



Side-Saddle Tourists at Yosemite

SHIRLEY SARGENT

Author and Historian

Who Makes Her Home in the Yosemite

6 **T**HE SHIRLEY LETTERS, giving details of rough and colorful mining life on the Feather River in 1851, are well known as is the history of "Dame Shirley," their petite and gentle author. After a divorce from her miner-doctor husband, Fayette Clappe, on April 5, 1857, "Dame Shirley," in reality Louise Amelia Knapp Smith Clappe, became a teacher in San Francisco's first public school, Denman Grammar School.¹

She was no ordinary school teacher. Publication of her soon famous letters in *The Pioneer* magazine in 1854-55 had attracted to her such young and would-be literary lights as Bret Harte and Mark Twain. Her accounts of a "fallen" woman driven from camp and a pet frog inspired two of their most popular stories, Harte's "The Outcasts of Poker Flat," and Twain's "Jumping Frog of Calaveras County."²

They and other literary figures of the time formed a weekly salon and her lectures on literature and art and Shakesperian read-

ing were events. Soon she taught in high school and her classes nurtured literary talents in Charles Warren Stoddard and Mary Viola Tingley, both of whom scored published success as adults. Poet Stoddard reminisced, "I never left her presence but I was the richer . . . and her letters to me . . . were as brilliant as they were exquisitely delicate."³

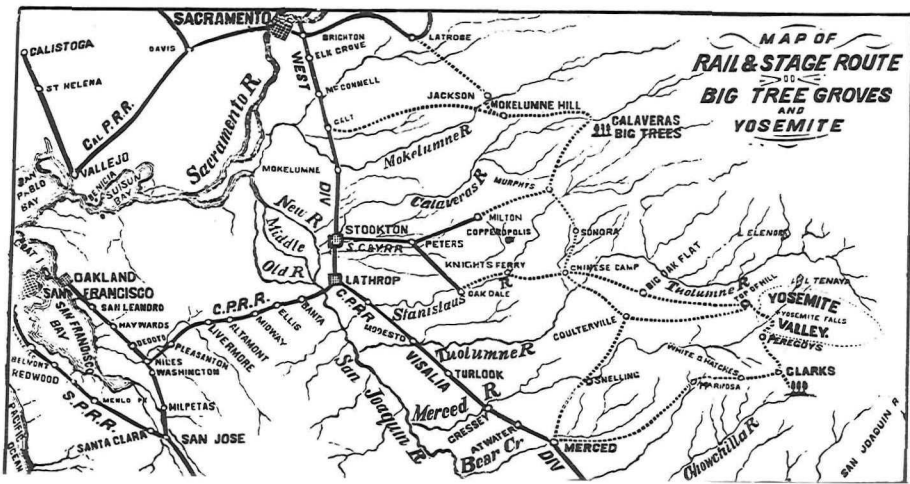
Mrs. Clappe lived with the John Swett family in their home where personages such as Emerson, Agassiz, and Julia Ward Howe were entertained, and others, like John Muir, lived.⁴ Mr. Swett was the California Superintendent of Public Schools, 1863-68, and took a vital interest in cultural life of the day as it was represented by personalities such as Mrs. Clappe.

One incident of her life, an 1873 trip to Mariposa and Yosemite, is little known and this account enlarges upon it. By then Stoddard was a published poet and Mary Tingley was "Ridinghood," author of *Overland Monthly* articles and many lighthearted newspaper columns. Her admiration of her mentor was evidenced in an August 1, 1868, column in the *Sacramento Weekly Union* in which she said:

