

Shirley Sargent Collection

Finding aid created by Yosemite National Park Archives staff using RecordEXPRESS

Yosemite National Park Archives

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<http://www.nps.gov/yose/historyculture/collections.htm>

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Descriptive Summary

Title: Shirley Sargent Collection

Dates: 1811-2006, bulk dates 1930-2004

Collection Number: YCN: 2006 (YOSE 224352)

Creator/Collector:

Extent: 22 linear feet

Online items available 

<https://voro.cdlib.org/user-pdf-dav/yosnpa/Shirley%20Sargent%20Collection%20Finding%20Aid.pdf>

Repository: Yosemite National Park Archives

El Portal, California 95318

Abstract: The Shirley Sargent Collection contains material including correspondence, notes, forms, deeds, legal records, articles, newspapers, drawings, prints, maps, blueprints, diazotypes, linens, photographs, nitrate and acetate negatives, slides, stereographs, photo albums, postcards, scrapbooks, brochures, programs, pamphlets, calendars, menus, magazines, journals, bulletins, newsletters, hardcover publications, paperback publications, children's books, reviews, manuscripts, and special media such as floppy discs and CD-ROMs. Material that requires special attention such as diazotypes, blueprints, and nitrate negatives, have been reboxed and separated as appropriate. Much of the material revolves around Sargent's research efforts and supplemented the publications represented in the collection.

Language of Material: English

Access

No restrictions.

Preferred Citation

Shirley Sargent Collection. Yosemite National Park Archives

Acquisition Information

The collection was created by Shirley Sargent and donated to the Yosemite Museum by her niece, Kathy Chappel, and Fernando Peñalosa in 2004 and 2005. Although YOSE-06738 is the primary accession number, the following accessions were incorporated into the collection: YOSE-3279, YOSE-3644, YOSE-3709, YOSE-3730, YOSE-3823, YOSE-5050, YOSE-5837, YOSE-6738, YOSE-6787.

Biography/Administrative History

"Shirley Sargent is the foremost Yosemite historian of our time. Tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of readers, have enjoyed her books, and learned from them." Fernando Peñalosa, "Shirley Sargent: Yosemite Historian," 2006. Shirley Sargent dedicated most of her life to writing about Yosemite's history. Sargent was born on July 12, 1927, and by the time of her death, she had written over 30 books, over 100 articles, and numerous other stories and guidebooks. Sargent began her literary pursuits with adolescent fiction, but she was also known for her meticulous historical research. As a result, her writing is characterized by its narrative readability and depth of detail. Most of her books either documented Yosemite's history or were fictional stories based on Yosemite. Her accounts of Yosemite's history, in particular, have been recognized for showcasing little-known parts of the park's pioneer past. In 1990, Sargent was awarded the Certificate of Merit of the California Council for the Promotion of History, and in 1994, she also received the Yosemite Fund Award for her achievements. Sargent's articles and columns appeared regularly in both local newspapers and magazines, and in respected historical publications. She came to be recognized as an authority on Yosemite history, and kept writing and researching until her death on December 3, 2004. Sargent chose to spend her life in Yosemite because it offered her both solitude and adventure. She wrote about Yosemite's history because it was romantic and exciting. She said of herself, "My unique, nomadic background provided me with a zest for living and a deep appreciation for nature, roots in one place, financial solvency and hot and cold running water (thus determining my longtime residence on a forested mountain spur 12 miles west of Yosemite Valley) but also helped shape my career as a historian and writer of some 29 books. In Yosemite, roots firmly planted, I raise Manzanita, echoes and books." (A Moving Life in the Great Depression, 35) Sargent flourished in Yosemite because it reaffirmed her commitment to live independently and offered her a chance to write about pioneers whose rugged, outdoor lifestyles she herself admired and tried to emulate. As a child, Sargent became enchanted by Yosemite; the park's landscape and pioneer past inspired her for the rest of her life. Sargent first visited Yosemite during a family vacation in 1929, when she was just two years old. In 1936, despite the Depression, Sargent's father found a job working as a highway surveyor in the park and moved his wife and nine-year-old Shirley from Pasadena to Yosemite. The family moved back south in the fall of 1937, only to return to Yosemite again in the summer of 1941 when Sargent's father found another temporary job. These years in Yosemite were formative for young Sargent and she proclaimed she would "build a cabin" (SSYH, 12) in Foresta when she grew up. After graduating from Pasadena City

