until its disintegration in the mid-2000s created music that was aesthetically and thematically aligned with an idealist approach to environmental history that considers nature as a hybrid process, not an essential entity. The film itself was completed in the late 1990s, released as a making-of DVD for the band’s release, *The Sophtware Slump*, the most acclaimed album for an independent band that otherwise functioned in relative obscurity. The concept album featured songs about alcoholic robots⁶¹² and forests made up of broken appliances,⁶¹³ while blending organic and breezy musical styles of western country and folk with the mathematical rigidity of electronic pop. Critiques regularly discussed the band’s constant focus on the intersections between human and technology, between nature and artifice. But unlike another album with similar themes released the around the same time (*OK Computer* by neo-progressive rock band Radiohead), Granddaddy’s musical approach to these hybrid spaces carried as much acceptance and resignation as anxiety and fear. “(The band) suggested that far from destroying us, technology would simply lead to disappointment, both with ourselves and how the future was supposed to be somehow better,” stated one critic.⁶¹⁴ “*The Sophtware Slump* is the point where the deflated myth of the American West met the deflated myth of technological salvation. The fear isn't that computers would destroy us, it's that we'd end up living in a futuristic world but still have the same old problems,” echoed another.⁶¹⁵

⁶¹¹ Granddaddy, “Making of The Sophtware Slump,” YouTube Video, 12:09, Aug 24, 2011, youtu.be/CNs9Nr2P0mQ.

⁶¹² Granddaddy, “Jed the Humanoid,” YouTube Video, 4:18, Feb. 9, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iF5YA-ofvyA>.

⁶¹³ Granddaddy, “Broken Household Appliance National Forest,” YouTube Video, 4:34, Feb. 9, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qiNLJg5fBWQ>.

⁶¹⁴ Derek Robertson, “Jason Lytle: What’s Wrong with the Safe and Warm?” *DIY*, October 10, 2012, diymag.com/archive/jason-lytle-whats-wrong-with-the-safe-and-warm

⁶¹⁵ Mike Powell, “The Sophtware Slump,” *Pitchfork*, Aug. 31, 2011, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/15723-the-sophtware-slump/>.

Granddaddy functioned during its creative run not simply as a critic and observer of those points of intersection between nature and technology. The band was also a product of them and their history. Headquartered in the Central Valley city of Modesto (as well as its rural surroundings), the band and its chief songwriters grew up amidst landscapes and waterways shaped as much by engineering as by ecology. Among these were stretches of the Stanislaus River, where band members regularly fished.⁶¹⁶ While the ironic, biting and often the melancholy subject matter of their songs make it clear these musicians don't romanticize the hybrid places of central California, it's also clear the history of those places deeply inform their artistry and aesthetics. Band leader and chief songwriter Jason Lytle once contrasted their home area against bigger cities that he claimed are, "little bit too heavy on the artifice." A place like Modesto, he said, is one that clarifies how, "A lot of times it's just better to take the slow road. It's like the analogy of the freeway versus frontage road. I would very much rather take the frontage road, just because it allows you to kind of stop every now and then, take a look at things."⁶¹⁷ Later in the same film, Lytle drives to a home studio where some of the record was recorded. To get there, his compact pickup truck had to travel through miles of fruit and nut orchards irrigated by the waters of the Stanislaus River or Tuolumne River.⁶¹⁸ He then describes a recording technique the band used on the album, using concrete and steel irrigation gates located in the middle of those orchards to create organic echo effects. "Out here, there's a lot of irrigation and a lot of underground waterways – big, sort of, holding areas for water. They have this tremendous echo. And it's not as expensive of having to go to this big, incredibly expensive studio."⁶¹⁹

