Wilderness handrails: The evolution of search and rescue in Yosemite National Park

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WILDERNESS HANDRAILS: THE EVOLUTION OF SEARCH AND RESCUE
IN YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK

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ABSTRACT

Wilderness Handrails: The Evolution of Search and Rescue in Yosemite National Park

by

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The evolution of search and rescue in Yosemite after World War II highlighted the ways in which park users and administrators negotiated the contentious discourses of technology, tourism, and wilderness in the modern national parks movement. The establishment of a technologically sophisticated search and rescue force provided free by the federal government blurred the lines between preservation and use in national park policy by allowing administrators to resist development and support wilderness while still providing a safe environment for recreation. The co-evolution of rock climbing and rescue also illuminated the resulting tensions between individual freedom, social responsibility, and class in environmental culture. Drawing from incident reports, administrative correspondence, and climbing literature, this thesis demonstrates that the professionalization of search and rescue enabled the Park Service to accommodate visitors seeking to both preserve nature and consume it through rock climbing and other wilderness activities in the nation’s premier national park.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project could not have been completed without the dedication, advice, and patience of others. I am especially grateful to my wife Tomoko who supported me through the long nights and numerous ups and downs of the past two years. The constant encouragement of my mother, my father, and my sister Erin also carried me through the difficult process of researching and writing this thesis.

I discovered the often overlooked story of search and rescue in Yosemite in June 2006 while conducting research in the park for a forthcoming administrative history. I am indebted to Andrew Kirk, the chair of my advisory committee at UNLV, for giving me the opportunity to work on this project. I am also grateful to Dr. Kirk for his many close readings of my work and for our frequent discussions of the complicated intersections between technology, consumer culture, and environmentalism in the history of rock climbing and recreation in the national parks.

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arguments in this thesis in fact grew out conversations with Mike as we traversed the Yosemite region on tortuous twenty-mile day hikes.

I want to thank Linda Eade at the Yosemite library and Paul Rogers at the archives in El Portal for their invaluable assistance in locating source materials. I also appreciate the efforts of Nikki Nichols and Charles Palmer who offered advice and supervised my work on the Yosemite administrative history. Thank you to Butch Farabee whose tireless research and personal insight helped me to understand the complicated political and legal issues facing rescuers in the national parks today. I am especially grateful to John Dill at YOSAR who allowed me access to long-hidden source material and shared his unequaled knowledge of the history of search and rescue in the park.

Finally, I dedicate this thesis to Hal Rothman, my advisor at UNLV through the first year and a half of my graduate education. His insight and uncanny ability to pick out the critical ideas in my writing shaped my understanding of environmental history and the significance of the national parks in twentieth and twenty first century American history. Hal’s unbounded enthusiasm for his work, for his students, and for life in general has been a constant source of inspiration in completing this project and will continue to inspire me as I move forward in my graduate school career.
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INTRODUCTION

Let them take risks, for Godsake, let them get lost, sunburnt, stranded, drowned, eaten by bears, buried alive under avalanches – that is the right and privilege of any free American.

Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 1968

Today rescue in America is pragmatic. It is a classic American expression of the denial of death by means of technology and motion.

Kenneth Andrasko, “Editor’s Note” in *Wilderness Search and Rescue*, 1980

October storms are frequent catalysts of search and rescue (SAR) missions in Yosemite National Park. Though not uncommon and typically less severe than similar meteorological events in other major mountain ranges around the world, these first storms of the winter season can be devastating to unaware visitors in Yosemite’s more than 700,000 acres of undeveloped terrain beyond, and high above, the relative safety and security of the urbanized Valley. SAR specialist and expert rock climber Lincoln Else recalled spending the first two weeks of October 2004 hiking along the Valley rim in a t-shirt and shorts, “sweating in the hot sun.” Just days later, on the morning of the nineteenth after two straight nights of freezing rain and snow, he found himself breaking trail through knee-deep snow drifts in blizzard conditions, marking trees with bright pink “flags” so that a support crew of thirty SAR experts could follow with climbing ropes, medical supplies, and other tools of rescue. Their destination: the rim of El Capitan, one of the park’s premier tourist sights and the most famous rock climbing wall in the world. The storm continued for two days as Else and Yosemite’s team of professional rescuers
struggled to carry out one of the most technically difficult, dangerous, and ultimately tragic SAR operations in the park’s recent history.\(^1\)

When the storm hit on the seventeenth, four parties including seven total climbers became trapped on four different routes high on El Capitan’s 3,000 foot vertical face. After enduring three days of fifty mile-per-hour winds and rain mixed with snow, five climbers survived to be pulled from the rock by the park’s crack SAR team while two Japanese climbers perished from hypothermia and prolonged exposure only 600 feet short of the summit. Though experienced and well-stocked for the five-day climb of the “Nose” route on El Capitan, Ryoichi Yamamoto and Moriko Ryugo did not anticipate the dire straights an October storm could bring. After two days of huddling against the cold on the same tiny ledge, the pair jettisoned much of their gear in a last ditch effort to make the summit during a lull in the storm. Unfortunately, good weather lasted only an hour, and on the night of the nineteenth, the climbers died hanging in slings, wrapped together under a flimsy nylon tarp. “Parties can steel themselves to the misery and boredom of riding out a storm on the wall,” explained Ed Visnovski in his analysis of the climbers’ actions, “but the physical and mental debilitation of hypothermia is a slippery slope that is hard to prepare for and harder to resist.”\(^2\) Requiring 110 rescuers, thousands of feet of climbing rope, a contract helicopter, and more than $110,000 of the park’s emergency appropriation funds, the rescue of the surviving climbers and the recovery of the bodies

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of Yamamoto and Ryugo underscored the vital importance of search and rescue to the administration of Yosemite National Park.3

By 2004, Yosemite’s elite SAR team had amassed nearly forty years experience carrying out some of the most improbable climbing rescues ever performed. In fact, the dramatic rescue and body recovery from El Capitan in October of 2004 shared an eerie connection with another SAR incident in exactly the same location twenty years earlier, almost to the day. On the night of October 15, 1984, an unseasonable winter storm inundated the Yosemite region, stranding five climbers in three parties on the granite flanks of El Capitan. After three days of battling poor visibility, freezing temperatures, and violent winds, rescuers managed to save the lives of three of the five climbers. The other two, Keiso Sadamoto and Kenji Yatsuhashi of Hiroshima, Japan, lost their lives to hypothermia in a vain attempt to climb through the storm.4

Such stories are reminders of the power of nature, yet they are perhaps even more valuable for what they reveal about culture and the ways in which Americans, and other visitors from around the world, have known nature through recreation in Yosemite and the national parks. The striking and oddly unsettling parallels between these two incidents on El Capitan suggest more than cosmic coincidence; they also illustrate in high relief the persistent administrative challenges arising from the transformation of rock climbing and other wilderness-oriented activities into mainstream recreational pursuits in

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3 Friends of YOSAR, “El Capitan Rescues, 10-19-04 to 10-22-04.”

4 Michael Mayer, “Case Incident Record,” October 18, 1984, YOSE SAR files, 1984.; also see Ghiglieri and Farabee, Death in Yosemite, 331-332.
Yosemite and other national parks in the second half of the twentieth century. As park goers in this period created new ways to experience nature through recreation in America’s iconic landscapes, search and rescue became routine, serving as a marker of profound changes in environmental culture.

Sociologist Joseph Sax, in his 1980 study of recreation in the national parks, *Mountains without Handrails*, asked how a minority of “preservationists” could justify their demands that the National Park Service (NPS) prioritize rock climbing, backpacking, ski mountaineering, and other wilderness-oriented activities which, by the level of risk, technical skill, and physicality involved, effectively excluded the majority of visitors seeking only “an experience that will provide the essential qualities of a resort vacation.”

Sax made no mention of the function of visitor protection in justifying this recreational hierarchy. Yet the NPS’s institutionalization of search and rescue in Yosemite in the decades following World War II represented a significant devotion of human and financial resources towards privileging the park’s most active visitors, specifically those seeking a wilderness experience *sans* “handrails.”

