

*In 1970, tensions between young campers and National Park Service employees in Yosemite boiled over and turned violent. The series of confrontations led to changes in how the Park Service viewed and handled law enforcement in the popular national park.*

# THE STONEMAN MEADOW RIOTS

*AND LAW ENFORCEMENT IN YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK*

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**T**he buzz of voices filled the air as people gathered in small knots scattered across the eastern end of the Yosemite Valley, waiting expectantly for the darkness to come. Dozens sat in front of the stage at Camp Curry, frequently glancing up from their conversations to Glacier Point. Others had found

their favorite spots in the surrounding trees, parking lots, and meadows. Softly at first, but quickly gaining volume as more campers joined in, the strains of “America the Beautiful” rose above the din. Soon it felt like everyone in the valley was singing.

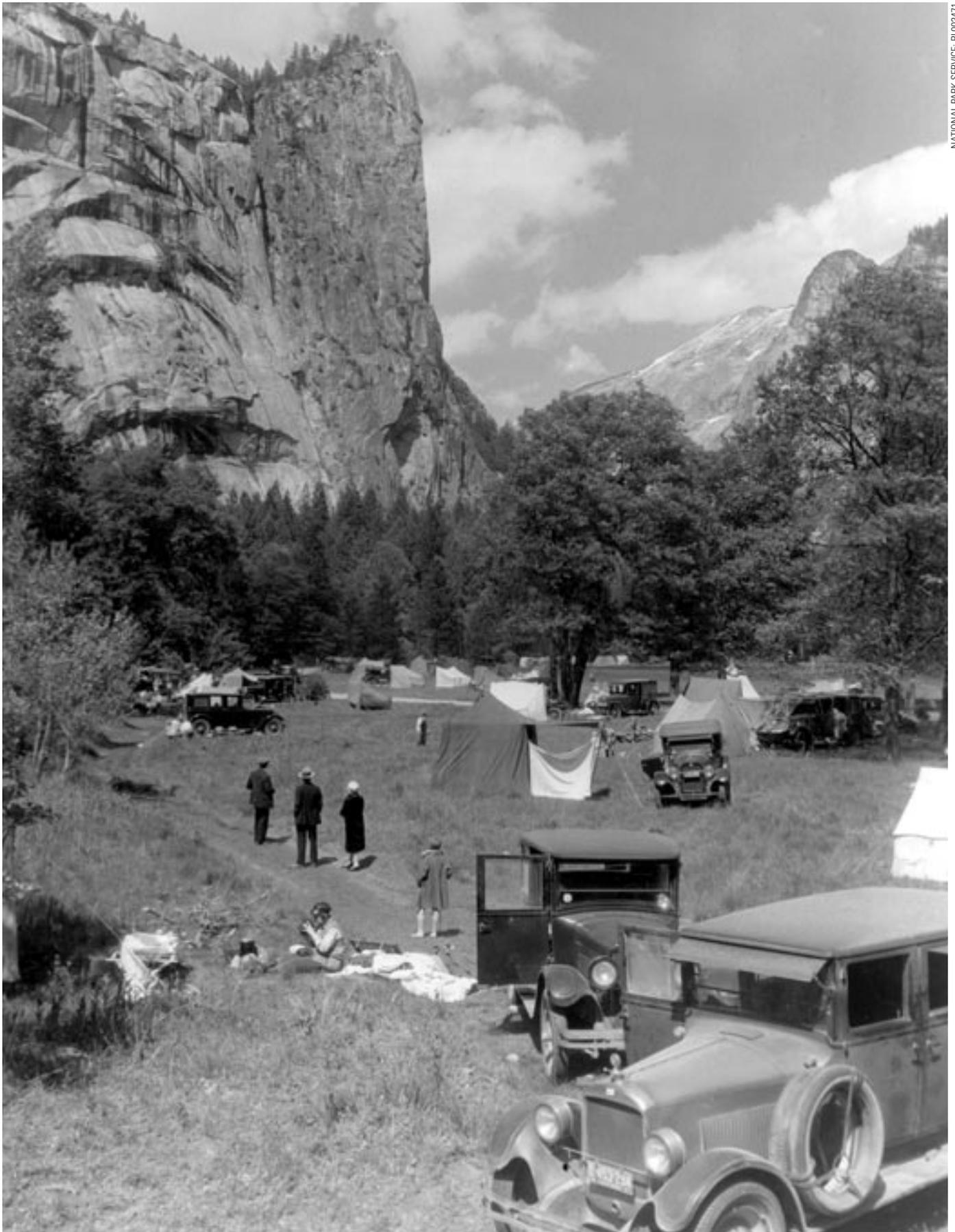
The conversations and singing immediately hushed as a faint voice rang out: “Hello Glacier Point!” The crowd quieted as a single voice called from above, “Hello Camp Curry!” Then, another voice, typically that of the night bellhop at the Ahwahnee Hotel, hidden behind a nearby boulder, yelled, “Is the fire ready?” A beat later, from Glacier Point, came the response, “Yes, the fire is ready.” The invisible voice then bellowed, “LET THE FIRE FALL!” As if by magic, a cascade of glowing embers poured off Glacier Point, making it appear as if a waterfall of fire was flowing down the granite face. As thousands of viewers gasped in delight, the sound of cameras clicking and whirring in quick succession filled the air as the vivid red coals streamed down the darkened granite face.<sup>1</sup>