The hybrid landscapes of central California have etched themselves onto the sonic foundations for Granddaddy's music. Beyond this, the band's songs blend images of the organic and mechanical, the digital and material, while telling stories set in, or focused on, hybrid landscapes where the lines are blurred between artificial and the natural; where the two collide, interact, and influence one another. In telling these stories, Granddaddy's music exudes an ambivalence about the landscapes and waterscapes, both lamenting and building a unique aesthetic out of this intersection between nature and technology. In doing so, these musicians represent just one of the many ongoing legacies that remain today from the region's hydraulic engineering and the modernist environmental approaches that drove it. While the events analyzed in this study all happened in the past, they still live today and will continue to do so not only through unique cultural creations influenced by their environmental consequences but also through the political and social conflicts born out of a particular reality – that water is a finite resource in an arid land. Granddaddy's music captures the environmental conditions of this reality in central California, centering an ambivalence experienced when living in a world where nature is a cyborg. Neither romanticizing

⁶¹⁶ Jud Cost, "he Making Of Granddaddy's Sunday," *Magnet*, November 23, 2015, magnetmagazine.com/2015/11/23/magnet-classics-granddaddys-sunday/.

⁶¹⁷ Granddaddy, "Making of The Sophtware Slump."

⁶¹⁸ Ibid.

⁶¹⁹ Ibid.

purity, nor offering triumphalist proclamations of mankind's abilities to create or improve upon it, perhaps that kind of ambivalence could lend itself to solutions in the ongoing social conflicts and environmental problems that remain along the Stanislaus River and in the Emigrant Wilderness. Especially as a changing climate makes the lands more arid and the water more finite.

Still saving the Stan; Still defining the Stan

For those driving along the right country roads, it could have appeared around 2015 that the battle over the Stanislaus River never ended. Those roads would most likely be running between stretches of nut and fruit orchards in the shadow of New Melones, inside of the river's lower watershed communities of Oakdale, Riverbank, Escalon or Linden. Along those dusty country roads, billboards calling for their readers to "Save the Stan" would break up the monotony of parallel lines of fruit and nut trees sweeping past the vehicle windows one after another. In some cases, the billboard or large sign would have a picture of a river running through rural landscapes. In others, the "A" on the "Stan" would include a stylized graphic of a blue ribbon winding through green background. The connection between the slogan and the famous (or infamous, depending on the perspective) river preservation movement in the region 40 years earlier would have been difficult to ignore for passersby with knowledge of local politics and environmental issues. Just like in the 1970s, someone was saying that the Stanislaus River was under threat and calling on the public to rally to the cause.

But the "Stan" that these signs wanted to save was different than the one which wound through the canyon more than a generation prior. And the people who wanted it saved were different, too. These signs – some versions of which are still posted sporadically along farmlands in Stanislaus and San Joaquin counties – were part of a campaign backed by multiple irrigation districts that draw water from the river and the agricultural interests that use that water for economic production.⁶²⁰ The Stan here includes the stretches of lower river, much like those which pro-New-Melones argued needed water impounded by the major dam for water quality and fish habitat improvements. Following similar logic, saving the Stan here involved keeping more water in the upstream reservoirs year-round, which in turn purportedly would improve water quality and habitat for migratory fish and other aquatic wildlife. One way this would occur, according to the water districts, would be by maintaining cold water temperatures for trout populations in the stretches downstream from New Melones. New Melones water levels lower during tight water years, which results in higher temperatures, which impacts what historically has been a healthy trout population in the lower Stanislaus River – a population that also fuels recreational interest and signifies ecological health.⁶²¹ "The future of rainbow trout in the Stanislaus River is dependent on our future management. Key to future management is preservation of

⁶²⁰ "Protecting the Stanislaus River," Save the Stan, South San Joaquin Irrigation District, Oakdale Irrigation District, Tri-Dam Project, Accessed June 13, 2023, <https://savethestan.org/about-sts/>.

⁶²¹ FISHBIO, "The Future of Rainbow Trout in the Stanislaus River," YouTube Video, Aug. 15, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=43Eysji85vE>.

adequate cold-water pool in New Melones Reservoir to maintain adequate water temperatures,” said one scientist with Fishbio, a private fisheries research firm tapped by the water districts to study the lower river.⁶²² One manager with the Oakdale Irrigation District stated it more directly – “When you send that river down it's not there in the reservoir to meet the cold water needs of the fisheries.”⁶²³ The “Stan” here was the health of the lower river, and saving it would require holding more water in New Melones year-round.