Even with serious budget concerns, annual increases in accidents, and objections from taxpayers, rescuers, and some wilderness advocates, the promise of free rescue remained embedded in Yosemite’s visitor protection apparatus. Established in 1970, Yosemite Search and Rescue or YOSAR - a technologically sophisticated, professional organization composed of park rangers, expert rock climbers, medical technicians, and helicopter support teams - provided a psychic safety net for even the most inexperienced visitors wishing to encounter the park through rock climbing, backpacking, cross-country

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skiing, or other forms of recreation consistent with what Sax called "the preservationist tradition in the national parks movement." As a tool for the NPS to accommodate the changing recreational expectations of park goers in the age of environmentalism, YOSAR became the "handrails" of Yosemite's wilderness.

For most tourists in Yosemite since the 1970s, YOSAR's "wilderness handrails" functioned as far more acceptable safeguards than the roads, hotels, metal railings, and other explicit "handrails" that Sax feared would pervade the parks and spoil the interaction with wild nature central to what he and millions of park lovers perceived as an appropriate wilderness experience. For many outdoor enthusiasts, YOSAR's use of helicopters, rigging systems, high powered spotlights, and other conspicuous tools of rescue seemed an intangible sideshow, existing as a reactive safeguard to be effected in the off-chance that an emergency cut short their wilderness fantasy. YOSAR's technical sophistication - though viewed by some preservationists as running counter to the technological skepticism of the wilderness ideal - enabled the individualized recreational experience sought by the park's most active visitors to remain functionally self-sufficient without becoming unjustifiably dangerous. In an urban industrial/post-industrial society in which few visitors to the national parks possessed the skills to extricate themselves from life-or-death scenarios in a wilderness setting, a technologically proficient SAR apparatus became not only an acceptable presence in the outdoors but a vital requirement of the much sought-after wilderness experience.

The wilderness handrails of SAR occupied what Leo Marx called a "middle landscape" in America's ongoing reconciliation of technology and nature since the start

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6 Ibid., 42.
of the industrial age. In Marx’s analysis, Americans created a new understanding of their relationship to nature as the “machine” of industrial technology crept into the idealized “garden” of the pre-industrial landscape. While Marx’s pastoral nature differed from the notion of a recreational wilderness that gained currency in twentieth century environmental thought, the process of redefining the human place in nature through technology remained central to both constructions. Outdoor enthusiasts from the early twentieth through to the twenty first century have continually modified the technological imperative described by Marx in order to define the limits of authenticity in the wilderness experiences. Despite the anti-technology bias of the wilderness ideal, for consumers of outdoor recreation, this search for authenticity has not always required a tangible nature unaffected by human agency, but more often has involved locating an appropriate role for technology in providing safe access to the landscapes defined as wilderness in environmental discourse.7 The history of search and rescue in the national parks reveals how park enthusiasts in the second half of the twentieth century constructed new rationales for the inclusion of technology and consumer desire into a wilderness ideal that did not explicitly contain a place for either.

As environmental historians have long argued, the wilderness movement and its outgrowth, environmentalism, emerged as critiques of the nation’s religious zeal for the technological domination of nature in the industrial age.8 Preservationists from John

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7 Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964, 23, 71, 113-115, 139-144; For these intersections between technology, consumer-oriented recreation, and wilderness in the twentieth century consider the essays in Liza Nicholas with Elaine M. Bapis and Thomas J. Harvey, eds., Imagining the Big Open: Nature, Identity, and Play in the New West (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2003); Also see James Morton Turner, “From Woodcraft to ‘Leave no Trace’: Wilderness, Consumerism, and Environmentalism in Twentieth Century America,” Environmental History 7, no. 3 (2002): 462-484.
Muir to Aldo Leopold to Edward Abbey presented wilderness as an ideal state of nature existing apart from the technological imperatives and commercialism infiltrating urban industrial society. Yet by dividing the physical world into sacred wilderness and profane civilization, these “prophets” of environmental thinking constructed a rhetorical dualism that did not necessarily reflect the practices and expectations of modern Americans.

Richard White deconstructs this dualism by positing a third path in which Americans schooled in the rationality of the enlightenment cut through the romantic critique of industrialism to discover a place for technological innovation in environmental discourse. White traces this line of thinking from Thomas Jefferson to Ralph Waldo Emerson and finally to social critic Lewis Mumford who viewed great projects such as the Grand Coulee Dam on the Columbia River as opportunities for Americans to develop functional relationships to the natural world. Andrew Kirk goes a step further by explaining the significance of Stewart Brand’s *Whole Earth Catalogue* in shaping environmentalism in the late 1960s and 1970s. Kirk demonstrates that discussions of alternative technology

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and human ingenuity in mediating relationships to nature pervaded environmental thinking well into the late twentieth century.\(^{10}\)

The changing role of technology in shaping human interactions with nature has occupied center stage in the co-evolution of recreation and rescue in Yosemite and other nature tourism destinations around the world. YOSAR’s wilderness handrails enabled park lovers to experience the freedom of unencumbered risk that Edward Abbey and other wilderness luminaries valued in the national park experience while mitigating through technology the very real possibility of serious injury or death this “right and privilege of any free American” could bring.\(^{11}\) The history of SAR in Yosemite illustrates how this interplay between technology, tourism, and wilderness influenced the National Park Service’s efforts to preserve nature as a recreational resource in the national parks in the decades following World War II.

A definition of wilderness that moves beyond the traditional analysis of the 1964 Wilderness Act as the culmination of preservationist thought is vital to understanding the evolution of SAR in Yosemite.\(^{12}\) Yet, as perhaps the most complicated and fiercely debated concept in recent environmental history, wilderness defies easy categorization.


\(^{12}\) For the Wilderness Act as a starting point for analysis of wilderness as an important theme in environmental culture and politics see James Morton Turner, The Promise of Wilderness: A History of Environmental Politics, 1964-1994 (PhD. diss.: Princeton University, 2004), 1-3.
As the aesthetic conservation of John Muir evolved into the broad-based environmentalism of the late twentieth century, the wilderness idea signified an idealized escape from the stresses of technological modernity; a reiteration of lost frontier masculinity; a roadless, “untrammeled” nature lacking signs of human agency; an ecologically sound “vignette of primitive America;” and finally, an elitist social construction that arguably devalued environments appearing less “natural.” Central to all of these interpretations has been the notion that an area designated as wilderness, whether politically or culturally, harbored a desirable recreational experience for privileged individuals in an urban industrial/post-industrial consumer society. While preservationists often maintained a distinction between what Wallace Stegner called the “spiritual refreshment” of an engagement with wilderness and “recreation” as an exploitative consumer-oriented activity, NPS administrators typically saw no such clear separation. From an administrative point of view, the “wilderness experience” was one form of recreation along what Director George Hartzog described in 1966 as a “spectrum of use from the developed areas...to the wilderness threshold...and beyond to the wilderness.” From the perspective of SAR operators, and for the purposes of this thesis, wilderness can best be understood as a malleable, hierarchical, and often ambivalent consumer ideal defined in recreational terms.

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This ambivalence has not been a contradiction in values, nor has it represented the selling out of an altruistic regard for nature since wilderness has always been contingent to changes in the culture and politics of modernity. The wilderness idea emerged in mid-nineteenth century thought as a product of the very same romantic critique of industrial age materialism that historian Colin Campbell identifies as the root impulse of modern consumer culture. As it gained cache over time, the wilderness ideal became indicative of what Campbell calls a “hedonistic” consumer response to modernity in which “the individual’s interest is primarily focused on the meanings and images which can be imputed to [a] product” rather than on its (in this case nature’s) elusive objective qualities. In other words, the self-actualizing sensation of wilderness trumped the idea of wilderness itself, enabling Americans to continually reinvent their relationship to nature. From Henry David Thoreau’s terror-filled ascent of Mount Katahdin in 1846 to Edward Abbey’s critique of “industrial tourism” in the 1960s to the emergence of Gortex-garbed “Bobos” (Bourgeois Bohemians) in the 1990s, the wilderness experience has always been a driving force in the commoditization and politicization of nature. For this reason, wilderness advocacy has never truly succeeded in divorcing nature from culture in environmental thought, but has instead brought nature into the folds of modern


culture and politics. This reconciliation of wilderness, technology, and consumerism forms a crucial yet unexplored aspect of national park history.