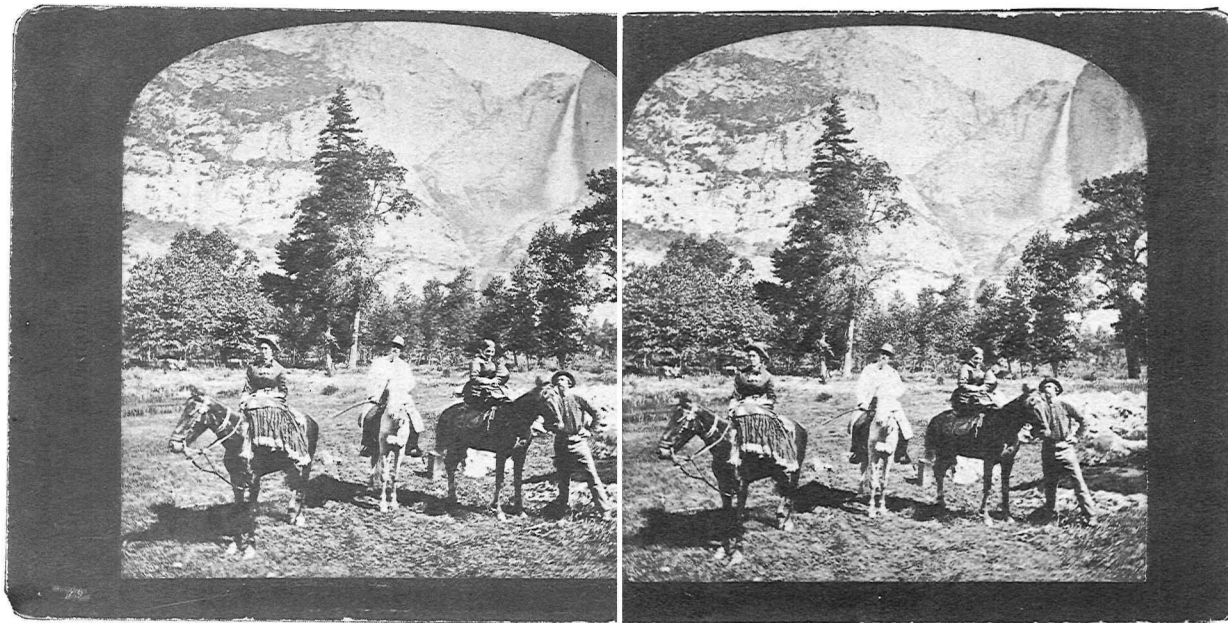
Picture a widow, neither very young nor very pretty, but still fascinating . . . Of dignified and suave and elegant address, and with a manner warm and gushing and winning . . . You ought to hear her read Owen Meredith's "Aux Italiens," and she'd take you captive by her beautiful conversational powers. With all this she is such a modest, sensitive violet that she'll go right out naturally and hide in a fence corner after reading this.

By 1873 Mary Tingley had become the wife of James Henry Lawrence, lawyer, politician, and editor of the *Mariposa Gazette*.

The Big Tree and Yosemite country--when railroads were at their prime. This map is from the Covert Martin collection at the Stuart Library of Western Americana, Stockton.



*Yosemite shots
were popular with
stereoptican viewers.*



*From the Covert
Martin Collection
of photos and prints.*

When Mrs. Lawrence made a visit to San Francisco in June of that year she found Mrs. Clappe, then 54, "nervous and worn" and, as school vacation had begun, packed her up and took her home to Mariposa.

Like Rich Bar and Indian Bar, Mariposa was a mining settlement which had known boom days, but was quietly between excitements. What a contribution to history it would have been had Dame Shirley written a letter about the idleness and decay of mines there, the hope and optimism of miners who knew there was still gold "in them thar hills."

8 Instead of writing a letter, Shirley, as Mrs. Lawrence called her, "stayed in bed the first three days. Then she was daily swung in a hammock under an oak. Soon we had horseback-rides and up the creek she again panned out gold."

How much gold was taken out of Mariposa Creek that June day Mrs. Lawrence did not say, but Shirley's first try was documented in her November 25, 1851, letter from Indian Bar.

. . . I have become a mineress; that is, if the having washed a pan of dirt with my own hands, and procured therefrom three dollars and twenty five cents . . . will entitle me to the name . . . "I am sorry I learned the trade," for I wet my feet, tore my dress, spoilt a pair of new gloves,

nearly froze my fingers, got an awful headache, took cold, and lost a valuable breastpin, in this my labor of love.