But that outcome would also be advantageous to local farmers, as more water would remain impounded for distribution during irrigation seasons. This remains especially true in the context of recent management decisions and policy discussions about the role of Stanislaus River water to help with water quality, threatened fish populations in the San Joaquin River watershed, and the river’s embattled delta in central California. State and federal agencies have made multiple recommendations and mandates to increase water flows from New Melones Dam and other Stanislaus facilities for fish populations. These increased flows mean less water stored for irrigation, thus less water for farming. “More water leaving the basin each year means less water going into storage to keep the dams and reservoirs full. Less water going to storage in dams and reservoirs eliminates the safety net for people and the environment when droughts occur,” reads one statement in campaign materials advocating against increasing water flows in the lower Stanislaus. “Less water available during droughts means these facilities would be drained more often to meet water shortages. Under the state’s plan, it’s estimated New Melones Reservoir would be ‘empty’ one out of five years.”⁶²⁴ Such a situation, the Save the Stan campaign claims in the same publication, would have “enormous” negative impacts on regional agriculture. “Agriculture in San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Merced counties is worth more than \$8.5 billion annually, with those dollars circulating many times over. The state’s plan could divert more than 350,000 acre-feet of water away from agriculture. One estimate suggests that as many as 240,000 acres would be fallowed; thousands of jobs in farming, trucking, food processing and related industries would be lost; and tens of millions of dollars would be sucked out of the local economy.”⁶²⁵

So saving the Stan here means more water in reservoirs, which in turn – according to the campaign run by agricultural interests – will not only improve the ecological health of the lower river, but will also, very conveniently, work out for the farmers who will get to utilize more water for irrigation in dry weather. Furthermore, this effort would save the Stan from environmental management agencies that associate improved ecological health with more water in the river system during critical times for fish migration. The campaign and its funders rely on research from a private firm they work with, and the research suggesting that these increased releases

⁶²² Ibid.

⁶²³ Ibid.

⁶²⁴ “Increased unimpaired flows would take water away from farmers,” Save the Stan, South San Joaquin Irrigation District, Oakdale Irrigation District, Tri-Dam Project, Accessed June 13, 2023, <https://savethestan.org/unimpaired-flows/>.

⁶²⁵ Ibid.

don't help – and even may hurt – Stanislaus fish populations.⁶²⁶ The real threats faced by trout and salmon in the river system include warm water (exacerbated by these releases), predation by species like striped bass, and lack of proper gravel beds for spawning fish, according to the firm's research.⁶²⁷

Four decades after the massive campaign to save the Stanislaus River from federal water managers who built New Melones failed, a new campaign built an image off the lingering memories of those efforts. In many ways, that campaign served as an ironically negative contrast to the original as it involved farmers working to increase amounts of water for irrigation and continued the mantra that dam management was vital to lower-river health. Yet something remained the same. Powerful dam agencies, with state bureaucrats at the helm, were still the enemies. And still central to the question of environmental management and protection was the question of what constitutes nature in an engineered, socio-ecological system. "It's hard to find a 'natural' river in California's Central Valley. Significant changes over the past century, such as dams and water use, have altered the daily, monthly, and annual variations in river flow, or the hydrographs, of the valley's rivers. At the same time, the landscape around those rivers has changed dramatically, shifting towards agriculture and urban development. In recent years, river managers worldwide have been striving to release more natural river flows, or flows that mimic the natural hydrograph of a river system. But just what is a 'natural hydrograph' in a river system that has been thoroughly, and in some cases permanently, altered?"⁶²⁸ asks one statement created by Fishbio, linked from the Save the Stan campaign Website.