Wildly popular since its inception in 1872, the Firefall had grown into a beloved tradition in Yosemite. Many visitors considered it the highlight of their annual trip to the park. So in 1968, when the Park Service announced its cancellation of the event, the news came as a jolt to many. Calling the Firefall “artificial,” Park Service Director George Hartzog decided the event had grown too large, created too much traffic, and left behind too much litter. Charged with protecting the natural wonder of the park, the Park Service, he asserted, could no longer condone the event.<sup>2</sup> The event’s popularity had led to its demise.

The Firefall’s cancellation, and the ensuing public backlash, highlighted the very real limitations of visitor use in Yosemite. With the park hosting more than two million visitors annually, crowds were overwhelming campgrounds, roads, trails, and scenic overlooks. Rather than finding space for the quiet contemplation of Yosemite’s wonders, the park’s visitors more often encountered

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**BY MICHAEL CHILDERS**



*People camping with tents and automobiles in Stoneman Meadow, below Washington Column, Yosemite Valley, 1927. A few years later, camping was banned in the meadow; 40 years later, it became the site of a riot that changed Park Service policies.*



*In the late 1960s, families vacationing in Yosemite Valley expected to hear rangers talking about nature above the din of birds, not above loud music, drunken revelry, and roaring motorcycles.*

mountains of litter, citylike traffic jams, and campgrounds chaotically packed with tents, cars, and people. Bumper-to-bumper traffic brought mounting complaints over air pollution and the lack of parking in the valley. Weekend traffic congestion had become so bad in Yosemite Valley that Park Service officials worried that they would soon have to put up “Closed to Vehicles” signs at the park’s entrances. Within the next two years, rangers did begin turning cars away from the valley on busy summer weekends.

Outside the valley, the constant stream of cars passing through the Wawona Tree had so weakened the tree’s root system that the giant sequoia could no longer support itself. The tree’s collapse in winter 1969 brought an end to a nearly 90-year tradition of visitors’ driving through its tunnel by horseback and automobile. While saddened by the giant sequoia’s death, one ranger voiced his relief, telling the *New York Times*, “I hate to say it was fortunate, but the tree was a real headache, a major traffic jam.” Throughout Yosemite, sitting in traffic had become as common an experience as standing at the base of Yosemite Falls, leading to mounting calls to limit the number of cars allowed into the park.<sup>3</sup>

### **A METROPOLITAN AREA IN THE SUMMERTIME**

Although traffic remained the park’s most visible problem, camping and lodging were also reaching a crisis point. As early as 1965, Hartzog described Yosemite as being a “great metropolitan area in

the summertime.”<sup>4</sup> Overcrowding had become such a problem that by the late 1960s, Yosemite Valley had earned the unwanted nickname “Yosemite City.”

In 1967, one-seventh of all the camping in the entire National Park System occurred in Yosemite Valley.<sup>5</sup> Anarchy reigned in the campgrounds. Campers set up wherever they wanted because there existed no designated individual sites. One Yosemite visitor complained that 25 to 60 people crammed into single campsites.<sup>6</sup> To address the issue, in 1968 the Park Service finally delineated individual sites, each with a single picnic table, fire ring, tent area, and parking spot, in the hopes of imposing some much-needed order on the bedlam. This obvious step did not alleviate the problem. “I’ve had people move right in, take down my tent and set up where my family camped while we were off hiking,” one visitor complained.<sup>7</sup> Disregard for the long-held tradition of first-come, first-served forced the creation of a reservation system.

