Yosemite Nature Notes Collection

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2016
Descriptive Summary

Title: Yosemite Nature Notes Collection

Dates: 1922-1988

Collection Number: YCN 1024: (YOSE 109205)

Creator/Collector: Yosemite National History Association

Extent: 11 LF

Online items available: [link]

Repository: Yosemite National Park Archives

El Portal, California 95318

Abstract: The Yosemite Nature Notes Collection contains a nearly complete run of Yosemite Nature Notes, including "Special Numbers" (themed issues), which the Yosemite National History Association frequently revised and republished, even following Yosemite Nature Notes’ institutional demise in 1962. The run of Nature Notes is divided into two identical series, Series I, Yosemite Nature Notes—Preservation Copies and Series II, Yosemite Nature Notes—Research Copies, with the intention that researchers will be supplied with publications from Series II. Also included in the collection are hardbound volumes of Yosemite Nature Notes from the Rocky Mountain National Park Library, which date 1923-1940 and sometimes include Yosemite Field School and other naturalist program publications. Mimeograph kits from the early years of Yosemite Nature Notes (1923-1924) complete the collection. More information pertaining to Yosemite Nature Notes, including correspondence, drafts of "Special Numbers" and numbers from the 1970s, illustrations, and other ephemera can be found in the Yosemite Association Records, in Series II, Subseries D, Publication projects, Boxes 24-29.

Language of Material: English

Access

No restrictions

Preferred Citation

Yosemite Nature Notes Collection. Yosemite National Park Archives

Acquisition Information

Most of the Yosemite Nature Notes Collection arrived in one accession from the Yosemite Association in 2006. In 1992, the Yosemite Association had received a large donation of Yosemite Nature Notes from the National Audubon Society. These issues spanned 1946-1954, and it is likely that some of the numbers in our collection derive from this donation. When the publications were first donated to the park, they were kept in the Yosemite Museum attic in Yosemite Valley before being transferred to the Yosemite Archives in El Portal. Since the primary accession, issues have been accepted from individual donors to fill gaps in the collection. Many numbers, especially from the early years, are inscribed with the names of their original owners or stamped by initial repositories.

Biography/Administrative History

Orchestrated by Yosemite’s ranger-naturalists and produced by the Yosemite Natural History Association (now the Yosemite Association) between 1922 and 1962, Yosemite Nature Notes was created to woo the press (no writing was copyrighted in the regular numbers), educate and guide Yosemite visitors, and, as a subscription-based magazine, provide interested readers across the country with a year-long immersion in Yosemite’s macro- and micro-miscellanea. Each issue comprises short vignettes by ranger-naturalists about natural and cultural park topics. Yosemite Nature Notes and Yellowstone’s contemporaneously-spawned and eponymously-titled iteration (1921-1958) provided the first models for other such publications throughout the National Park Service. A common interpretative tool in the mid-twentieth century, parks with a Nature Notes program included Mount Rainier National Park (1923-1939), Grand Canyon National Park (1926-1935), Zion/Bryce Canyon National Park (1920s-1930s), Rocky Mountain National Park (1930s), Glacier National Park (1920s-1930s), and Acadia National Park (1930s). There is scant compiled information about the park-wide Nature Notes programs. It appears that other parks, such as the Grand Canyon, also relied upon their supporting organizations to fund the publication of Nature Notes. In 1937, Hazel Hunt Voth, assisted by workers from the Works Progress Association (WPA), published a National Park Service-wide bibliography of Nature Notes for the period of 1922-1936. Though this publication provides little illumination about the administrative mechanics or foundational and conceptual origins of Nature Notes as a Park Service initiative, it does offer an inventory of parks with Nature Notes programs. Initiated by Chief Park Naturalist Ansel F. Hall in 1922, Yosemite Nature Notes grew out of the praise that Hall and Enid Michael, Yosemite’s first female naturalist, received for their weekly columns in the local Stockton Register. The editor of the Register, G.E. Reynolds, supported the efforts of Hall and Michael, providing their new magazine with type from his Linotype machines, and the Yosemite Natural History Association funded all other print shop necessities. Ansel Hall thus became the editor and
publisher of the fledgling Yosemite Nature Notes, which he printed in-house at the Yosemite Museum. In its earliest form, the publication comprised a four-page, mimeographed, letter-sized document stapled in the upper right-hand corner. Hall published the magazine bi-weekly during the summer and monthly in the off-season. In 1925, the rough manuscript morphed into an octavo-sized booklet, and by 1962, Yosemite Nature Notes had a color cover and themed, “Special Number” issues clocking up to eighty pages in length. Although the publication’s style matured significantly over its first two decades, Yosemite Nature Notes continued to be printed at the Yosemite Museum by the Chief Park Naturalist until 1947, when printing was outsourced to Fresno. In the 1950s, printing was shifted to Crown Printing and Lithography Company in San Francisco. From 1926 until the sporadic, final issues of Volume XL in 1961 and 1962, Yosemite Nature Notes followed a regular publication schedule—twelve issues were published annually, one each month, with one month of the year usually designed as a “Special Number.” The Yosemite Nature Notes Collection includes forty such unique “Special Numbers,” most authored by a single Yosemite luminary and delving into some issue of interest, such as Yosemite’s birds, wildflowers, or geology. The Yosemite Natural History Association revised and republished these issues frequently, continuing to reprint some numbers even following Nature Notes’ institutional demise in 1962. Though “Nature Notes” had been dropped from the publication’s cover title in 1958, the name of Yosemite Nature Notes officially changed to Yosemite in 1961. Subscribers were encouraged, via back cover ads, to “[k]eep in touch with [their] Yosemite.” Initially, a year’s subscription cost one dollar; by 1962, this price had doubled. It has not been possible to locate statistics of Yosemite Nature Notes’ subscription base, but there are occasional mentions of the magazine’s influence and clout within its pages. Though Superintendent Carl P. Russell downplays the impact of Yosemite Nature Notes in his 1949 article, calling the magazine “small and unpretentious,” he does note that the twelve unique “Special Numbers” published to date in 1949 had reached over 168,000 readers. The increasingly professionalized design of Nature Notes—especially of its “Special Numbers”—in the 1950s, as well as the 1947 outsourcing of its printing, indicate that there was a healthy readership through the last decade of the magazine’s publication. The longest-running and last such publication in the NPS, Yosemite Nature Notes was discontinued, according to the 1962 “Final Issue,” because of “rising costs, diminishing manpower, and the changing times.” It is speculated that the evolving structures of the Ranger-Naturalist and interpretative programs caused the publication to slide into obsolescence. Writing about Yellowstone Nature Notes, historians Paul Schullery and Lee Whittlesey discuss the concurrent demise of that publication: “In the late 1950s, traditional observational ‘natural history’ was falling out of favor…replaced by more rigorous scientific techniques. For many years, park service naturalists had been jokingly referred to as ‘Sunday supplement scientists’ for their simple nature lessons... On the other hand, perhaps it was just practical needs, or bureaucratic whim, that one day led to a decision (either in the National Park Service or in each park individually) to invest limited staff resources in other things.”