Perhaps the main similarity between the current campaign to Save the Stan and the similarly named campaign two generations prior has been the makeup of the sides battling over these questions. Here, as before, the battle is pitched as one between environmentalists seeking preservation of pre-dam conditions and pro-development interests seeking to maintain regimes that favor instrumental uses of water for agriculture and other extractive industries. Environmentalist and river preservationist groups – some of whom were involved in the original campaign to preserve the river canyon – have supported management trends toward increased flows for fish populations. But even more recently, in the wake of historic droughts in the region which have seen New Melones and other regional reservoirs critically low, those interests in increased flows also intersect closely with the preservation campaigns built out of the Stanislaus canyon struggle. Calls for restoration of that wild place have grown in recent years, some of them coming from the same voices. In April 2022, Mark Dubois teamed up with fellow Friends of the River activist Sue Knaup to form

⁶²⁶ "Want to help fish? Improve habitat and reduce predation," Save the Stan, South San Joaquin Irrigation District, Oakdale Irrigation District, Tri-Dam Project, Accessed June 13, 2023, <https://savethestan.org/science/>.

⁶²⁷ "Our ideas to increase fish population in the Stanislaus River," Save the Stan, South San Joaquin Irrigation District, Oakdale Irrigation District, Tri-Dam Project, Accessed June 13, 2023, <https://savethestan.org/our-ideas/>.

⁶²⁸ "Fish Report: What's 'natural' in a regulated river?" FISHBIO, Jan. 28, 2013, <https://fishbio.com/whats-natural-in-a-regulated-river/>.

Restoring the Stanislaus River, an organization dedicated – among multiple goals – to “reducing the size of New Melones Dam and permanently restoring the river”⁶²⁹ both along the historic canyon and elsewhere in the watershed. Knaup was a teenager near the end of the 1970s campaign to save the Stanislaus, receiving local attention for her efforts to catch and move wildlife that would have been trapped and likely killed as their habitat was inundated by the dam.⁶³⁰ Through the new organization, Knaup is working with preservationists to complete and distribute a film entitled *Reclaiming Estanislao*, which they describe as “a narrative feature film” that “tells the true story of the campaign to save the Stanislaus River near Yosemite” and to “show that it is never too late to right a terrible wrong.”⁶³¹

Other river preservationists have increased calls to revisit the New Melones Dam, either calling for its removal or calling for management reforms that could restore conditions in the canyon. Rebecca Lawton, former Stanislaus River guide and author of environmental literature, wrote of these revitalized campaigns to restore the river in 2022. “Now, with New Melones logging its fourth decade of broken promises in water delivery, flood control and energy production, hundreds of river advocates from the old campaign hope to reclaim the Stan,” Lawton stated, also quoting Dubois who argued the restoked campaign was part of “national momentum” on dam removal.⁶³² In 2020, politics scholar and Stanislaus campaigner Sean Kay co-wrote a policy white paper on the problems with New Melones management. Entitled “Deliver the River,” which echoed one of many Stanislaus slogans from the 1970s, the paper claimed faulty assumptions in its planning and implementation have led to environmental and social problems on the river. “Restoration of the upper Stanislaus River can correct a historic injustice, improve the environment and agricultural sustainability, and offer new economic benefits for local communities,” stated Kay,⁶³³ who has since passed away. Also cited in that paper was a 1994 report on New Melones, compiled by the federal Bureau of Reclamation, which found that the dam itself – outside of the environmentalist conflicts – did not solve the perpetual water conflicts in the state but instead exacerbated them. The dam did not solve “problems with the lack of a sustainable water supply” in the watershed, with its management issues centered around the “operational and water yield problems” of an over-allocated river that cannot meet so many competing demands with enough water. “With the

⁶²⁹ “About,” Restoring the Stanislaus River, Accessed June 14, 2023, <https://restoringthestanislaus.org/index.php/about-stanislaus>.

⁶³⁰ Sue Knaup, “Stanislaus River Wildlife Rescue,” March, 2020, Stanislaus River Archive, <https://www.stanislausriver.org/document/the-story-of-susan-brooks-and-the-stanislaus-wildlife-rescue-campaign/>.