Frustrations with overcrowding in Yosemite took a much darker turn in the summer of 1970. Seeking a small bit of respite from modern life by camping along the Merced River, peering out over Glacier Point, or standing at the base of the Yosemite Falls, visitors instead found modern life intruding on their solace: traffic congestion, chaos, and loud noise in the campgrounds, and both the Yosemite and Curry villages teeming with people, including a growing number of young visitors. To many, the long-haired and strangely dressed youth were simply odd. But to others, including

many long-time park rangers, the growing numbers of “hippies” roaming Yosemite Valley were an unwelcome intrusion. Park rangers fielded seemingly endless complaints about loud music, marijuana smoke, loose dogs, public nudity, and theft. “It seemed that every group had loud stereo systems, and we kept moving from one campsite to another trying to quiet them down and hoping it would stay that way,” recalled law enforcement ranger James O’Toole.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, Don Hummel, president of the Yosemite Park & Curry Company, which operated lodging and food concessions in Yosemite Valley, complained of the rampant panhandling, loitering, and shoplifting in the park. It had become generally accepted that leaving possessions unattended in any campground typically ended with having them stolen. Frustrated over the Park Service’s failure, in his view, to police Curry Village, Hummel turned to private security. Some tourists met the new security with a mixture of resignation and outrage at the presence of a private police force in a national park. Most, however, aimed their ire at the few panhandlers sitting outside the village’s restaurants and shops.<sup>9</sup>

But if there was a single issue that bedeviled park visitors and rangers alike, it was the lack of parking. Unable to find parking in campgrounds, where visitors were limited to one vehicle per campsite, or in nearby parking lots, many drivers had simply taken to parking along the side of the road. This, in turn, further congested Yosemite Valley’s heavily used thoroughfares. Congestion was particularly bad adjacent to Stoneman Meadow, where groups of mostly young visitors had begun to congregate in increasing numbers but, as had been the case for 40 years, camping was not allowed. Park rangers managed both the illegally parked cars and the crowds in the meadow by citing those vehicles parked on the meadow’s edge, to encourage their owners to move.

This rather informal arrangement came to an abrupt end on Memorial Day weekend in 1970. That Saturday evening, rangers announced that people in the meadow needed to remove their cars parked alongside the road or risk being ticketed. When few complied, rangers closed the four-way intersection at Camp Curry to stop any further traffic. They then called in a tow truck to begin removing all the illegally parked vehicles. With the parking issue seemingly settled, Yosemite’s chief law ranger, Dave Patterson, ordered rangers to begin pushing people out of the meadow while he and three