College in 1947, Sargent began her writing career while running a nursery school. Sargent and her family continued to visit Yosemite, and Sargent began renting a cabin in Foresta during the summers. In 1961, Sargent closed her nursery school and made the move to Foresta, where she was able to buy two lots and build a small cabin, known as her “bankrupt bunkhouse.” Here, she began to write about Yosemite, and while conducting her research, found the ruins of a cabin a mile from Foresta. She discovered—through her research pursuits, no doubt—that the ruined cabin and land had belonged to Theodore Solomons (SSYH, 50), an early Sierra Nevada writer and pioneer. In 1961, Sargent’s father and a family friend, Henry Gunderson, bought the 21 acres of “Flying Spur Land” from Solomons’ surviving widow and deeded a portion to Sargent. Feeling an affinity with Solomons, Sargent acquired the original plans for his cabin and had her new cabin built around the remaining ruined fireplace. She chose to preserve the name “Flying Spur,” and moved into the cabin in 1964. Flying Spur was Sargent’s home for nearly 30 years; the cabin, decorated with sugar pine cones, became a place of contemplation, as well as celebration. Sargent lived at the Flying Spur cabin until 1990 when it burned in the Arch Rock Fire— this fire, unfortunately, also destroyed the bulk of her research, writings, and historic material. Though she rebuilt the Flying Spur in 1991, Sargent’s health deteriorated, and she spent winters and most summers in Mariposa until her death in 2004. After Sargent’s death, her biographer, Fernando Peñalosa, donated what remained of Sargent’s research to the Yosemite National Park Archives. The majority of the material in the Shirley Sargent Collection is associated with her research and correspondence from 1990 - 2004. After 1991, she wrote three books, revised two previously published books, and wrote a reunion booklet for the Yosemite Elementary School, while continuing to write articles. The contents of the collection have been organized into five series: Research, Photographs, Postcards, Books, and Fernando Peñalosa’s donation of his research about Sargent. Unfortunately, Sargent did not leave the collection in any discernible order, probably due to her health; as a result, the original organization of the collection is unknown. Sargent suffered from dystonia, a debilitating neuromuscular disorder that worsened after 1991. Sargent exhibited the first symptoms of dystonia in 1936, after her first summer in Yosemite. For all of her adult life, Sargent could barely stand, suffered from involuntary jerking of the hands and head, and had to crawl up the stairs to her cabin. As her health deteriorated in the 1990s, she had to be confined to a wheelchair, couldn’t feed or clothe herself, and could only type with one finger. Sargent often relied on her family and friends to help edit her manuscripts or travel to conduct research. Sargent resented her disease, always striving to be self-sufficient and independent, like the pioneers she wrote about. Most of her remaining documents, therefore, contain incomplete, abrupt, and misspelled notations due to her worsening condition in the 1990s and her insistence that she work independently. Keeping Sargent’s deteriorating health in mind while utilizing the collection is one method to interpret its contents. The research for her last books has no clear organization. Furthermore, there are general categories of research in the collection with little or no explanation of her ultimate publication goals. Other than Sargent’s health, the collection can be understood in terms of how she published her books. Most of Sargent’s publications about Yosemite, as well as souvenir items and brochures, were published by either the Flying Spur Press or the Ponderosa Press. Sargent, along with her fellow historian Hank Johnson, founded the Flying Spur Press—named after her beloved residence in Foresta— in 1966. Sargent and Johnson published books, Yosemite calendars from 1967 to 1984, postcards, stationary, and “Happiness is Yosemite” bumper stickers. The Flying Spur partnership was very successful until the 1990 fire, when most of the supplies and books burned, but it persisted until Sargent’s death. Sargent only published three books under her Ponderosa Press, two of which, “Protecting Paradise” and “Keepsake: Yosemite Elementary School,” were printed after 1990 when the Flying Spur Press was in financial trouble. Sargent also revised her earlier book, “Yosemite’s Innkeepers,” under Ponderosa Press. The research for these three books remains in Sargent’s collection, as well as some of the souvenir items. Peñalosa, Fernando. “Shirley Sargent: Yosemite Historian.” Rancho Palos Verdes, CA: Quaking Aspen, 2006. Print. Sargent, Shirley. “A Moving Life in the Great Depression.” *The Californians* Jan./Feb. 1988: 31-35. Print.

Scope and Content of Collection

The Collection has been divided into five subject series: Series I, Research; Series II, Photographs; Series III, Postcards and Scrapbooks; Series IV, Publications; and Series V, Fernando Peñalosa.

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