⁶³¹ “The Film,” Reclaiming Estanislao, Accessed June 2023, <https://www.reclaimingestanislaothefilm.com/index.php/stanislaus-river-the-film>

⁶³² Rebecca Lawton, “It’s Never too late to save a River,” *Writers on the Range*, Nov. 14, 2022, <https://writersontherange.org/its-never-too-late-to-save-a-river/>.

⁶³³ Sean Kay and Dakota Goodman, “Deliver the River: States’ Rights, Cost-Benefit, and Environmental Justice on California’s Stanislaus River,” March, 2020, N.P., The Stanislaus River Archive, <https://www.stanislausriver.org/document/deliver-the-river-states-rights-cost-benefit-and-environmental-justice-on-californias-stanislaus-river-2/>.

enormity of the problems facing New Melones, it seems unlikely that the project will ever realize its full potential as a multi-use unit. Indeed, new Melones may become a case study of all that can go wrong with a project,” the report reads.⁶³⁴

And among these competing interests, even after they seemed to be doused by the water in New Melones, remains whitewater rafting. In 2016, as the reservoir was among its lowest water levels due to one of the worst, multi-year droughts in at least a century, the federal Bureau of Reclamation announced interest in re-opening a use-permit system for white-water rafting trips starting at Camp Nine. The low water levels had resulted in the re-emergence of a running river multiple times since the completion of the dam. “White-water boating has occurred during ideal lake conditions. The Stanislaus River, when it is not inundated by New Melones Lake, offers generally forgiving to fairly difficult rafting runs. Depending on seasonal water fluctuations, commercial rafting companies may offer organized guided raft trips down the river.”⁶³⁵ All of these claims by river preservationists share basic assumptions and assertions: New Melones was a mistake, the upper river should be restored for recreational use, and the reservoir is a detriment, not the savior, of the watershed’s environmental and economic health.

On one hand, the newly emerging struggle over saving the Stan is an echo and continuation of the same fight 40 years prior. Preservation-minded environmentalists don’t want the dam flooding the scenic stretch of canyon, questioning the instrumental logic of big-dam building while pointing to the environmental, economic and aesthetic costs and legacies of the Big Dam Era. Development-friendly conservationists claim the opposite, that the dam needs to be used and managed in a way that could restore and improve watershed health and water quality while balancing the interests of agricultural users and others who benefit from extractive use. And much like in the 1970s, this battle remains as much a fight over the definition of the Stanislaus (and what it means to “save” the river) as a fight over environmental preservation.

On the other hand, this continued battle seems to be emerging in the wake of a new reality in California water management – one of increasing unpredictability in water supplies due to global climate change. According to the California State Water Resources Control Board, climate scientists largely expect water supplies to become increasingly erratic and unpredictable in the coming years as a drier climate makes droughts and floods more extreme in a region already known for its wide fluctuations. This will likely result in increased competition and strife between existing users (farmers, residents, industries, recreationists, environmental managers, and others) over management of dams like New Melones. Here, these factions are still pitched in

⁶³⁴ Wm. Joe Simonds, “The Central Valley Project, The East Side Division, The New Melones Project (second draft),” U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Denver, 1994, California Water Boards, State Water Resources Control Board, Index of /waterrights/water_issues/programs/hearings/auburn_dam/exhibits, https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/waterrights/water_issues/programs/hearings/auburn_dam/exhibits/x_8.pdf

⁶³⁵ U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, “Finding of No Significant Impact: Camp Nine Whitewater Events,” U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, Mid-Pacific Region, Folsom, September 2016, https://www.usbr.gov/mp/nepa/includes/documentShow.php?Doc_ID=27288.

the same battle not over whether to keep or remove dams, but over what role dams have in maintaining and improving natural conditions in a changing climate. In that battle, the stakes are centered on the very idea of what is natural in the first place, as the existing infrastructure should be used to maintain those conditions despite inevitable change. For the old Save the Stan fighters, restoring a flowing river through the canyon – regulated by upstream power and irrigation facilities while emptying much of New Melones – would restore a natural and moral order. For the new Save the Stan fighters, that moral and natural order primarily comes from keeping the reservoir full and supposedly balancing the interests of agriculture with the environmental needs of the watersheds. Both in their own ways ignore certain aspects of the watershed’s human history and seek to define nature through the lens of their own interests and ideologies. Both could foretell similar conflicts in the watershed moving forward.