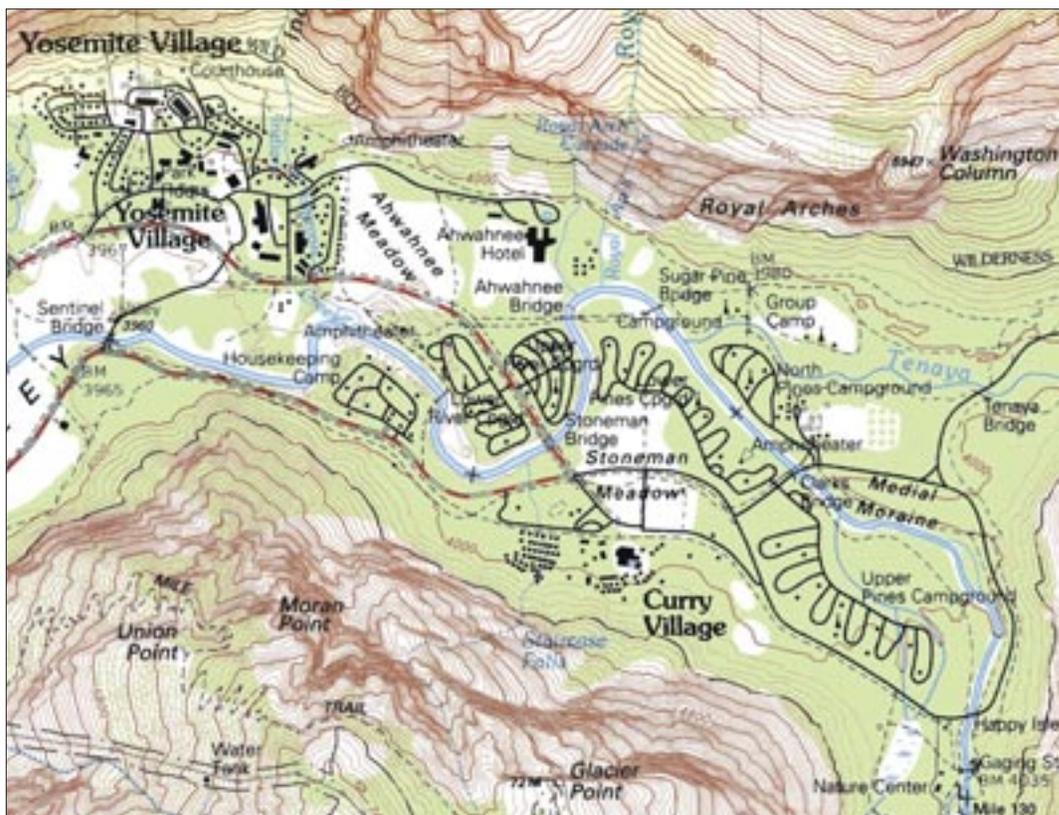
other rangers boxed in the near side to ensure none slipped back in. Few in the meadow initially noticed the rangers’ entry. But after rangers arrested a young man for pulling a knife, “the crowd seemed to explode,” Patterson later wrote in his report on the incident.<sup>10</sup> Fearing further violence, Patterson ordered his men to withdraw from the meadow. Emboldened by the rangers’ departure, and seething over their harassment, many lingered at Stoneman Meadow before finally dispersing the following morning.

Although rangers had made only a single arrest, tensions in Yosemite Valley remained high the next day. Making matters worse, crowds continued to pour into the area, overrunning the already crammed campgrounds and stretching the nine park rangers on duty to the breaking point. “By Saturday the men were extremely tired, having only 7 or 8 hours sleep in a 48-hour period,” according to Patterson. In addition to having contended with the crowds gathered in Stoneman Meadow, the small band of rangers had had to deal with multiple car accidents, reroute incoming traffic out of the valley to alleviate overcrowding, and conduct what few foot patrols they could. Although no further violence occurred, the size of the holiday crowds that had descended on Yosemite Valley raised serious alarms over the coming Fourth of July weekend.<sup>11</sup>

### SHOWDOWN IN STONEMAN MEADOW

Such concerns proved warranted as thousands of visitors swarmed into Yosemite for the long holiday weekend. Seeking to prevent another confrontation in Stoneman Meadow, Superintendent Robert L. Arnberger ordered quiet hours in the valley be moved from 10 to seven o’clock in the evening. Once again, groups of young revelers gathered in the meadow. By early evening an estimated 300 had settled in and showed no sign of obeying the curfew. The situation in many of the valley’s campgrounds was no better, with loud drunken parties shattering the evening peace.

*Stoneman Meadow is in the heart of Yosemite Valley, near the Ahwahnee Hotel (now called the Majestic Yosemite Hotel), and adjacent to several campgrounds and the tent cabins in Curry Village, now called Half Dome Village.*



U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY MAPS, 1992, VIA PICKATRAIL.COM, MODIFIED

Seeking to regain control by first removing the increasingly wild parties from Stoneman Meadow, rangers slowly encircled the meadow. As quiet hours began, over a loudspeaker a ranger ordered the crowd to disperse while law enforcement rangers, augmented by 13 wranglers and packers on horseback, entered the meadow in a long skirmish line.

Walking past Stoneman Meadow with his twenty-one-year-old daughter that evening, John Fisher watched as the line of rangers and mounted park employees moved into the meadow. "Before my very eyes we watched these children stampeded, several being clubbed, and two thrown to the ground, handcuffed, and led off to jail," the physician and former Florida state senator later wrote in a scathing open letter to President Richard Nixon. In the ensuing chaos, Fisher lost track of his daughter, only to be reunited with her when a ranger physically dragged her to him and demanded to know whether she was in fact his child. Incensed as much at her treatment as at the Park Service's heavy-handed tactics, Fischer insisted on speaking to the superintendent but was told that Arnberger would not be available until Monday. Seething, Fisher and his daughter returned to their campsite for the night.<sup>12</sup>