Environmental historians have typically framed their analysis of Yosemite and the national parks with a critique of the so-called “dual mandate” of the National Park Service to “provide for the enjoyment” of the parks “by such a means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” A number of historians, most notably Alfred Runte and Richard Sellers, contend that this ambiguous directive - spelled out by the United States Congress in the 1916 Organic Act - had, by the 1960s, become hopelessly contradictory and out of touch with the objectives of modern, science-based environmentalism. A suitable standard of ecological integrity, these authors assert, could not be preserved for future generations if the NPS remained committed to earning profits and accommodating mass-tourism in the present. While offering a valuable critique of the modern NPS from a natural resource perspective, this activist argument overstates the preservation/use dichotomy in national park policy and obscures the gradient of appropriate recreation that Joseph Sax and a number of recent historians have recognized as the primary concern of NPS administrators at both the national and local levels since the beginning of the national parks movement.

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Indeed, the emergence of ecology-based natural resource protection in the 1960s and
1970s, while altering the scientific basis for conservation in the national parks, did little
to change Americans’ fundamental understanding of the parks as places where wild
nature could be enjoyed in relative safety through recreation. As Hal Rothman argues,
national parks have never in their history been “vehicles for preservation;” instead, the
NPS has functioned as a political institution charged with negotiating the complex web of
narratives that connect, rather than divide, nature and culture in environmental
discourse. 20 Far more complex than a simple conflict between preserving nature and
accommodating use, national park management in the twentieth century involved a
highly contested political process in which the NPS negotiated numerous conceptions of
what nature in a national park should look like, how it should be experienced, and who
should have access to it. The ecological perspective advanced by Runte and Sellars
comprised only one aspect of this dialogue and could never truly be separated from
recreational discourses. Search and rescue, as a pragmatic response to these debates,
blurred the lines between preservation and use in NPS policy by offering an
administrative means to reconcile the contentious discourses of recreation, technology,
and wilderness in the national parks movement.

Search and rescue serves as a lens through which to trace broad shifts in attitudes
towards nature and appropriate recreation in American culture. Following the federal
government’s 1864 decision to grant the Yosemite Valley to the state of California “for
public use, resort, and recreation,” only a small number of visitors could make the

K. Rothman, The New Urban Park: Golden Gate National Recreation Area and Civic Environmentalism
(Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 2004), ix, 76-98.

20 Quoted in “Interview: Hal K. Rothman,” Environmental History 12 (January 2007): 23; Also see
arduous journey to the “Incomparable Valley.” Moreover, with the exception of a few extraordinary individuals including the enigmatic John Muir whose romantic depictions of “sauntering” in the mountains of California inspired Congress to designate Yosemite as a national park in 1890, early visitors typically had neither the inclination nor the skills to venture beyond the meandering trails, scenic viewpoints, and rustic lodges lining the Valley floor. Those that did travel into the backcountry, including members of the Sierra Club, a hiking and conservation club organized by Muir and a cohort of influential San Francisco businessmen in 1892, were usually adequately self-reliant to handle safety concerns on their own. As such, serious accidents requiring park administrators to carry out complex search and rescue operations remained few and far between. The limited numbers of rescues that early guardians and park rangers did carry out were typically regarded as selfless acts of heroism that reflected the frontier masculinity and nationalistic virtue associated with Western nature tourism.

As the park became accessible to a larger demographic in subsequent decades, administrators could no longer sustain their impeccable safety record. Formalized emergency response policies became necessary to accommodate rapidly changing patterns of recreation in Yosemite and other parks. From the creation of the National Park Service in 1916 as the agency responsible for administering the parks, through to the outdoor recreation boom of the late 1950s, visitation rose consistently as Steven Mather, Horace Albright, and other first generation NPS directors initiated expansive road construction projects and other accommodative policies to attract a larger national park constituency and meet a growing demand for outdoor recreation among the nation’s

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expanding and increasingly mobile middle class. Rangers charged with responding to accidents were ill-prepared to handle the diversity of complex and dangerous predicaments that inexperienced or careless visitors encountered in Yosemite’s vast backcountry, and on its precipitous granite cliffs. The park’s fledgling visitor protection division, in order to act on its authority to “aide and assist visitors to the national parks...in emergencies,” became increasingly reliant on wartime innovations in SAR technologies, the ad-hoc efforts of a few exceptionally skilled rangers, and occasional assistance from a Sierra Club volunteer rescue force.

By the late 1960s, as the environmental movement exploded into a mainstream cultural phenomenon, a spike in accidents related to increasingly popular forms of wilderness recreation including backpacking, ski-mountaineering, and especially rock climbing, demanded a level of vigilance, organization, and technological competency unprecedented in the NPS’s long history of protecting visitors. In this period of diverse environmental concerns and increasingly democratized recreation, the Sierra Club could no longer maintain its primacy as the overseer of safety standards in rock climbing and other wilderness activities in Yosemite. At the same time, the emergence of the wilderness experience as a requirement of what Samuel Hayes and Hal Rothman call “quality-of-life environmentalism” motivated legions of newly affluent middle class consumers to flock to Yosemite and other iconic wilderness destinations in search of


solitude, physical exertion, and the opportunity to come in contact with wild nature.\textsuperscript{24} The formalization of YOSAR, culminating in the 1970 decision to employ a cohort of independent rock climbers to supplement the limited capabilities of the ranger force, represented a concerted effort by administrators to accommodate rather than regulate this new generation of visitors seeking an individualized encounter with wilderness in the crown jewel of America’s national park system.

While the majority of SAR operations in Yosemite involved lost or injured hikers, developments in the culture of technical rock climbing in the decades following World War II brought about the most significant changes in the park’s visitor protection policy. From modest beginnings as a pet project of David Brower, Richard Leonard, and other up-and-coming Sierra Club leaders in the 1930s, rock climbing became a fundamental component of the cultural geography of recreation in postwar Yosemite. Beginning in the late 1950s, Camp 4, a sprawling encampment of ragged tents and communal picnic tables situated under the sunny north wall of the Valley, served as the semi-permanent home for a cohort of self-styled “climbing bums” who, as Steve Roper explained, “took the word ‘impossible’ out of the American rock climbing vocabulary.”\textsuperscript{25} The original “denizens of Camp 4” including Warren Harding, Royal Robbins, Chuck Pratt, Layton Kor, Yvon Chouinard, Steve Roper, and others devised sets of new techniques, equipment, and philosophies that transformed Yosemite into the most important locus of modern rock climbing in the world by the mid-1960s.\textsuperscript{26}


Camp 4 produced not only the world’s best climbers, but also some of the most innovative minds in modern business. By the 1970s, Yvon Chouinard, Tom Frost, Royal Robbins, and several other prominent climbers had moved on to successful careers as gear manufacturers and retailers in the growing specialty outdoor recreation industry. These entrepreneurial climbing bums modeled their corporate philosophies after a hegemonic, experience-based wilderness aesthetic constructed high on Yosemite’s distinctive granite walls. The “enabling technologies” climbers developed, manufactured, and marketed to the public served to both expand the possibilities of their sport and protect the physical features of the climbing landscape against an inevitable wave of outdoor enthusiasts seeking to experience nature in national parks and other public lands. Though they had facilitated this transition of climbing into a mainstream activity, Chouinard, Frost, and others also resisted the influx of “thousands of average Joes” that seemed to compromise the spirit of adventure that the climbers of the so-called “golden age of Yosemite rock climbing” had enjoyed in previous decades. Through their connections to the commercial marketplace, and their promotion of an ethic Chouinard called “clean climbing,” Camp 4 climbers sought to instill climbing culture with a regard for the impact of their sport on the environment. Through their advertising, Camp 4


27 David Louter, “Remarks for the Camp 4 National Register Ceremony, Yosemite National Park, May 17, 2003.” Unpublished manuscript; For Louter, the automobile was the enabling technology that allowed the majority of tourists to access the nation’s parks. He considers pitons and expansion bolts the primary “enabling technologies” for rock climbers. For a history of technology in climbing see John Middendorf, “The Mechanical Advantage,” Ascent (1999). http://www.bigwalls.net/climb/mechadv/index.html (accessed on July 24, 2007).

climbers popularized strict standards of equipment use and risk that established rock climbing as an appropriate wilderness experience.