Less dire effects resulted from her nostalgic gold panning on Mariposa Creek for Shirley was soon possessed of health and enthusiasm enough to take a trip to Yosemite Valley where hotel-keepers, guides, and stablemen had learned there was gold to be mined from tourists. The Lawrences, Shirley, and Florence Tingley traveled by stagecoach to Clark's Station.

Happily, Mrs. Lawrence set down a few details of the Mariposa-Yosemite trip in an appreciative manuscript prepared for a San

1 Biographical material on Dame Shirley was found in *San Francisco's Literary Frontier*, Franklin Walker, and the introductions to *The Shirley Letters*, edition of 1922, written by Mary V. T. Lawrence, and 1933 and 1961 editions, by Carl I. Wheat.

2 Page xxix of the 1922 introduction to *The Shirley Letters*.

3 "Confessions of a Reformed Poet," by C. W. Stoddard, ms. Bancroft Library.

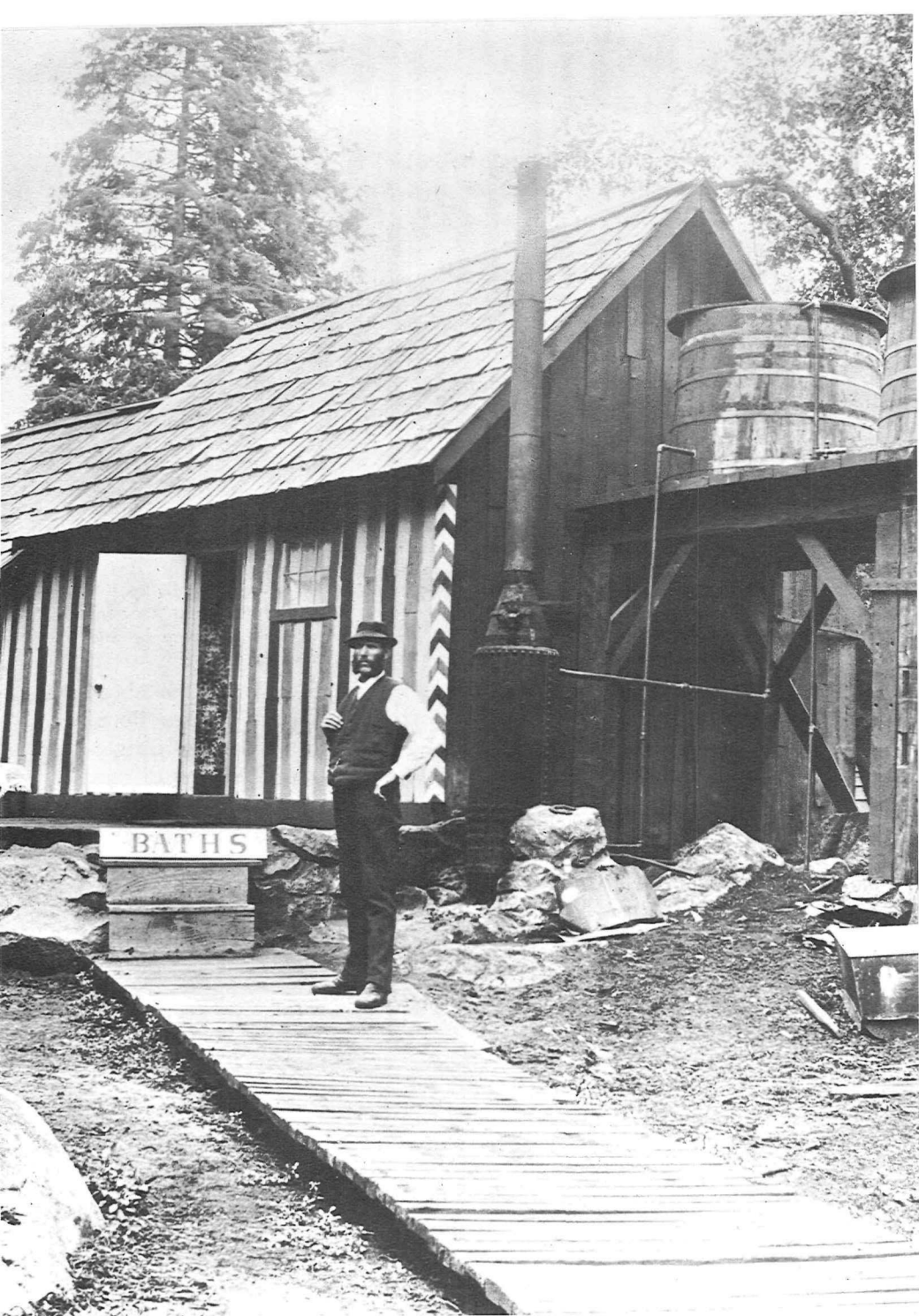
4 *Ibid.* #2, p. xxx. See also *Son of the Wilderness*, *The Life of John Muir*, by Marsh Wolfe. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967).

5 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from Mrs. Lawrence's 1922 introduction to *The Shirley Letters*.

Where tourists tarry, there spring up baths. It was so in the hey-day of the coach-drawn visitors at Yosemite. Note sideburns, riveted steam boiler, and the old wood-staved tanks.

This stylish group is the General Douglass party, posing on a hitching rail below Yosemite Falls. He was a distinguished figure of his day and a Mexican War veteran





Both photos from Covert Martin Collection, Stuart Library of Western Americana.

Francisco literary society and published in 1922 as an introduction to the first edition of *The Shirley Letters*.

At Clark's Station, now Wawona, Lawrence put them in charge of

Galen Clark, a rare scholar and guardian of the Big Tree Grove and of the Yosemite Valley. This charming man was much interested in Shirley. From the hotel we took daily rides with him through the forest . . .

As the stage road to Yosemite Valley was not completed until 1875, the ladies rode the 25 miles on horseback; sidesaddle as Mrs. Lawrence, at least, proclaimed riding astride to be fatiguing, dangerous, and unladylike.⁶

The trip was broken by an overnight stay at Perego's Hotel, a midway spot. In Perego's Register⁷ for June 16, 1873, this registration was made, "Mary Lawrence, Mariposa, Mrs. L. S. Clappe, San Francisco, Miss Florence Tingley, San Francisco."

On the following day the sidesaddle sight-seers found Mr. James M. Hutchings, of the Illustrated California Magazine, awaiting us at the entrance to the valley. He escorted us to his picturesque hotel, where he and his interesting wife made our three weeks stay most enjoyable.

Again what a colorful letter Shirley could have written about the "picturesque" hotel which was famed for its Big Tree Room surrounding a large, living cedar,⁸ and of host Hutchings' forgetfulness, erudition and combativeness against legal moves to oust

6 Sacramento *Weekly Union*, Aug. 20, 1820, "Mountain Letter, by Riding-hood."

7 Perego's Register, 1870-74, belongs to Miss Bea Perego, a great-granddaughter of the hotelkeeping Peregos. A microfilm copy is in the Yosemite Museum.

8 The old, emancipated cedar still lives, marked by the roofline of the Big Tree Room, across the highway and a little southwest of Sentinel Bridge in Yosemite Valley.

9 See *In the Heart of the Sierras*, James M. Hutchings, and Galen Clark, *Yosemite Guardian*, Shirley Sargent.

10 For fuller information on Elvira Hutchings and her family, see Chapter IV of *Pioneers in Petticoats*, Shirley Sargent.

11 *In the Footprints of the Padres*, C. W. Stoddard, *Son of the Wilderness*, Wolfe, and *Letters to A Friend*, John Muir.

12 All three volumes of Snow's Register, 1870-92, are safeguarded in the Yosemite Museum.

13 "Memories of Emily and Albert Snow," ms. by Pinkie P. Ross, Yosemite Museum.

14 Mrs. Clappe moved to New York in 1878, to be with her niece. Mrs. Lawrence's 1922 introduction concludes, ". . . Charley Stoddard, myself and others, contributed to her pleasure by letters till the close of her perfect life at Morristown, New Jersey, on February 9, 1906 . . ."