After engaging in a "large confrontation" with those remaining in the meadow, rangers succeeded in pushing the crowd from Stoneman Meadow into Camp 14. There, they spoke with revelers about park regulations and the environmental consequences of such large crowds on the meadow. A few visitors pressed the rangers on the logic of removing people from the meadow to keep them from trampling grass while allowing pollution-spewing cars and motorhomes into the valley, but most simply drifted back to their campsites for the evening.<sup>13</sup>

The Fourth of July dawned in typical Yosemite magnificence. Campers awoke to the sound of Steller's jays squawking as the first rays of light hit Yosemite Valley's granite walls. And slowly, the smell of woodsmoke and coffee drifted across the valley. In Camp 14, the Fisher family made preparations for a hike. Still upset at the treatment of his daughter by park rangers, John Fisher again sought to speak with Arnberger. But once again he was told that the superintendent would not be available until the following morning. Meanwhile, several other families packed their cars and left the park, disgusted by the previous evening's events. Returning from a hike later that afternoon, the Fishers once again found the meadow teeming with people. But a somber mood had settled over the area. And as the evening cast shadows across the valley floor, rangers again ordered those in the meadow to disperse.

Standing on the edge of the meadow with hundreds of other spectators, Fisher watched in horror as park rangers, wranglers, maintenance workers, and even naturalists wearing construction helmets and armed with ax handles emerged from the far tree line into the meadow. "Without any warning, the horsemen suddenly burst forth in a pack, riding the iron-shod steeds directly into the midst of the seated assembly, at full gallop, scattering all those fortunate enough not to be run over," wrote Fisher of the sight. A CBS film crew captured what happened next. Seeing horses charging at them, several in the meadow began hurling whatever lay at hand. One horse, struck in the head, panicked. People scattered in every direction, and fear quickly turned into anger. Small scuffles broke out across the meadow as rangers used their batons and ax handles to ward off attackers. Having lost control of the crowd, rangers retreated from the meadow. But the fuse had been lit, and the valley was bedlam for the next several

hours. Rioters set a bonfire in the road, blocked and then rolled a police vehicle onto its side, and skirmished with Park Service personnel for the next several hours.

In the end, the Park Service had called in nearly 150 police officers from the nearby communities of Madera, Merced, and Fresno, along with U.S. marshals, to quell the riot. Over the two days, 174 people, including 41 minors, were arrested. The majority of the arrests were for drugs and alcohol, but a fair number were for far more serious crimes, including assaulting a federal officer, carrying a loaded firearm, and assault with a vehicle. Five rioters were reported as needing medical care for injuries received while resisting arrest, and another for an unspecified foot injury.<sup>14</sup>

Fisher laid the blame for the riot directly on the shoulders of the Park Service, whose tactics he argued had incited the violence—a view that not all agreed with.<sup>15</sup> Having arrived in Yosemite Valley that afternoon, the Ford family had grabbed one of the abandoned campsites in Camp 14, grateful for their luck in finding a site during the holiday weekend. Such feelings soon turned to disgust as they watched "several of the children ... crawling out of the meadow," too drunk to walk. Partiers caroused throughout the campground, passing jugs of wine, and raced motorcycles up and down the valley's narrow roadways. On returning from Camp Curry just prior to the seven p.m. curfew, the Ford family's three boys reported that a ranger had been attacked, his car was destroyed, and hundreds of hippies, some armed with knives, were congregating in the meadow, apparently hoping to provoke law enforcement. That evening, after attending a naturalist's talk, the family returned to their trailer where the sound of fireworks, motorcycles, and yelling forced them to close all their windows to block the noise. Later, as police began to comb through the camp making arrests, the Fords awoke to obscenities screamed at the officers.