Still, neophyte climbers did not always adhere to safety standards as uniformly as elite climbers and park administrators hoped. As climbing became a mainstream activity in the 1970s and 1980s, a corresponding spike in accidents produced serious apprehension among over-burdened and under-funded NPS administrators. SAR evacuations from the massive glacier-polished granite walls of Yosemite demanded not only high levels of technical competency, specialized planning, and considerable physical talent; they also posed greater risks to rescuers than any other search, rescue, or recovery scenarios facing the park’s ranger force in this period. Concern for the safety of visitors and rangers contributed to a fragile consensus between NPS administrators and the Camp 4 counterculture over the position of rock climbing as a legitimate use of the park. The resulting dialogue exemplified a process within late twentieth century environmental culture of negotiating limits on the infusion of technology and consumer desire into the wilderness ideal. Since most accidents could be attributed to the inexperience or poor judgment of visitors engaging in activities for which they were ill-prepared, climbers and administrators had reason to debate placing limits on who should and who should not be allowed access to the wilderness experience in Yosemite. Search and rescue became the most tangible administrative issue by which climbers, environmentalists, and the NPS could negotiate the strict class hierarchies and technological imperatives embedded in the culture of wilderness recreation in the national parks.

Through this period, the NPS used its long-standing obligation to provide for the safety of visitors as an administrative tool to support the recreational preferences of an
increasingly individualistic and environmentally conscious park-going public. With the establishment of YOSAR, park officials could allow for, and actively encourage, next-generation outdoor enthusiasts to not only view "untrammeled" nature in the parks through their windshields, a practice historian David Louter identifies as a perennially popular means to experience wilderness in the parks, but also to leave their cars behind and engage physically with the dramatic and, at times, hazardous environments beyond the road-head. Faced with a choice of either limiting access to appease an increasingly adversarial wilderness lobby or expanding the park's tourism infrastructure to facilitate greater access, administrators chose a middle route: limit development and prioritize wilderness recreation without explicitly excluding the majority of visitors or unreasonably compromising their safety. The presence of a professional SAR service provided free of charge by the federal government enabled visitors, even those unfamiliar with wilderness-oriented activities, to explore Yosemite's vast network of hiking trails, cross country ski tours, and rock climbing routes with the psychic assurance that a park helicopter or a team of expert climbers and medical technicians would be called in on a moment's notice if an accident occurred.

However, as park officials and many outdoor enthusiasts soon discovered, the boundaries separating an invigorating wilderness experience from serious injury or even death were often all too easy to cross. Even under the watchful eye of YOSAR, the number of accidents and mishaps related to wilderness recreation in Yosemite rose

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29 For wilderness as a place "untrammeled by man," as defined by Howard Zahniser of the Wilderness Society and included in the 1964 Wilderness Act, see Mark Harvey, *Wilderness Forever: Howard Zahniser and the Path to the Wilderness Act* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 202-203; Also see Louter, *Windshield Wilderness*, 4, 6-7, 105-109.
alarmingly from the 1970s through the late 1990s when visitation finally leveled off and NPS administrators streamlined safety procedures. In this period, thousands of backpackers became lost, injured, or killed in remote locales; countless hikers fell on steep trails, collapsed from exhaustion, or suffered medical emergencies ranging from heart attacks to epileptic seizures to morning sickness far from the medical clinic and other urban facilities in the Valley. Swimmers, rafters, and fishermen frequently found themselves overwhelmed by powerful currents or swept over waterfalls; ski mountaineers routinely suffered frostbite, hypothermia, and high altitude pulmonary edema in the park's backcountry; and most characteristic of Yosemite, rock climbers in ever increasing numbers became stranded, incapacitated, or fatally injured in improbable locations high on the park's imposing granite walls.30

By the 1980s, "rescues so ghastly, no Hollywood 'Latex and Catsup' movie could duplicate the sheer horror of the experience" had become commonplace in Yosemite.31 Not only had traumatic accidents become epidemic, the high cost of numerous annual searches, rescues, and body recoveries began to strain the park's already limited emergency appropriations. With costs exceeding $100 thousand annually by 1974 and more than $400 thousand only a decade later, the question of who should pay for rescues motivated administrators, rescuers, and national park constituencies to critically examine NPS policies which arguably encouraged inexperienced and ill-prepared visitors to

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engage in dangerous activities. Discussions over the high cost of rescue underscored the elitist class distinctions underlying the culture of wilderness recreation and highlighted the tensions between nature, technology, and consumerism shaping both cultural and administrative definitions of wilderness in the national parks.

Ultimately, the skyrocketing costs of visitor protection could not outweigh the immediacy of the life-or-death scenarios facing YOSAR on almost a daily basis. Nor could the NPS significantly change safety policies without inviting legal problems and a serious public relations nightmare. As these debates continued through the 1980s and 1990s, the rangers, medics, rock climbers, helicopter pilots, law enforcement officials, and military personnel involved with YOSAR saved thousands of lives, performing at a level of technical competency and organizational skill unmatched by any wilderness search and rescue network in the United States and arguably around the world. The techniques that rescuers in Yosemite developed, especially those for evacuating stranded rock climbers from high on the Valley’s distinctive cliffs, became the industry standards for mountain rescue operations worldwide. For better or worse, YOSAR became the mechanism by which NPS administrators could accommodate the changing preferences, however reckless, of a new generation of outdoor enthusiasts seeking to both preserve wild nature and consume it through recreation in Yosemite and in other wilderness destinations in the national park system.

Yosemite’s sophisticated visitor protection infrastructure derived from a long history of accidents, mishaps, tragedies, and triumphs occurring since the earliest days of the park. Chapter One follows the progression of search and rescue from a non-specific obligation of early administrators into a systematic but still fragmented function of
Yosemite’s ranger force in the immediate postwar years. Chapter Two demonstrates that even with vast improvements in SAR capabilities in the 1950s and a system-wide overhaul of rescue procedures in 1959, the park’s protection division struggled to keep pace with the rising popularity, cultural imperatives, and evolving technological sophistication of rock climbing activities. Chapter Three details the maturation of a “SAR culture” in Yosemite following administrators’ controversial decision to establish the “rescue site” in Camp 4 where a cadre of highly skilled climbing bums could reside for free and receive on-call wages as the park’s first internal rescue force. Lastly, Chapter Four discusses the cultural context in which recent debates over legal liability and the high cost of rescue emerged and explores the implications of the National Park Service’s decision to support free SAR as a critical element of the park’s management philosophy to this day. The evolution of search and rescue, as detailed in these chapters, illustrates a characteristic struggle within the modern NPS to maintain a safe visitor experience that functioned within budget constraints while still satisfying the expectations of the numerous diverse constituencies vying for access to the wilderness experience in America’s most revered national park.

Today, YOSAR responds to between 150 and 250 incidents each year, making it among the busiest emergency call centers in the national park system. Operators can mobilize a search party of rangers, medical respondents, on-call volunteers, and even trained bloodhounds on a moment’s notice to locate a lost hiker or assist in the evacuation of an accident victim. Rangers can send into the field a team of skilled rock climbers from Camp 4 to reach an injured climber or a hiker stranded on an inaccessible cliff face. Helicopters can be dispatched within minutes to comb the backcountry for lost
backpackers, locate a plane crash, or pluck stranded big wall climbers from high on the 3,000 foot face of El Capitan. Certified scuba divers and river runners are frequently called upon to search the rivers and lakes of the park for hikers, fishermen, and boaters who capsize or are swept into treacherous waterways. In winter, snowmobile operators can motor into the backcountry to reach cross-country skiers or snowshoers trapped in bad weather. YOSAR has also established a number of accident prevention measures specific to Yosemite’s hazards. Park officials routinely communicate warnings to participants in wilderness-oriented activities through ranger-led education programs, Internet sites, signs posted near dangerous areas, backcountry permit processes, and contributions to the American Alpine Club’s annual publication of *Accidents in North American Mountaineering*. As a pragmatic means to enable a standard of safety in the forms of recreation that park officials, environmentalists, and the visiting public have historically considered appropriate in a national park setting, YOSAR continues to function as Yosemite’s wilderness handrails.

