

The Kaweah Colony

Utopia and Sequoia National Park

The Sierra Nevada, stretching north and south for over 400 miles, forms a jagged line of demarcation between California's eastern desert and its interior, the agriculturally-rich Great Central Valley. Mountain peaks push to over 14,000 feet; lakes and streams contribute to a vast watershed of expansive mountain meadows and dense stands of pines and firs. Unique to the middle elevations of the mountains' western slopes are the spectacular groves of Sequoia giganteum—the giant sequoias—among the largest living things on Earth. To walk among them today one would be hard pressed to divine the struggles, politics, and dreams that surrounded the area in the late 19th century: conflicts that culminated in 1890 with the founding of California's first national park.¹

Into this dramatic setting entered an unlikely group of idealists. Their leader was Burnette Haskell. As a young man, he had wandered through a series of occupations and universities, eventually returning to San Francisco where he passed the bar and began to practice law. In time, he inherited a newspaper from a generous uncle. *The Truth*, as it was called, would become the vehicle for Haskell's latest and most

abiding enthusiasm: labor organizing.

Throughout the 1880s, Haskell advocated the overthrow of narrow interests with extraordinary zeal, organizing unions (one of which, the Coast Seaman's Union, is still active), publishing, attending meetings, and studying works of political philosophy. He would become "without a doubt the best-read man in the local labor movement."²

The intellectual milieu in which Haskell and his comrades operated was secretive by needs and peopled with largely forgotten figures, a shadow-land behind the expansion of industry and metropolitan growth. One such figure was Laurence Gronlund. A Danish émigré, Gronlund was once described as "the foremost Socialist in America."³ In 1884, he published *Co-Operative Commonwealth*, outlining a model for collective, progressive settlement and replacing Marx's class struggle with the deliberate cultivation of cooperation as the "motor of history." The book was hugely influential and contributed to Edward Bellamy's popular fantasy, *Looking Backwards*.⁴ With such a project in mind, Haskell and his circle founded the Cooperative Land Purchase and Colonization Association in hopes of putting Gronlund's principles into practice.

In the summer of 1885, when Association member Charles F. Keller overheard reports of public land then available in the southern Sierra Nevada, the question of location seemed settled. In September 1885, an advance team from the Association made a quiet visit to "Giant Forest."⁵ Under the terms of the Timber and Stone Act, a citizen could legally file for 160 acres. Individually, a tract of this size in the remoteness of Giant Forest held little practical economic benefit, but managed collectively, a block of shared claims could prove viable. A proposed logging venture would be their economic anchor.

By the end of October 1885, 53 Association members had filed indi-

This previously unpublished photograph by photographer and Kaweah Colony member C. C. Curtis shows a gathering of colonists and supporters near the settlement at Kaweah.



vidual but adjacent land claims in the Giant Forest. If all went as expected, after 60 days each claimant would be expected to pay \$400 plus a \$10.00 processing fee. Legal title to a considerable portion of the Giant Forest would then pass to the members of the newly renamed "Cooperative Land and Colonization Association."

In the "land grab" of the late 19th century, land act provisions, written to favor individuals and families, were customarily abused by larger interests. The size of the Association's filing aroused the suspicions of a local newspaper editor (and former land agent), George Stewart. For the past 10 years, Stewart had advocated the protection of the sequoias and their watersheds, particularly the drainage of the Kaweah River, flowing west from the mountains through the county seat at Visalia; now, he alerted the Land Office of potential fraud. Referring the matter to the Government Land Office in Washington, then under administration of the reform-minded William Andrew Jackson Sparks, all claims within the four townships of Giant Forest (and 14 others in this vicinity) were suspended pending investigation.⁶

Despite the irony of being mistaken for agents of corporate interest, the would-be colonists set to work. By 1886, approximately 160 members had moved to the foothills below Giant Forest and established the "Kaweah Colony."⁷ Haskell rhapsodized upon the grandeur of the location in the colony's newspaper and concluded,

I think our people in the city should get away once in a while, aye, if only for a day, from the rottenness of the city to some place like this. Looking around me now, I can understand why those who live in the mountains are never fully enslaved.⁸

On October 1, 1886, the colonists began the most daunting task before them: building the road to the Giant Forest. The colonists established a headquarters at "Kaweah" and a tent construction camp which they called "Advance." Following impassioned debate, they re-organized their collective assets under the Kaweah Co-Operative Commonwealth Company of California Limited, a joint stock company. They organized a school, arranged evenings of musical entertainment, and began farming on homesteaded land outside the withdrawn townships. As the road work progressed for three arduous years, the colonists remained confident that the outstanding question of title would be satisfactorily resolved.

Finally, in late 1889, with the road nearly complete, an initial report of investigation was filed. Quite enthusiastic about the colonists' enterprise, it found no evidence to support the initial reservations of the Visalia Land Office. In Washington, however, this report languished. A second report, filed in the summer of 1890, again failed to bring resolution. The colonists remained optimistic and, in the summer of 1890, a portable steam-driven sawmill was drawn to the edge of the giant sequoia groves and logging commenced. In the colony newspaper, Haskell proudly described the accomplishment:

The Eiffel Tower is 1,000 feet high, the Cologne Cathedral, 510 feet; the Great Pyramid but 460 feet; but our road has attained an altitude of nearly 7,000 feet. We are into the timber and Kaweah Colony is no longer, in a material point of view, an experiment.⁹

Meanwhile, George Stewart and his allies had succeeded in persuading the congressman from Ventura, General William Vandever, to introduce legislation that would reserve as a public park two townships containing substantial stands of giant sequoias. Garfield Grove lay south of, and quite distinct from, the Giant Forest area. The bill was introduced, passed quickly through both the House and the Senate, and was signed by President Benjamin Harrison. On September 25, 1890, Sequoia became the first official national park in California and only the second in the entire national park system.