This article would have been enriched by a portrait of Dame Shirley—Louise Amelia Knapp Smith Clappe—but although the author has searched diligently, none has been found. If any reader knows of one, kindly write to Miss Shirley Sargent in care of *THE PACIFIC HISTORIAN*—Eds.

him from his 160-acre Yosemite Valley homestead!⁹ No letter of hers told about Elvira Sproat Hutchings whose frailness and painting ability ill-suited her to be a hotelkeeper's wife.¹⁰ Shirley did not write of the Hutchings' children, tomboy Floy, Cosie, and little Willie, but her pupil, Charles Warren Stoddard, had, and John Muir was even then remembering them in his journals and letters.¹¹

Instead of wielding a pen, Shirley was enthralled with exploring the spectacular Valley.

Down in the meadows we came upon John Muir sawing logs. He dropped his logs, and we three went botanizing, and soon were learning all about the valley's formation as he entrancingly talked.

On June 20th Mrs. Lawrence, Mrs. Clappe, Flora Tingley, and their guide, George W. Carter, signed Snow's Register¹² with gay but partly undecipherable comments about being "Senior members of the Modoc Club." Snow's La Casa Nevada hotel stood on a flat below Nevada Fall "Just as near to heaven as you'll get" Mrs. Snow liked to tease.¹³ Snow's was the favorite lunch stop for thousands who hiked or rode to see Vernal and Nevada Falls, Little Yosemite and higher peaks.

They took many horseback rides and leisurely walks before the three weeks stay was over. Mrs. Lawrence recorded that they had "met many tourists of distinction, and Shirley forgot that she ever had a care, and on our way back she galloped along recklessly."

"At our home in Mariposa, we invited friends to come and enjoy Shirley's Shakespearian readings, chiefly comedy. In these Mr. Lawrence had a happy part."

So ended "Dame Shirley's" visits to Yosemite and Mariposa, unchronicled by any letter of hers, but documented by hotel register and Mrs. Lawrence's paper, "An Appreciation of Dame Shirley."¹⁴

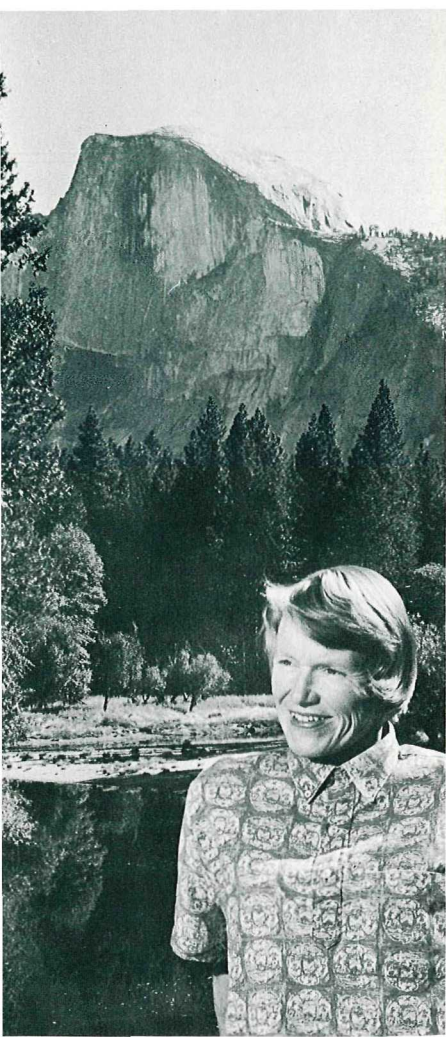
The Pacific Historian

*A Quarterly from the
University of the Pacific*

Descending The
Mountain To The
Yo Semite Valley



1968
Winter



HAIL, DARING DARLINGS!

Argonauts of '49 were still reeling from their golden spree when they made another startling discovery—*Yo Semite*. (Punsters to the contrary, no blood ties linked Yo Semite Indians to the lost tribes of Israel!) By mid-'50s ladies on sidesaddles and gentlemen wearing silk hats were there, jogging or scrambling over trails that led to inspiring views of lakes and mountains and of water tumbling more than 2,000 feet down picturesque cliffs. Shirley Sargent, here shown in Yosemite (it's now a four-syllable single word) has made a special study of early-day tourists there. The appropriate cover sketch is from JAMES M. HUTCHINGS *Scenes in California* (1861).