As this history shows, from a cultural and an administrative perspective, Yosemite and other national parks could be both symbols of elemental nature to be held inviolate for future generations and recreational spaces in which a tempered construction of wilderness could be experienced first hand. The parks functioned not as cordoned off remnants of pure, unspoiled nature, but as sites of individual self-discovery where middle class Americans, emboldened by affluence and outfitted with specialized recreational technologies, could supplement their lifestyles of leisure by acting out a fantasy of strenuous engagement with a simulacrum of uncorrupted nature.\(^\text{32}\) Differing from both

\[^{32}\text{Jean Baudrillard, }\textit{Simulacra and Simulation, }\text{translated by Shiela Faria Glazer. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994); Baudrillard explains “simulacra” as a copy of an original that does not}\]
the rigidly class-based "tourism of hegemony" in turn-of-the-century nature appreciation, and the ecologically-informed construction of wilderness embedded in the 1964 Wilderness Act, this consumer-driven wilderness ideal had its own logic, its own technological hierarchies, and its own standards of risk which officials in Yosemite accommodated through the maintenance of a professional search and rescue apparatus.\textsuperscript{33} The history of YOSAR offers a means to trace the complex route by which postwar environmental culture operated in dialogue with the National Park Service to isolate and define the boundaries of a safe and accessible yet still fundamentally self-sufficient wilderness experience in the nation's parks.

\textsuperscript{33} For "tourism of hegemony" see Hal K. Rothman, \textit{Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the American West} (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 111-112; For the Wilderness Act see especially Nash, \textit{Wilderness and the American Mind}, 225-226; and Harvey, \textit{Wilderness Forever}, 3-6, 240-244.
CHAPTER 1

THE ORIGINS OF VISITOR PROTECTION

The history of rescue extends back as long as humans have encountered mishap, trial, and tragedy in perilous locales. From the good Samaritans of the Old Testament to Helen of Troy to the tenth century monk Saint Bernard whose hardy dogs were for generations dispatched from their Alpine hospice to locate travelers trapped in hazardous weather, search and rescue tales have long been fixtures in Western tradition. Romantics steeped in these heroic narratives considered rescue a selfless act of duty, a masculine obligation to put one's own security in jeopardy for the sake of an often anonymous other. In Western Europe through the nineteenth century, cultural perceptions of rescue evolved contingent to the exploits of Edward Whymper, Jeanne Antoine Carrel, and other "gentlemen mountaineers" who willingly distanced themselves from the possibility of rescue through their audacious explorations of the highest unclimbed peaks in the Alps. As a corollary to the risk and self-reliance implicit in Victorian-era alpinism, selfless acts of rescue attained as valorous a stature in the popular imagination as even the most daring mountaineering accomplishments. Rescue became, in Kenneth Andrasko's words, "a heroic adventure against predestination and a victory for the advancing idea of rugged

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individualism.\textsuperscript{35} Rescuers, as Alpine climbing historian Charles Gos explained in 1948, were “obscure men [always men] who, completely scornful of danger, obey only their consciences in attempting to rescue parties in distress.”\textsuperscript{36}

As Alpine climbing grew in popularity through the nineteenth century, search and rescue evolved into an organized function of the numerous mountaineering clubs and guide services cropping up throughout Western Europe. In 1823, the King of Sardinia, who in this period ruled over the Chamonix region in the French Alps, established the \textit{Syndicat des Guides de Chamonix}, charging his expert mountain guides with safeguarding their clients and other mountain travelers. Yosemite rescue specialist Tim Setnicka later recorded this decree as among the earliest “delineation[s] of professional and moral obligations of rescuers toward all those in danger.”\textsuperscript{37} In 1896, the Austrian Alpine Association established the first volunteer rescue service in the eastern Alps with the belief that “it could not encourage the sport of alpinism without preparing, in advance, for alpine misfortunes.”\textsuperscript{38} Though founded on such pragmatic grounds, organized search and rescue retained its heroic connotations as it developed into a necessary duty of administrators assigned to the newly created national parks of the American West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Yosemite Guardian Galen Clark, by responding to a father’s plea to find his son, performed the first documented successful search and rescue mission in the park’s history.

\textsuperscript{35} Kenneth Andrasko, “Editor’s Note,” in Setnicka, \textit{Wilderness Search and Rescue}, iii.

\textsuperscript{36} Charles Gos, \textit{Alpine Tragedy} (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948), 3.

\textsuperscript{37} Setnicka, \textit{Wilderness Search and Rescue}, 16.

On July 12, 1880, after a full-day search on horseback involving several volunteers, Clark located twelve year old Don E. Tripp lying unconscious on the porch of the abandoned Wharton house on the banks of the Merced River. The previous afternoon, one mile north of Inspiration Point, Tripp had disembarked from the freight carriage he and his father had been traveling on and decided to hike on foot to the Valley. He became confused at a crossroad, venturing off the path and down a hillside where he mistakenly thought he would find the correct route. The boy then lost his footing and slid down a steep slope which he could not ascend. He headed towards the Merced River below but stumbled down several more bluffs, falling unconscious each time. Finally making his way to the river, Tripp spent an uncomfortable night on a sand bar. The next morning he crawled to the Wharton building where he remained until Clark discovered him “in a most pitiable state, being very thirsty, cut and bruised covered with sand.” The Yosemite Tourist declared the ordeal a “remarkable escape” while Tripp’s caretakers at the Stoneman Lodge commented “the young fellow is very gritty and we hope to soon see him out.”

For Guardian Clark and the generation of superintendents and chief rangers following in his footsteps, this noble act of protecting travelers in Yosemite remained less an aspect of their jobs than an unwritten duty that affirmed the frontier individualism their personas were to represent to the public.

The evolution of search and rescue in Yosemite and the national parks paralleled changing patterns of tourism in the American West beginning in the late nineteenth century. Set aside as sanctuaries of monumental scenery to rival the cultural treasures of Europe, the great parks of the West became iconic sources of national pride for the

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entrepreneurs, managers, attorneys, and other elites benefiting from the economic reorganization of society in the industrial age. Excursions to Yosemite, Yellowstone, and the Grand Canyon - first by carriage, then by rail, and finally by automobile - offered intellectual stimulation and psychic regeneration in a natural setting for the touring elite. Through the Progressive Era, the national parks affirmed and legitimated the narrative of confrontation with a wilderness frontier that turn-of-the-century historian Frederick Jackson Turner identified as the process by which Americans forged their particular democratic traditions. Dispossessed of Native Americans and largely inaccessible to workers in distant cities (though middle class professionals in nearby western cities comprised a significant percentage of early visitors), the parks presented scenic nature as a vision of frontier democracy and a refuge from the class strife and ethnic conflicts that Progressive elites viewed as plaguing urban-industrial society.40

Despite the hardy frontier imagery national parks were to project, few visitors to Yosemite in the early years were willing or able to explore beyond the genteel accommodations and scenic viewpoints promoted by park concessionaires and administrators.41 Those that did seek recreation in the high mountains beyond the Valley floor - including the hikers and mountaineers of the Sierra Club - were generally self-reliant in their ability to deal with emergencies. As such, early park administrators faced


very few complex search and rescue scenarios. Given the relative infrequency of accidents in Yosemite and the perception of rescue as a transcendent act of individual valor, specific search and rescue procedures remained virtually absent from training manuals or job descriptions for rangers even after the creation of the National Park Service in 1916. Ansel Hall’s 1921 *Handbook of Yosemite National Park* mentioned only a nebulous duty on the part of rangers to “inform, assist, and instruct the park visitor” in order to “give to the public not merely what they pay for, but everything within power.” In the period leading up to and immediately following the transfer of management responsibilities from the United States Cavalry to the National Park Service in 1916, the active maintenance of visitor safety remained little more than an infrequent, anomalous responsibility of the park’s ranger force.