One week after the establishment of the new national park, on the last day of Congress, President Harrison received and signed a second bill, creating Yosemite National Park. A similar bill had been put forward earlier in the year, again by Representative William Vandever, but the bill that passed was a substitute bill introduced at the last minute. Curiously, it now included language expanding the boundaries of the week-old Sequoia National Park and including the four townships of Giant Forest. The colony's claims were suddenly within a national park. Looking back on his experience, J. J. Martin, one of the founders of the colony, clearly attributed the colony's difficulties to the intervention of the Southern Pacific Railroad whose virtual monopoly of timber and timber-transport in the booming Central Valley was threatened by the colony's enterprise.¹⁰

In the months that followed, the Government Land Office (GLO) investigation was con-

cluded. The GLO Commissioner recommended that the colonists' claims be upheld as language in the park expansion bill allowed for the exemption of "private lands" from inclusion in the park. This was rejected by an assistant attorney general on the grounds that the land claims weren't technically "private lands" at the time the bill became law. The trustees of the colony were arrested, jailed, and convicted of "timber trespass" and U.S. Cavalry troops were dispatched to patrol the new national park. By the end of 1891, the utopian dreams of the Kaweah Colony had begun to fade, to be replaced by others. Several of the colonists remained in the area and several would work in the new park; one former member, Guy Hopping, joined the Park Service in 1918 and eventually became Superintendent of neighboring General Grant National Park in 1930. As for Burnette Haskell, it is reported that he died alone and embittered, addled by drink and drug, in a ramshackle cabin by the ocean on the outskirts of San Francisco.

Few extant cultural resources related to the colonists and their venture remain. The site of the colony's headquarters and tent construction camp lie outside the park's boundaries. The sawmill has long since been removed. The Colony Mill Road, leading from the foothills to the edge of the Giant Forest, is the most enduring evidence of the colony's efforts. This road served for about 30 years as the only vehicle route into Giant Forest. Today, it is a hiking trail. The trail is periodically maintained, but active restoration of colony-related areas is not currently planned. However, interpretation of the colony and its efforts is available through a variety of publications. The ongoing preservation of related features and sites lies in their relative remoteness. To undertake a day hike of the Colony Mill Road is to take on a fairly rugged 10-mile journey, with approximately 4,000 feet of elevation change.

Certainly, the most significant contribution of the experiment, albeit an inadvertent one, is the instrumental role it played in the formation of Sequoia National Park. Today, visitors given to irony may thank a strange collision—of utopian industry, narrow corporate interests, and a grass-roots campaign for the broadest public good—for the preservation of this piece of the Southern Sierra Nevada.

Notes

- ¹ The most complete history of the Sierran parks can be found in William C. Tweed and Larry M. Dilsaver, *Challenge of the Big Trees: A Resource History*

of Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks (Three Rivers, California: Sequoia Natural History Association, 1990).

- ² Ira Cross, *Labor Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1934), p157. The most complete biography of Haskell can be found in Jay O'Connell, *Co-Operative Dreams: A History of the Kaweah Colony* (Van Nuys, California: Raven River Press, 1999).
- ³ See Robert Hine, *California's Utopian Colonies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp29-30.
- ⁴ A biographical sketch of Gronlund is provided by Stow Persons in his introduction to Laurence Gronlund, *The Cooperative Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1965).
- ⁵ East of the valley town of Visalia, Giant Forest sat at an elevation of 6,500 feet, overlooking the Kaweah River drainage. Named by John Muir, this is one of the largest and most beautiful of the approximately 80 groves of giant sequoias.
- ⁶ Curiously, filings on timber lands some 10 miles to the north – leading to the acquisition of some 30,000 acres by the Smith & Moore Lumber Company – would be upheld in the coming years. See Hank Johnston, *They Felled the Redwoods* (Fish Springs, California: Stauffer Publishing, 1996), pp. 23-54, and Dilsaver and Tweed, pp. 55-56.
- ⁷ The colonists adopted the name of the local river (North Fork of the Kaweah River), itself the phonetic spelling of a local Yokuts Indian tribal group variously spelled "Gawia," "Gawya," or "Kawia." The meaning of the Yokuts word has been variously interpreted to mean "Here I rest," "[place of] crows and water," or a reference to the locally present "red-winged black bird."
- ⁸ Burnette Haskell, "Nirvana," *The Commonwealth*, 3:20 (1885): p.168.
- ⁹ Burnette Haskell, "A Visit to Kaweah," *The Commonwealth*, 3:20 (1885): p.169.
- ¹⁰ "It was directly after I had personally interviewed President Crocker in regard to the location of a switch to connect our railroad with his that the reservation for the park was made and the persecution of the colony instituted." Correspondence with park naturalist Frank Been, March 3, 1933, in the archives of Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks (Manuscript Collection B, Folder 1). It would be 60 years before the colonist's suspicions would find any documentary support; see Oscar Berland, "Giant Forest's Reservation: The Legend and the Mystery," *The Sierra Club Bulletin* 47:9 (1962).

Thomas L. Burge is Cultural Resources Specialist, Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks.

Ward Eldredge works in the archives of Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks.

William C. Tweed is Chief Park Interpreter, Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks.