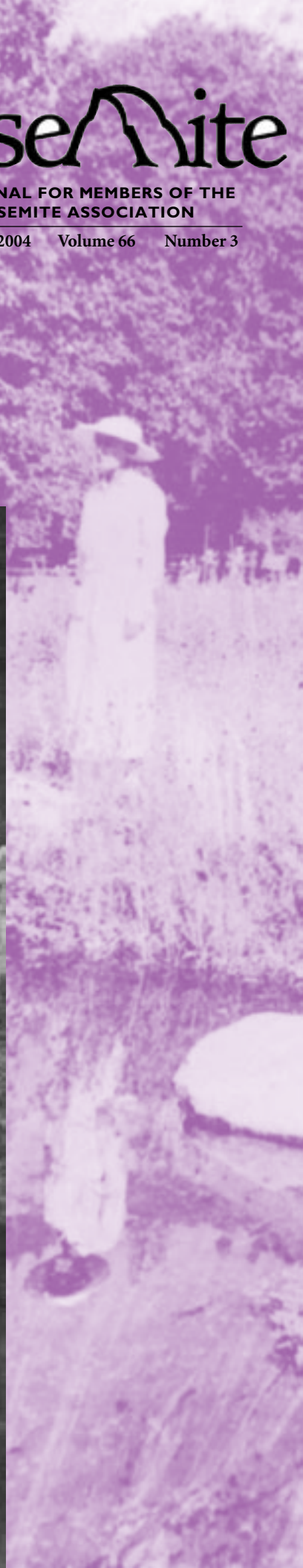


Enid Michael: Yosemite's First Woman Ranger Naturalist

Yosemite

A JOURNAL FOR MEMBERS OF THE
YOSEMITE ASSOCIATION

Summer 2004 Volume 66 Number 3



ENID MICHAEL: YOSEMITE'S FIRST WOMAN RANGER-NATURALIST

Enid Michael is probably the most prolific author ever to write on Yosemite, and it is inexplicable that her work has remained in such obscurity over the years. She was born Enid Reeve in Gilroy, California, on May 27, 1883, but her family moved to Los Angeles in 1897, and about ten years later to Pasadena. Enid attended the State Normal School in Los Angeles, and, like her mother, became a third-grade teacher.

Enid met Charles Michael, Assistant Postmaster of Yosemite, on a Sierra Club outing of unspecified date. She married him and moved to the park in May 1919. Both Charles and Enid had long been acquainted with Yosemite, and they were avid hikers and climbers. Charles was a famous climber in his day, and his accomplishments, including three first ascents, are still honored by present-day climbers.

The Michaels often took small groups of friends on difficult and dangerous excursions. Many of the hikes and climbs were repeated, and the Michaels were known for being better informed about Yosemite's backcountry than anybody else in the park. In a sense, Enid and Charles did not have separate careers, even though they had different "day jobs." They were a team, and this was emphasized by those who knew them. While it is difficult to discuss one without the other, the focus of this article is Enid.

Settling in the valley, Enid continued her interest in botany, which had begun about ten years earlier as a member of the California Botanical Club, headed by Alice Eastwood, renowned California botanist. She developed a long-term relationship and collaboration with Eastwood, and made at least one trip a year to San Francisco for assistance in identifying Yosemite specimens.

Enid Michael was one of four in the first group to be named Yosemite's Nature Guide Service under the direction of Ansel F. Hall. Normally employed for only two months, as were the other ranger-naturalists, she volunteered her time during the rest of the year. Oddly, she was never issued a uniform as were women rangers in the other national parks. Whether this was a decision of the National Park Service or her own choice is not known. She did wear a badge.

It is not clear how she obtained this position, for most of the other nature guides had graduate degrees and she had only a two-year normal-school certificate. At that time it was still fairly common for naturalists to become

qualified by apprenticing to a recognized naturalist, rather than through formal education. Alice Eastwood and Enid Michael were both products of this system.

Yosemite in the 1920s, when she wrote most of her articles, was a very different place than it is today. Predators such as mountain lions and coyotes were routinely hunted, and feeding wildlife was a common practice. The Michaels and some of their neighbors regularly maintained feeding tables for the birds. They felt they were doing the birds a big favor, especially during the winter when food would otherwise be scarce.

The bird feeding table that the Michaels maintained was an aid to observation, and Enid published many interesting descriptions of bird eating habits and disputes over the spoils. She also was a superb observer of mammals, able to look at tracks on the trail and discern what kind of animal and how many had passed that way.