As such, most successful searches, rescues, and recoveries in the early years were achieved through the vigilance and ingenuity of individuals rather than through any formalized planning apparatus. In 1915, for example, Park Superintendent George V. Bell engineered a homemade “rescue harness” which proved useful in a number of incidents “caused by tourists leaving trails in trying to make short cuts or in climbing about the face of cliffs.” Celebrating the larger-than-life heroism of rescue rangers, Horace Albright and Frank Taylor described Yosemite’s first chief ranger, Forrest A. Towsley, as “a giant in stature and a man of great courage who lowered himself dozens of times down precipitous cliffs hand over hand to tie a lost hiker securely so that the


rangers above could drag him to safety." Even with such phenomenal individual exertions, as visitation increased and tourists ventured farther from the security of the Valley’s accommodations, accounts of persons being lost, injured, or killed appeared with greater frequency in the superintendent’s monthly reports. Relegated to a section titled “other areas of interest,” however, descriptions of mishaps, deaths, and heroic rescue efforts through the 1920s functioned as sensationalist fodder for newspapers as much as for educational or preventative purposes.

While drawing attention to the rugged, frontier-like experience of a trip to Yosemite, publicity generated by accidents and rescues also revealed shortcomings in the park’s visitor protection capabilities. A case in point occurred on the night of April 7, 1928 when Edna Wilbur, daughter of Secretary of the Navy Curtis D. Wilbur, and her companion Ona Ring, lost their way while descending the Ledge Trail, a treacherous shortcut from Glacier Point to the Valley floor that claimed several lives before being closed in 1954. Responding to reports from campers in Camp Curry that cries for help could be heard echoing off the cliffs below Glacier Point, rangers John Bingaman and William Reymann, accompanied by three volunteers, started up the trail at 9:30 p.m. finding “the going very difficult because of patches of snow on the trail.” The search party eventually located faint footprints and skid marks in the snow leading off the path to a precarious ledge where the young women “were stranded...above a sheer drop of


45 Despite being closed to the general public, the Ledge Trail has continued to see foot traffic largely due to the novelty of navigating a long overgrown, unmaintained shortcut to and from the valley rim. Frequent accidents and deaths continue to occur on this dangerous system of ledges and steep boulder-choked gullies. See for example, Pablo Lopez, “Bodies of Yosemite Hikers are Recovered,” Fresno Bee (July 9, 1998); In this incident, two young men fell to their deaths while trying to descend the trail late in the evening.
200 feet.” With Reymann stationed above, Bingaman lowered himself hand over hand down one hundred feet of rope to the ledge, a risky endeavor considering the icy conditions, the darkness, and the dubious integrity of the hemp ropes used at the time. Despite these dangers, the rescue proceeded smoothly. After securing the rope, Bingaman and Reymann pulled the girls to safety, finding them “cold, frightened, scratched and bruised but not seriously hurt.”

The daring rescue generated newspaper articles and commendations for Yosemite and its rangers from California to Washington D.C., largely due to the notoriety of Edna Wilbur’s father. The operation, though ultimately a success, also forced park officials to take a closer look at the procedures, techniques, and qualifications, or lack thereof, in place to deal with increasingly frequent search and rescue scenarios. Even as Stephen Mather and Horace Albright showered praise on rangers Bingaman and Reymann in public, the directors’ behind-the-scenes discussions revealed an undercurrent of concern over the ability of rangers to consistently perform such harrowing rescues as increases in visitation made medical emergencies and accidents, though predominantly minor, an almost daily occurrence through the busy summer months. A few days after the rescue of Wilbur and Ring, Acting Superintendent E.P. Leavitt wrote to Mather to convince him of the need to enforce the mandatory retirement of rangers at the age of sixty two. In correspondence to the Civil Service Commission in Washington, Leavitt and Mather

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46 E.P. Leavitt, “Superintendent’s Monthly Report for April, 1928,” May 9, 1928, 8, Yosemite National Park Library; Also see John Bingaman’s somewhat glorified account in John W. Bingaman, Guardians of the Yosemite: A Story of the First Rangers (Palm Desert, Desert Printers, 1961), 31, 32; and Farabee, Death, Daring, and Disaster, 86.
stressed that “only men of youth, experience, and ability are qualified to participate in
such strenuous and dangerous work as this is.”

Through the 1930s, problems of recruiting, training, and paying a sufficient ranger
force became increasingly apparent. In 1934, a Los Angeles Times reporter claimed that
hasty efforts to fill holes in the ranger force were “bringing into the service a lot of young
Democrats who may be deserving but who are totally inexperienced in the ways of the
woods, instead of forest-wise men who have heretofore been appointed to such posts.”
Many new recruits, the author remarked, hailed from “eastern cities” and would “be a
burden to the regular force, which will have to look after them as well as the public.”
The article referenced an embarrassing incident occurring a few months earlier in which a
“tenderfoot ranger,” William Corless Jr. from Kansas City, Missouri, wandered lost for
more than two and a half days in the rugged country near Tenaya Canyon. A search party
of forty park rangers, local law enforcement personnel, and volunteers spent more than
two days combing the area, finally locating Corless safe but “hungry and exhausted...having been without food or warm clothing.”

While shortages of qualified rangers posed real problems for the park’s visitor
protection capabilities, park officials in the 1930s worried less about a diminishing
supply of frontier hardened, “forest-wise men” than the administrative implications of
rising participation in a set of new, potentially dangerous forms of recreation. Largely

47 Quoted in Farabee, Death, Daring, and Disaster, 86, 87: In a notable accident occurring in July of
the same year, a hiker, Richard Ham from Burlingame California, fell to his death in nearly the same
location on the Ledge Trail from which the two girls had been rescued only four months earlier. See E.P.

48 Quoted in Farabee, Death, Daring, and Disaster, 123.

49 C.G. Thompson, “Superintendent’s Monthly Report for June, 1934,” July 4, 1934, 14, Yosemite
National Park Library.
the exclusive province of the Sierra Club until after World War II, backpacking or "knapsacking," cross-country skiing, and especially rock climbing, while opening up new ways to enjoy the Sierra wilderness in and around Yosemite, also created a long list of real and hypothetical accident scenarios for which the park’s fledgling search and rescue infrastructure simply would not be capable of responding to.\textsuperscript{50}

As visitation to the national parks and other public lands increased through the interwar years, leaders of the nascent wilderness movement began to challenge the idea of nature-as-democratic-scenery informing the management philosophy of the NPS and other federal land management agencies. As historian Paul Sutter argues, the founding members of the Wilderness Society constructed the modern idea of wilderness in opposition to an abrupt rise in tourism in the 1920s and the continuing expansion of resort-style accommodations in public lands. Founders Robert Marshall, Aldo Leopold, Robert Sterling Yard, and Benton MacKaye railed most adamantly against the rampant construction of roads and the intrusion of automobiles into previously inaccessible areas of undisturbed nature. The land managers, foresters, and lobbyists of the early Wilderness Society conceived of wilderness as a condition of the landscape characterized not principally by its monumental scenery or necessarily by its ecological integrity, but by its "roadlessness." Wilderness was a place where automobiles, buildings, and other signs of human agency were either non-existent or imperceptible; an area in Leopold’s words, "big enough to absorb a two weeks pack trip, and kept devoid of roads, artificial trails, cottages, or other works of man."