Fish, frogs, floods and fires: The lasting legacies of wilderness and electric power

In April 2015, Republican Representative Tom McClintock sounded off in the halls of Congress over the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation’s management of the dam at New Melones. During a multi-year, record-setting drought, with state and federal water managers implementing deep cuts to allocations for farmers, dam managers were increasing flows into the Stanislaus River from the federal reservoir to maintain water quality for downstream fish habitat in both the Stanislaus River and the California Delta. The flows were part of U.S. Bureau of Reclamation’s environmental and water policies, improving water quality and quantity for protected migratory fish species. McClintock, whose California district is adjacent to the reservoir, echoed other conservative, pro-development lawmakers who have long derided environmental releases as wasteful and unnecessary. In his telling, and that of many California Republicans and the farmers who largely support them, the out-of-touch bureaucrats, environmentalists and lawyers often force such wasteful policies when that water could and should be put to better use as irrigation for Central Valley agriculture, an industry that generates billions upon billions of dollars, employs millions of people and grows the food that we all buy in our local grocery store. Such policies, McClintock, his peers and his supporters on the issue have said, prioritize fish over people. “When are we going to wake up to the lunacy of these current environmental laws and the ideological zealots who are administering them?” McClintock said on the floor of the House in 2015, the last time the region was deep in a generational drought that drained much of the reservoir.⁶³⁶

Two years prior, the same representative criticized a different environmental management decision in the central Sierra Nevada mountains – the protection of the Yosemite yellow-legged frog. The small amphibian had been an abundant species in the ponds, lakes and streams of the high Sierra earlier in the 20th Century before a steady, multi-decade decline. Preservationists and environmental managers have in

⁶³⁶ Tom McClintock, “Save Our Water” (speech Given in House chambers), April 22, 2015, <https://mcclintock.house.gov/newsroom/speeches/save-our-water>.

recent decades pushed for regulations over logging, grazing and fishing around those critical habitat areas, and McClintock and other development-friendly voices have claimed such regulations, “will likely cause severe restrictions on land access resulting in a devastating impact on the local economy.”⁶³⁷

But research into the decline of the yellow-legged frog suggests protection of that critical habitat – the streams and lakes of the central California high country – is the best bet for the threatened species. The decline has largely been due to predation from the fish populations introduced into the frogs’ natural habitat, as those trout feed on both on the frogs themselves and their tadpoles.⁶³⁸ But a changing climate has complicated the issue even further, as the frogs that remained have faced increased threats from global climate change, which is expected to make precipitation more erratic in the region and result in longer droughts and less reliable water sources for habitat. The perennial streams and deeper ponds needed for successful sustainability of the populations are expected to dwindle, exacerbating threats like the aforementioned predation as well as disease. Efforts to prevent extinction of these and other similar amphibians in the region have focused on habitat restoration projects that remove introduced fish and restrict human activities and, in-turn, alienate constituencies who prioritize wilderness recreation more than restoration of primordial conditions.