Enid herself fed animals from the hand and commented favorably on others doing the same. She noted: "Who can forget the wild animal that has taken bread from his hand? In all the world there is no other joy like this."

Enid Michael.



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Enid Michael with students from the Yosemite School of Field Natural History.

Birds, deer, bears, and small mammals were given names by Enid and other residents, almost as if they were pets, and some of them, including deer or ring-tailed cats, were adopted as pets. Two of her most entertaining articles tell the stories of Jiggs the pampered deer and Maggie the grouse.

Enid created and maintained a very popular display of wildflowers at the old Administration Building, later behind the Museum, and at a few other locations, where hundreds of flowers in metal vases were kept fresh by constant running water. These displays allowed visitors to observe and learn the names of the fresh flowers.

In 1931, philanthropist Marjorie Montgomery Ward made a donation of \$4,000 for the development of a garden in the sandy, dry area behind the Yosemite Museum. Enid Michael was hired to direct the work of selecting and planting the flora. The creation and maintenance of this wildflower garden was perhaps her most significant single accomplishment. She combed the cliffs and canyons of Yosemite Valley as well as the high country in search of specimens to be planted. In its heyday the garden boasted more than one thousand plants.

The wildflower garden was a wonderful place to visit and study the plants, or to simply sit on a bench to meditate or read. There was a spring, and a little stream ran through the garden, where plants often bloomed beyond their normal season. It was a place to learn and to be inspired.

Enid wrote down much of what she observed in Yosemite. She was more a field naturalist than a scientific researcher, and wrote for the general public. Her output is outstanding, both in quantity and quality. She published 195 articles in *Yosemite Nature Notes*, 357 in the *Stockton Record*, and nineteen in other publications.

Her writings are rich in the details of her surroundings, and describe interesting local characters and the Michaels' way of life, in addition to the fauna, flora and other natural features. She was a talented writer; most of her articles are entertaining as well as informative, and quite a few are charming in their understated humor. They include some of the most extensive and intensive descriptions of bird behavior ever written, based on extremely detailed field notes.

The picture of Enid's life in Yosemite which emerges from her writings is that of an idyllic existence. Her lifestyle was simplified and leisure time to pursue her interests increased by the absence of children. Regardless of season she started off each day with her own personal nature walk, usually in the company of Charles. They were often followed by a little band of devotees. Charles accompanied Enid on all her reported climbs, and most of her reported hikes.

Enid Michael made many discoveries of birds and plants not previously sighted in Yosemite. She felt very close to the fauna and flora, and often described animal behavior in human terms and characterized the flowers as having "faces," "bravely" flourishing under adverse conditions, etc. Enid made many drawings and took many photographs to document her studies and illustrate her articles, but unfortunately none of the originals have survived.

The Michaels' happiness was not at all diminished by the fact that during most of their time in Yosemite they were housed in conditions that most of us today would consider primitive. As was the custom in the early decades of the twentieth century, most government and concessionaire employees lived in tents or cabins with wooden or cement floors. Enid seemed especially fond of their tent on the long-gone Roe Island, a large sandbar up river from Sentinel Bridge that could be reached only in low water, where they lived from 1920 to 1927.

For all intents and purposes, they camped out. Housekeeping was minimal. How long does it take to sweep out a tent? But there were no laundrettes, and water was heated on a wood stove and the clothes scrubbed on a washboard in a tub. Dishes were washed by hand, with the dirty dishwater tossed out on the ground "to settle the dust," of which there was plenty.

At least there was no bathroom to clean. In fact, there was no bathroom at all, just a pit toilet, or park service restrooms at a greater distance. And the couple seemed to have enjoyed their daily dip in the Merced River, or any other icy stream that happened to be available when they were out hiking or climbing.

Enid's articles include vignettes of colorful Yosemite figures such as Herbert Sonn, the "Birdman of Yosemite," as well as assorted neighbors, rangers, and other residents. Many of the local residents first learned about

the flora and fauna of Yosemite Valley by going on nature walks with the Michaels, and there are those who remember them with gratitude and affection to this day. Enid was also very popular with the tourists, and had quite a following, which benefited her when her reappointment was under consideration.

Enid Michael's career was not without serious controversy. In 1923, Enid mobilized the California Federation of Women's Clubs and other groups to pressure the NPS to change her appointment from seasonal to permanent. Superintendent Lewis appears to have resented the move, saying she had "propagandized" the federation; he recommended against her reappointment, but he was apparently overruled or changed his mind, for she was rehired.