Members of the Sierra Club and other hiking clubs cropping up across the nation at this time furthered contributed to the formulation of this recreationally-informed wilderness ethic. The thousands of hikers, climbers, and cross-country skiers joining outdoor clubs in the 1920s and 1930s did not reject recreation altogether, but instead formed a critique of mass-recreation. While the Wilderness Society delineated categories of inappropriate activities in wilderness, a cohort of young Sierra Club leaders including David Brower, Richard Leonard, and Bestor Robinson defined the specific recreational behaviors and facilitating technologies appropriate to the wilderness experience. The club's annual “High Trip,” a month-long trek into the High Sierra backcountry, typically involving more than two hundred club members and over fifty mules, served as a testing ground for a number of new wilderness-oriented activities including technical rock climbing, ski-mountaineering, and backcountry camping that formulated a gradient of appropriate recreation in subsequent wilderness discourse. The Sierra Club's strenuous and often dangerous recreational preferences had significant implications not only for the maturation of search and rescue in Yosemite, but also for the expansion of the modern wilderness movement in the postwar years. These new activities provided an appropriately self-sufficient and physically challenging recreational alternative to what conservationists had begun to decry as the transformation of the parks into sanitized playgrounds for an automobile-bound public.52


A young David Brower, who in the postwar years would cement his place in the modern wilderness movement by his leadership in the fight to block the Echo Park Dam in Dinosaur National Monument, forged his perceptions of nature and appropriate recreation through his High Trip experiences in the 1930s. Brower emerged as one of the most avid proponents of rock climbing and independent backcountry hiking, or “knapsacking,” in the interwar Sierra Club. In 1935, Brower expressed the wilderness ethic of knapsacking in his first article for the annual *Sierra Club Bulletin*. In “Far From the Madding Mules: A Knapsacker’s Retrospect,” Brower articulated the values of time spent with minimal belongings far from established trails and the constant interaction with mules and people that had heretofore characterized the High Trip. Summing up the benefits of this wilderness experience, he wrote: “Who, once having enjoyed it, does not long for the deep satisfaction of beholding a panorama from a vantage-point, access to which has cost something in effort and training; of knowing that here is a frontier still; of being aloof, and yet in close communion; of being awed by the great, but remaining proud of the success of the organized effort of the small?” In subsequent years, Brower and a young cohort of “high trippers” innovated techniques and a number of improvised technologies that vastly improved the safety and practicality of extended, independent excursions into vast undeveloped mountain terrain.

Despite an almost obsessive emphasis on safety among the High Trip leadership in this period, accidents remained a possibility. On July 30, 1934, Florence Hendra, a participant on that summer’s outing, slipped on wet granite along the shore of remote Benton Lake in the Yosemite high country. Superintendent Thompson, in his report for

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that month, reported that Hendra “fell about 25 feet into the water, first striking her head on a rock” before drowning minutes later. A group of Sierra Club members, assisted by a ranger who had been stationed nearby, pulled Hendra from the lake and arranged for the body to be repatriated to her family in San Francisco.\(^4\) While complex rescue operations requiring the NPS to take a leading role remained rare, the expanding opportunities for wilderness recreation in Yosemite and the High Sierra suggested a need to rethink the park’s informal management of search and rescue.

One year and a day before Hendra’s accident, Walter A. Starr, Jr., known by acquaintances as Peter, set out to map the final sections of the recently completed John Muir Trail that extended 250 miles from Mount Whitney to Yosemite. He never returned. On August 30, 1933, after the largest search conducted to date in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, Norman Clyde - the “old man of the mountains” who completed more first ascents in the High Sierra than anyone to this day - located Starr’s broken body on a ledge on rugged Michael Minaret just outside the southeastern boundary of Yosemite National Park. The search for Peter Starr required hundreds of searchers, countless airplane passes over the high mountains, and a series of extended forays into the remote Ritter Range by friends, family, and Sierra Club volunteers. After zeroing in on the steep Minarets just south of the 13,000 foot Mount Ritter by piecing together Starr’s entries in the summit registers of nearby peaks, Clyde managed to trace a path to Michael Minaret where he “interned [Starr’s body] in a great cairn of granite.”\(^5\) Before his accident, Starr

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\(^5\) For a thoroughly researched account of the search for Peter Starr see William Alsup, *Missing in the Minarets: The Search for Walter A. Starr, Jr.* (El Portal: The Yosemite Association, 2001).; Quote from
had been close to finishing his compilation of notes describing the John Muir Trail and its innumerable side excursions. The Sierra Club posthumously published Starr's *Guide to the John Muir Trail* in 1934. The work became the authoritative guide to the High Sierra region for generations of wilderness enthusiasts (most far less experienced than Starr) who sought to climb and hike in the beautifully rugged, yet deceptively hazardous, High Sierra environment that had claimed Starr's life.56

Though cognizant of the new challenges posed by participation in these emerging forms of wilderness recreation, park officials remained slow to enact changes to the park's visitor protection infrastructure. Administrators instead relied on the exclusive expertise of the Sierra Club to maintain safety standards. In an often repeated but telling example of the ill-preparedness of park authorities, San Francisco bay area attorney Richard Leonard, the leading figure in the development of the Sierra Club's Rock Climbing Section, recalled Chief Ranger Forrest Towsley's disconcertingly casual response to a concerned visitor who dashed into ranger headquarters in September of 1933 to report that two people were "stuck on the face of Washington Column." The men in question turned out to be a team of Sierra Club climbers attempting the first of a number of forays into modern technical rock climbing on Yosemite's challenging granite walls. Grinning at the bewildered tourist, Towsley, who had been informed of the details of the climb, responded "Hell, that's Dick Leonard and Bestor Robinson, and if they can't get themselves down, nobody can get them down!"57


57 Richard Leonard to John E. Williamson, November 5, 1984, YOSAR office files.
With Towsley's offhanded admission of the park's lack of rescue capabilities, so began a working relationship between expert wilderness users and NPS administrators that continues to this day. Through the 1930s, park officials often called on Sierra Club members to advise rangers of appropriate safety procedures and recommend possible accident prevention measures. Leonard remembered being asked whether a cross-country skier and snowshoer could reasonably expect to make the twenty-five mile, five thousand foot elevation gain trek from the Valley to Tuolumne Meadows "in midwinter without winter mountaineering equipment." Leonard advised park officials that the attempt would be impractical and exceptionally dangerous; he then recommended a far easier course to the Ostrander Lake ski hut only nine miles from the Valley. The club also volunteered Jules Eichorn, the veteran of a number of ground-breaking first ascents in Yosemite Valley and the High Sierra, to advise rangers of the proper techniques and technologies a rock climber should have knowledge of before they could safely ascend technical climbing routes in the Valley.\footnote{Ibid.} At a 1939 conference with National Park Service officials from around the country, Leonard recommended that parks with extensive climbing potential "require registration with the park before a climb, but with the understanding that no prohibition would result."\footnote{Ibid.} Such cooperative efforts between rangers and rock climbers became the hallmark of search and rescue operations in Yosemite in the decades following World War II.

During the war, nationwide gas-rationing and travel restrictions caused visitation to Yosemite and other parks to plummet to numbers not seen since the early 1920s. This
lull proved to be a quiet before the storm. In the decade following the Japanese surrender in August of 1945, the National Park Service struggled to accommodate a sudden, unprecedented influx of tourists. Liberated from fifteen years of depression and war, millions of middle class Americans - a majority of whom from California and the growing cities of the urban West - took to the highways to enjoy their newfound financial security and leisure time in the nation's great parks. 60

In no other national park were the pressures of skyrocketing visitation more sharply felt than in Yosemite. In 1944, the park reported less than 120,000 visits. One year later, the number doubled to more than 250,000, only to spike again to 641,767 by 1946. Visitation continued its meteoric rise over the next decade, exceeding the one million mark by 1954. Roads, lodgings, campgrounds, trails, and concessions not upgraded since the New Deal proved woefully inadequate to accommodate the abrupt surge in tourism. With Congress sluggish in designating much needed appropriations to the parks, conditions rapidly deteriorated, prompting Bernard DeVoto, in his plea to “close the parks,” to declare: “The priceless heritage which the Service must safeguard for the United States is beginning to go to hell.” 61

Rapid increases in visitation and changing patterns of recreation also overwhelmed the park’s visitor protection capabilities. In this period of rising public interest in outdoor recreation, Yosemite became not only an iconic destination for auto-touring, family camping, fishing, skiing, and hiking; it also emerged as a globally significant site for the


development of modern technical rock climbing. A small cohort of Sierra Club climbers gathering in Yosemite in the late 1940s and early 1950s devised new techniques and technologies that enabled groundbreaking first ascents of the Valley's smooth granite cracks and intimidating "big walls." Innovations in rock climbing techniques produced serious apprehension among park rangers who remained ill-prepared to respond to complex climbing-related accidents. Relying on wartime improvements in SAR technologies, the expertise of local Sierra Club climbers, and the advice of the American Alpine Club's mountaineering safety committee, administrators and rangers pieced together a set of rudimentary visitor protection measures that laid the groundwork for the professionalization of search and rescue in the 1960s and 1970s.