Beginning in 1970, the Yosemite Natural History Association attempted to resurrect the series; throughout the 1970s, issues titled either Yosemite Nature Notes or Yosemite were published intermittently, following the numbering schema and the style of the original Nature Notes series. Only two such issues are available in the Yosemite Nature Notes Collection. These publications were often in newsletter, not booklet form; this change in style was solidified when the Yosemite Natural History Association changed its name to the Yosemite Association in 1986 and began the regular publication of a quarterly newsletter, Yosemite, which ran until 2010. Despite differences in style, format, content, and tone, Yosemite also continued the numbering schema of Yosemite Nature Notes; its first issue in 1986 was designated Volume 48, Number 1. The legacy of the Yosemite Nature Notes is considerable; the Today, the entertaining, engaging, instructive, and often quirky wilderness anecdotes provides an significant overview of NPS interpretative strategies in the mid-twentieth century. The publication provides insight into shifting wilderness management techniques (more often than not in the early years, rare animals are killed and displayed in the Yosemite Museum); interpretative and visitor use priorities; and the ways in which changes in American culture and life affected the management and visitor experience at Yosemite. (Automobile tour guides become prominent “Special Numbers” in the mid1940s, for example.)

While Yosemite Nature Notes are not an auteur medium, they do provide some scholarly insight into Yosemite’s prominent mid-century figures. Although not all articles are attributed to a particular author, it is possible to track the career of frequent contributors in those that are. Early issues feature the writing of Enid Michael and Ansel F. Hall, as well as that of C.C. Presnall, M.E. Beaty, William Godfrey, and C.A. Harwell. Later issues include writing by Willis A. Evans, Newton Drury, Frank Kittredge, William Neely, Lawrence C. Merriam, C. Frank Brockman, Vincent Mowbray, and James Cole, among others. More information pertaining to Yosemite Nature Notes, including correspondence, drafts of “Special Numbers” and numbers from the 1970s, illustrations, an incomplete run of Yosemite, and other ephemera can be found in the Yosemite Association Records, in Series II, Subseries D, Publication Projects, Boxes 24-29. In addition to a complete run of the publication, the Yosemite National Park Research Library houses a subject index of Yosemite Nature Notes, in the form of a twenty-drawer card catalog that was compiled prior to 1980. 1 Hunt Voth’s bibliography can be found at the beginning of Series I, Yosemite Nature Notes—Preservation Copies and of Series II, Yosemite Nature Notes—Research Copies. 2 Russell, Carl P. “Twenty Five Years Ago.” Yosemite Nature Notes Volume XXVIII (1949): 19-20. 3 “The Final Issue.” Yosemite Volume XL (1962): 122. 4 Schullery, Paul, and Whittlesey, Lee. “Yellowstone Nature Notes: A Neglected Documentary Resource.” Yellowstone Science Volume VIII (2000): 2-5. National Park Service. 2012 June 17.
http://www.nps.gov/history/history/hisnps/NPSHistorians/schullery.pdf. 5 An incomplete run of this era of Yosemite can be located in the Yosemite Association Records.

Scope and Content of Collection
The collection is arranged chronologically within each series. In Series I and Series II, “Special Number” publications, if dated with a month, are incorporated into the run of normal Nature Notes numbers. If no month of publication is provided, they are placed at the end of the year and, where necessary, arranged alphabetically by title.