What is clear is that her status was resented by some of her male colleagues, who believed that no woman should occupy such a position. Each year her seasonal reappointment seems to have become an issue. Matters worsened with the appointment of C. A. "Bert" Harwell as Park Naturalist in 1929. With Harwell's arrival, an annual crisis seems to have become routine. Harwell had been Michael's student in the Yosemite School of Field Natural History in 1926, and perhaps it was difficult for her to take orders from a former student.

Harwell, on the other hand, was not tolerant of

woman rangers. In a memo to Superintendent Thomson dated March 5, 1937 Harwell included a handwritten notation initialed "JBW" indicating that: "It would be better if the [CCC] boys worked under the direction of a male naturalist." The word "male" is underlined four times!

Much of the friction stemmed from Enid's management of the wildflower garden. At times the controversy reached the highest levels of the National Park Service. In 1934, Harwell wrote to Assistant Director Harold C. Bryant saying, "the situation regarding Enid Michael and the garden has come to a crisis." Superintendents were put into an uncomfortable position between Harwell, who was Enid's supervisor, and Enid, who was admired for her achievements and enjoyed popular support.

In early 1935, Superintendent Thomson reluctantly informed her: "unless Mr. Harwell asks for your service I can't recommend appointment. Certainly I hope that you want to come back and that you really will convince Mr. Harwell that you and he can work shoulder to shoulder, as I know of no person who has a finer background or feeling for our work than Enid Michael and I should miss you and Charles personally, more than either of you realize."

Mrs. Michael, in turn, wrote to Harwell saying: "in case of my return I shall do my utmost to work in har-

Enid's flower show in front of the old Administration Building, circa 1924.



PHOTO COURTESY OF YOSEMITE RESEARCH LIBRARY.

mony with you. Shoulder to shoulder with you I should like to work to the glory of our Wildflower Garden and the success of the Ranger Naturalist Service. I should like to work in the Wildflower Garden just a few years more. To the end that the wildflowers really become naturalized in this spot. It is not for myself that I wish to return, but for the thousands of visitors that look with hope upon the Garden. Whether I return or not I wish you every success with the garden and with the Ranger Naturalist work. Charles joins me in best wishes."

Harwell's reply was equally cordial, complimenting her on her work: "I realize, I think, better than anyone else, the unremitting care you give to the program of planting and nurturing every single bit of growth out there and how carefully you guard your project." Nevertheless, he issued the notification that, "it seems to be in the best interest of the Service and harmony in the staff that you may not be invited to return this summer. . . I hope you will believe me when I say that I hold both you and Charlie in the highest regard."

Two days later, however, Harwell sent a memo to the superintendent listing a long series of reasons for refusing to nominate her for reappointment that summer. The list seems more than a bit exaggerated in light of Enid Michael's twenty-one seasonal reappointments!

The sensitivity of the matter is made clear by the fact that the superintendent took the extraordinary step of forwarding it to the Director of the National Park Service. He wrote:

"Mrs. Michael is not alone a vivid personality, but she has been part of the ranger-naturalist program here so many years that she is something of an institution. She has probably an unrivalled intimate knowledge of the flowers and birds of Yosemite, and her knowledge of the out-of-the-way places seems almost too valuable to be lost. With her husband, she has accumulated the

best series of 16 mm film extant on Yosemite, a series which they are constantly augmenting." (Three reels of the films have survived, and have been preserved in DVD format.)

Enid's ordeal ended when Harwell accepted an appointment to be California Representative to the National Association of Audubon Societies and resigned as Chief Naturalist on September 7, 1940.

Enid's beloved husband Charles died December 30, 1941 at their home in Pasadena. Charles' death was a

great loss to all who had known him. With the onset of World War II, the positions of Enid Michael and the other seasonal ranger-naturalists became endangered. Enid's last day of service was September 30, 1942. In 1943, all seasonal ranger-naturalist positions were abolished for the duration of the war, and she never returned to her job.

She remained in her home in Pasadena, and married Herbert H. Benson in the early 1950s. She continued to spend part of each summer in Yosemite with her new husband, and to take an interest in the wildflower garden and in the well-being of the park as a whole. She served as custodian of the Sierra

Club's LeConte Memorial Lodge for several summers in the forties and fifties.

During the last three years of her life, Enid Michael suffered the tragedy of Alzheimer's disease, and was faithfully cared for by Mr. Benson. She died in their home in Pasadena on February 11, 1966 at the age of 82.



Enid displays sugar pine cones.

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Fernando Peñalosa, a Life member of the Yosemite Association, is the author of Yosemite in the 1930s (Quaking Aspen Books, 2002). He is currently preparing a selection of Enid Michael's articles for publication.