The most common routes from the high Sierra Nevada setting of the Emigrant Wilderness, where ongoing efforts are underway to protect threatened amphibians, to the city of San Francisco are Highway 108 and 120 westward down the mountain and through the San Joaquin Valley. When taking either route, which generally parallel the Stanislaus River, one traverses the valley along the elevated byways that tower over the two bedroom communities of Manteca and Tracy. Located a short drive from the Bay Area, these towns have swelled with suburban and commercial sprawl in ways that belie the popular narrative that California refuses to allow growth and development due to its supposed progressive politics.⁶³⁹ Their growth has largely been driven by technological booms in the Bay Area, with commuting workers seeking more affordable and roomier homes for their families than they could buy in suburbs like Walnut Creek or Pleasanton. Those with keen eyes could spot a series of strange sights along the drive, anomalies that homeowners and commuters might not catch or

⁶³⁷ Staff and wire, “Frog protections spark debate in the Mother Lode,” Recordnet, Stockton, Aug. 5, 2013, <https://www.recordnet.com/story/news/2013/08/06/frog-protections-spark-debate-in/44382483007/>.

⁶³⁸ Knapp, Roland A., Gary M. Fellers, Patrick M. Kleeman, David AW Miller, Vance T. Vredenburg, Erica Bree Rosenblum, and Cheryl J. Briggs. “Large-scale recovery of an endangered amphibian despite ongoing exposure to multiple stressors.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 113, no. 42 (2016): 11889-11894. <https://www.nps.gov/yose/learn/nature/upload/knapp2016.pdf> ; <https://www.nps.gov/yose/learn/nature/upload/knappmatthews2000.pdf> ; “Frequently Asked Questions about Aquatic Restoration,” Yosemite National Park, Last updated Oct. 25, 2022, <https://www.nps.gov/yose/learn/nature/aquaticfaq.htm>; “Aquatic Restoration,” Nature Features & Ecosystems, Yosemite National Park, Last updated Oct. 10, 2018, <https://www.nps.gov/yose/learn/nature/aquaticrestoration.htm>.

⁶³⁹ Conor Friedersdorf, “The California Dream is Dying,” *The Atlantic*, Washington, D.C., July 21, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/07/california-dream-dying/619509/>.

notice on their daily drives. Between the tract home developments, warehouses and strip malls that stretch into the horizons from the thoroughfare is the occasional, relatively new home built on top of what appears to be an artificial hill about 20 or so feet off the valley floor. Rarely surrounded by much more than some open space or farmland, these homes seem simultaneously invisible and yet completely out of place between the seas of stucco and casual dining establishments.

In August, 2021, many of those residing in the newly finished homes of Manteca, Tracy and communities both to the east and west dealt with daily concerns over whether they would be able to turn their lights on.⁶⁴⁰ These potential outages were not due to infrastructure failure, but instead were planned, rolling blackouts that ideally would prevent more of the massive and horrific wildfires seen in the state over the past seven years. With extended drought, overgrown forestland and expansion of exurban development in California's coastal and Sierra wildlands, and century-old, overhead power lines owned and operated by PG&E had become increasingly risky to run at full capacity during high-risk times. The company's lines had already started two of the state's most devastating wildfires, disasters that the company and its rate payers would have to compensate for in the coming years.⁶⁴¹ Hanging over these towns on steel towers, the suspended power lines offered constant and stark reminders of modern technology's inability to control nature even with constant advancements in engineering and science that powered the nearby tech industries.

Much like the re-emergence of calls to Save the Stan, all four of these phenomena – the political bristling over water flows from dams, the question of how to maintain the existence of the Yosemite yellow-legged frog, the strange residential mounds of San Joaquin County and the annual rolling blackouts felt throughout the state – are closely tied to the people, places and events covered in this study. The river flows in the Stanislaus remain central to the debate over water resource management in California, with conflicting parties framing their debates over where the water should be allocated through discourses that define the very nature of the river itself. The fish that devour the alpine frogs and threaten their place in the ecosystem moving forward were first brought to the waterways of the Sierra by ranchers and naturalized through the popularization of high-country fishing in the Emigrant Wilderness. Much of the sprawling development in the southern portions of San Joaquin County and adjacent to the lower Stanislaus River watershed was made possible by flood protection from upstream dams like New Melones and those maintained by PG&E and the multiple water districts and companies that supply farmers and residents with

⁶⁴⁰ Lisa Pickoff-White, Raquel Maria Dillon, Lakshmi Sarah, Kelly O'Mara, "PG&E Shutoffs: What to Know About Power Outages in the Bay Area," KQED, San Francisco, Sept. 8, 2020, <https://www.kqed.org/news/11836990/pge-shutoffs-are-here-again-what-to-know-about-power-outages-today>.