The experience remained vivid months later for the Fords, and after reading Fisher's account in a newspaper, Mrs. Ford wrote a letter to Hartzog blaming hedonistic youth for the riot, condemning their despoilment of Yosemite Valley, and voicing her shock at Fisher's account of the weekend. "Never have I read such a flagrant untrue account of an event," she wrote, lambasting Fisher for his naiveté and the failure of visitors to behave in an acceptable manner in the park. "We believe that the National Parks of this country are provided for the beauty and enjoyment of all," she wrote. "If the young people of this country want to enjoy the benefits of the beautiful tributes to God and a great country, they should be willing to accept the rules of decent conduct."<sup>16</sup>

### **DON'T TRUST ANYONE UNDER AGE 30**

The riot fundamentally changed how the Park Service understood the growing national fear of lawlessness and the counterculture. For visitors such as the Fords, long-haired youth represented a clear danger to the park—a view many in the Park Service agreed with. In explaining the park administrators' actions after the riot, Yosemite's assistant superintendent, Russell Olsen, said that he had tired of college-age youth and their antics. "Today's fad is social protest," which he said had no place in a national park. Believing that the riots had "made it clear that the traditional methods for the administration of criminal justice have failed," Arnberger set about reforming how the park dealt with offenders. The first order of business was to set in place policies in preparation for Labor Day weekend, when Park Service officials feared that the *Berkeley Tribe's* call for a "10,000 freak army" to descend

on the park would draw large crowds bent on protest and violence.<sup>17</sup> Among the new policies was turning away all vehicles deemed “to be in an unsafe condition, or operated contrary to law.” Invoking safety as reason for the policy, entrance rangers were told to find any reason to keep any visitor “under 30 with long hair” from entering the park.<sup>18</sup>

After a five hours’ drive from San Francisco, Dorothy Goldeen and a friend arrived at the Big Oak Flats entrance gate around midday on September 6th. Although the riot had occurred some weeks before, the park remained on edge. After glancing into the car, the ranger manning the entrance station asked Goldeen to pull to the side of the road for a vehicle inspection. Annoyed at the delay, she curtly asked why the inspection was needed. The ranger said the inspection was necessary to prevent any accidents in the park. Exasperated by the thinly veiled reason, Goldeen pulled to the side, where two armed rangers began walking around her car inspecting its condition. One informed Goldeen that the light over the license plate was out, the plate needed to be bolted down, and the left rear reflector needed to be replaced before she and her passenger would be allowed into the park.

Fuming at the obvious ploy to keep them from entering Yosemite, Goldeen headed to the nearest repair shop. Three hours later, the two women returned to the entrance station. “The same ranger, who remembered us, checked over our car,” Goldeen later complained in a letter to Joseph Rumburg, director of the National Park’s Western Region. On seeing that the rear light was taped over, the ranger once again denied the women admittance. In a fit of rage, Goldeen broke out a roll of tape and completely covered the offending rear taillight. The ranger then asked to hear the car’s horn in a “final, futile attempt” to deny them entrance. The horn worked, and the ranger allowed the two women to pass.<sup>19</sup>

Goldeen’s experience was far from rare. Following Stoneman, entrance rangers turned hundreds of visitors away after rather suspicious vehicle inspections came up with balding tires, weak horns, and other mechanical problems—all of which were grounds for nonadmittance. Many who had experienced overzealous entrance rangers asserted such policies were discriminatory, and that the Park Service had no authority to restrict visitors to the park based on their appearance. The Park Service denied such discrimination. In responding to Goldeen’s letter, Rumburg wrote, “You may be interested to know that of the very few complaints against the program we have received, those who share your opinion that the program was discretionary universally identify with the ‘under 30 with long hair’ segment of our visitors.” Concluding that since Goldeen clearly would reject any justification for the inspection program, there was little else he could say other than to extend a sincere hope her trip to Yosemite had been “enjoyable, inspirational, and safe.”<sup>20</sup>

Even as the Park Service was seeking a means to stem the tide of hippies from entering Yosemite, many in the agency began to realize the consequences of a greater visual presence of law enforcement in the park. The Department of the Interior’s investigation of the riot determined the confrontation between visitors and park rangers had been unnecessary and avoidable. Investigators reported that the crowd in Stoneman Meadow that day had shown no indication of being violent, and that park personnel had failed to follow procedure in handling the situation.<sup>21</sup>

“People see the park service uniform and respond to its symbolic meaning almost automatically,” Rumburg later noted. The

riot, he said, had turned the Park Service’s carefully crafted image as the protector of the nation’s natural treasures into one of an armed police force. But although the addition of a sidearm, handcuffs, and a helmet presented an image “not needed for normal park functions,” the rise in crime throughout all national parks along with the trauma of the Stoneman riot obligated rangers to interact with the public more as police officers than as naturalists. The new approach both comforted and worried visitors concerned about their safety while distressing those nostalgic for the image of the friendly ranger armed only with a flat-brimmed Stetson and quick smile.<sup>22</sup>

The agency’s first step in changing its approach to law enforcement was to improve it and make training uniform. The riots caught the attention of Congress, which, in the wake of the 1968 riots across the country following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, and now the Stoneman Meadow incidents two years later, was eager to appear tough on crime. Consequently, Hartzog had little trouble getting funds for the Park Service’s new Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in 1971.<sup>23</sup> The first of its kind, the center institutionalized law enforcement throughout the park system by creating a small cadre of specially trained law enforcement rangers to police every Park Service unit.