⁶⁴¹ Olga R. Rodriguez, "PG&E to pay \$55 million for two massive California wildfires," *Associated Press*, April 11, 2022, [https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/pge-to-pay-55-million-for-two-massive-california-wildfires#:~:text=SAN%20FRANCISCO%20\(AP\)%20%E2%80%94%20Pacific,largest%20utility%20C%20prosecutors%20announced%20Monday](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/pge-to-pay-55-million-for-two-massive-california-wildfires#:~:text=SAN%20FRANCISCO%20(AP)%20%E2%80%94%20Pacific,largest%20utility%20C%20prosecutors%20announced%20Monday).

water and power. And the very power lines that bisect those expanding communities were first built more than a century prior to move the power generated by the Stanislaus Electric Power Company from Pelton wheels spinning in Camp Nine to street cars in the Bay and modern farms along the plains.

The people and institutions in all four of these examples – much like the ongoing, if inverted, fight over saving the Stan – seem to reflect a startling lack of perspective into how shared histories drive these conflicts and risks. McClintock and his allies regularly decrying what they say are policies driven by environmentalism seem to conveniently forget that it was the pro-development voices of dam managers and agricultural interests who first said New Melones water must be used to maintain and improve the health of the lower river. Environmental preservation advocates and managers seeking to restore frog habitat through fish removal in the wildernesses of the central Sierra Nevada do not seem interested in engineered structures like Leighton's check dams to potentially recreate wetlands of ideal size and depth for the threatened animals. And even if they did look to such ideas for habitat creation, they would be thwarted by the successful efforts of wilderness preservationists that deem such interventions anathema to the entire notion of wilderness in the first place. Those houses on hills along the freeway offer the clearest evidence of the region's ubiquitous flood risks hidden in plain sight among the sprawling developments of Tracy and Manteca. The homes were rebuilt after the disastrous floods of 1997 placed much of the flatlands adjacent to the San Joaquin River near its confluence with the Stanislaus under a dozen feet of water. And yet the very industries that accelerate the growth in those floodplains, as well as in the exurbs facing now-constant wildfire threat along the region's power lines, often conduct their business with promethean faith in the power of technology to solve the world's problems. Those who maintain such faith in modern progress likely have not read the triumphalist rhetoric of the communities around the Stanislaus power project in the early 20th Century, who pointed to those very power lines that now represent a new, threatening form of wild chaos and the infrastructure built to support them as the key to defeating the caprice of nature.

Lingering legacies of the history covered in this study, these conflicts and risks will only grow and intensify moving forward as the climate changes globally. Scientific consensus suggests that the droughts of central California and the corresponding floods – already understood as regular attributes to the regional climate – will become more erratic and intense with climate change.⁶⁴² Less water will be available in New Melones or in the snowpack of the Emigrant Wilderness, making the question of protecting fish and frogs with water already claimed by agricultural users more vexing and contentious. Floods in places like Tracy and Manteca will become bigger and more common, as will fires that start along PG&E's power grid in the state's increasingly dry and stressed forests. This study does not claim to offer solutions to such conflicts and problems. These stories were told with a level of ambivalence that may frustrate people seeking answers. If there is a single argument for the utility of this research it might be that the solutions to such problems should be

⁶⁴² Ingram and Malamud-Roam, *The West Without Water*.

informed by the histories that caused them and approached with the humility and ambivalence that many of its actors seemed to lack as they sought to define nature as a means to control it. Perhaps the first step to answering the questions of managing water in a changing and unpredictable environment is finally seeing the nature in dams, the egrets in the canals or hybrid landscapes of Granddaddy's music – even if those dams, canals and hybridity also forced us to ask those questions in the first place.

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