Yosemite established its own law enforcement office to handle criminal investigations the following year. Seeking to bridge the generational and cultural divides at the heart of the tensions and to soften the image of rangers as “park pigs” whose primary task was to “hassle” young men and women and infringe their rights, Yosemite established an “empathy team” to reach out to younger visitors. Contrary to the Park Service’s strict dress code, rangers let their hair grow longer, wore beads, and often sat down to “rap” about the role of parks and nature.<sup>24</sup>

Yet the empathic approach proved the exception rather than the rule when it came to law enforcement. Fearing another Stoneman, the Park Service began aggressively policing visitors’ behavior. Believing that its “Smokey Bear” image and “soft” law enforcement policy were no longer effective, Olsen, Yosemite’s assistant superintendent, ordered rangers to “tighten up their enforcement attitude.” Rangers would not hand out written or oral warnings to visitors but rather adopt a zero-tolerance policy toward any infraction in efforts to curb the surge of crime in the park. But as the park took a harder line on law enforcement by handing out citations rather than friendly warnings, visitors and even some employees lamented that the “the old, gentle rangers” had been replaced “by SWAT teams.”<sup>25</sup> Allowed to carry firearms beginning in 1976, law enforcement rangers became the Park Service’s own police force, reflecting both the grim reality of crime in Yosemite and the philosophical shift in handling the millions of visitors.<sup>26</sup>

## LAW ENFORCEMENT SINCE STONEMAN

In the half-century following the Stoneman Meadow riot, law enforcement in Yosemite Valley has remained a contentious and difficult issue. The work has grown ever more challenging as park law enforcement officials contend with crowds in the eight-square-mile valley that average 21,000 visitors a day during July and August.<sup>27</sup> “People bring urban problems with them,” Yosemite ranger Mike Mayer told the *Washington Post* in 1991, explaining, “When you have 15,000 to 20,000 people bedded down in this valley, it’s a small town of transients.” The high-profile murder

of four women by a concessioner employee in the late 1990s underscored the increasingly serious nature of crime enforcement in the park. Ensuring the safety of visitors has made law enforcement in the national parks one of the most dangerous jobs in the country.<sup>28</sup>

Yet as Rumburg noted, in the aftermath of the riot, the sight of armed rangers did not fit visitors' image of the National Park Service. Fifty years later, the problem with perception remains. Law enforcement rangers often appear more like an occupying force than the public's nostalgic image of a park ranger. Stories of rousting unsuspecting concessioner employees from their beds on suspicion of being drunk and issuing high fines to visitors for comparatively minor offenses have earned Yosemite's law rangers a reputation for being overly zealous and opened the Park Service to scrutiny from critics and the press. One of the most egregious examples of law enforcement overreach was park rangers' arrest and imprisonment of Australians Margaret and Andre Visser in 2004. After enjoying a meal at the Ahwahnee Hotel to celebrate Andre's 60th birthday, the couple was pulled over by rangers on suspicion of drunk driving. Andre blew a 0.08, the minimum to be considered drunk in California, and Margaret, 0.06. The two male rangers frisked the couple, then arrested them. Asked why she was being arrested, the ranger reportedly said she was a danger to herself and others. After paying a \$2,500 fine, both were released from the park's jail the following morning.<sup>29</sup>

Such reports have become all too frequent, leading critics to charge that Yosemite law enforcement holds a zero-tolerance policy toward all infractions, no matter how minor—a charge National Park officials deny. Those stories do, however, point to the difficult challenge law enforcement faces in Yosemite—and by extension, across the entire National Park System—as the number of visitors continues to climb: balancing park visitors' expectations of tranquility and friendly rangers with the Park Service's fear that Yosemite Valley will again erupt in chaos. □

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