World War II, in the words of former Yosemite rescue ranger Charles "Butch" Farabee, "was the best thing ever to happen to search and rescue." Farabee rightly attributes the postwar modernization of search and rescue in the national parks to wartime innovations in helicopter capabilities, communication technologies, and especially to the diverse array of outdoor equipment developed for the U.S. Army's elite mountain forces. Activated in November 1941, the 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry Mountain Regiment, later re-commissioned as the 10th Mountain Division, brought together the most accomplished skiers, rock climbers, and mountaineers in the nation, including a number of Yosemite park rangers and Sierra Club rock climbers. Funded by massive federal war subsidies, these outdoorsmen-turned-soldiers innovated a host of new outdoor equipment

Steve Roper, *Camp 4: Recollections of a Yosemite Rockclimber* (Seattle: The Mountaineers, 1994), 41, Roper defines "big-wall climbing" as "a multiday effort involving direct aid on a large and steep rock wall."

Farabee, *Death, Daring, and Disaster*, 139.

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including aluminum frame backpacks, dehydrated foods, lighter water resistant tents, eiderdown sleeping bags, portable butane stoves, waterproof nylon jackets, laminated skis, and quick release bindings, all designed to improve the safety and efficiency of cross-country travel in remote, mountainous areas.\(^{64}\)

The Army also began mass-producing improved versions of pitons, carabiners, ice axes, crampons, and other previously imported European climbing devices. Sierra Club leader and expert rock climber Richard Leonard, as an officer in the Quartermaster Corps, oversaw the testing and development of perhaps the most significant of these technological breakthroughs: the nylon climbing rope. Engineered from thick chords used to drive sawmills, these durable, shock absorbent \(7/16\) inch diameter ropes could withstand over one hundred and fifty test falls (the older hemp ropes failed after about a dozen).\(^{65}\) Such advances in outdoor equipment provided the technological foundations for the postwar recreation boom; and, in combination with helicopters and improved radio communication technology, also functioned as the technical infrastructure through which administrators and rangers in Yosemite hoped to provide for the safety of a rising tide of visitors seeking to engage physically with the roadless terrain beyond the congestion of the increasingly urban Valley. Technological innovation, in this respect, guided late twentieth century Americans’ understanding of wilderness as state of nature to be experienced through commercial recreation.\(^{66}\)

\(^{64}\) Ibid., 140.


\(^{66}\) For this propensity to know nature through leisure rather than through work or other means, see Richard White, “Are You an Environmentalist or do You Work for a Living?” in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, William Cronon, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1995), 171-185.
The end of the war and the accompanying economic recovery unleashed a record-breaking flood of tourists on Yosemite, inundating the park’s protection division and creating a pressing need for more formalized management of search and rescue operations. In the month of September 1945, beginning less than two weeks after atomic bombs exploded over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, approximately 60,000 visitors poured through the park’s entrances, breaking an all-time record for that month and shattering the previous September’s numbers by more than five hundred percent. This trend continued over the ensuing years, straining the park’s accommodation infrastructure and severely testing the capacity of the shorthanded ranger force to respond to increasing numbers of emergencies. In the month of July 1948 alone, Superintendent Carl P. Russell reported receiving at least sixty one “messages of more or less urgency” from visitors and park personnel concerned about lost or overdue hikers. Even with forty six seasonal rangers and twenty one full-time rangers on staff, a more than fifty percent increase from prewar numbers, Russell worried about the park’s ability to prioritize ranger duties: “Such requests are numerous and daily, requiring immediate attention, and are time and personnel consuming,” he wrote.

While most emergency scenarios in Yosemite involved lost or injured hikers, rock climbing prompted the most significant changes in the park’s visitor protection infrastructure. The increasing commercial availability of technical mountaineering gear in the affluent postwar years fueled the rising popularity of climbing and other

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mountaineering activities in the nation's parks. Indeed, almost immediately following the war, much of the equipment developed for the 10th Mountain Division began appearing on the shelves of Army surplus stores and sporting goods retailers around the country, enabling a new generation of outdoor enthusiasts to partake independently in rock climbing and mountaineering. The Yosemite Valley, with its towering monoliths and flawless glacier-polished granite, attracted the most ambitious of these hopeful climbers. Comprised predominantly of California-based Sierra Club members, the small contingent of serious rock climbers gathering in Yosemite in the immediate postwar years made innovations in techniques and equipment that according to historian David Louter "literally took the sport to new heights."^⁶⁹

Considered to be the "father of modern rock climbing," John Salathe, an eccentric Swiss-born blacksmith who became enamored with climbing after participating in a Sierra Club outing in 1946, forged his own pitons specifically for the Valley's smooth granite and innovated a number of new "aid climbing" techniques in which the climber directly ascended pitons, bolts, or other gear placed in the rock. For some, aid climbing contradicted a long-standing European mountaineering ethic which held that the rope should only be used as protection in case of fall, not as an aid in upward movement. Yet Salathe's extraordinary endurance and skill in equipment use demonstrated to most climbers that aid techniques, properly applied, could open up whole new possibilities in big wall climbing without compromising the standards of physicality and self-reliance demanded by the sport's most stringent aesthetes. On September 3, 1947, Salathe and Anton "Ax" Nelson completed a remarkable five day ascent of the much coveted Lost

Arrow Spire, a striking tower of granite jutting one hundred feet from Yosemite Point just east of Yosemite Falls. Regarded as the first true big wall climb, Salathe’s achievement ushered in the “golden age of Yosemite rock climbing,” which for the park’s ranger force meant a new age of apprehension.\(^{70}\)

Carl Russell’s concern in the summer of 1948 over the preparedness of the ranger force stemmed in part from a climbing accident from the previous July which seemed to many a prelude of challenges to come. On July 12, experienced Sierra Club climber Al Baxter lost his handhold on a difficult pitch on Higher Cathedral Spire. The force of the fall pulled a piton from the wall and Baxter plunged sixty feet before slamming into the rock and shattering both of his ankles. With the aid of his companions and a climber who had witnessed the accident from the nearby Lower Cathedral Spire, Baxter managed to make three rappels down to the talus six hundred feet below. A party of thirteen rangers, accompanied by Superintendent Frank Kittredge, arrived on the scene to meet the injured climber. While descending the talus with Baxter strapped to an improvised stretcher, a member of the rescue party dislodged a five hundred pound boulder which careened off two rescuers breaking Ranger Byrne Packard’s ankle and leaving Assistant Chief Ranger Homer Robinson badly cut and bruised. Though Baxter recovered - and later headed a Sierra Club volunteer rescue force - the hastily contrived rescue effort anticipated the challenges of responding to climbing mishaps and incorporating new technologies into the park’s fragmented rescue apparatus.\(^{71}\)

\(^{70}\) Roper, *Camp 4*, 41.

Later that same year, the Safety Committee of the American Alpine Club (AAC) published the first edition of *Mountaineering Safety*, a guide offering expert analysis of the various climbing accidents occurring each year in the United States and Canada. William P. House, director of the newly established safety committee, described the publication as a means "to investigate climbing accidents and to formulate a program of prevention for the future." In subsequent years, the annual accident report became the premier repository for safety standards in "new world" rock climbing and mountaineering. In the 1948 issue, editors prepared a detailed analysis of Al Baxter's accident, pointing to his reliance on "old pitons" left by previous climbers and his lack of caution in continuing to ascend difficult terrain without placing protection as the immediate causes. "A leader is not justified in continuing if the difficulty is so great that he cannot place pitons for safety," the report concluded. The AAC offered such explanations as preemptive, educational tools to promote self-reliance in climbing and limit the need for a sophisticated rescue apparatus.

*Mountaineering Safety* also served to assert a class hierarchy in an increasingly democratized climbing culture. Established in 1902 by American linguist and alpinist Charles Ernest Fay, the American Alpine Club functioned as the North American equivalent to the gentrified mountaineering clubs operating in Britain and Western Europe since the mid-nineteenth century. Through the early twentieth century, AAC leaders embraced a masculine ethic of technological restraint and self-reliance in

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72 Safety Committee of the American Alpine Club (AAC), *Mountaineering Safety* (New York: The American Alpine Club, 1948), 18; After several name changes, in 1968 the AAC finally settled on *Accidents in North American Mountaineering* as the appropriate name for the annual report.

73 Ibid., 3.

74 Ibid., 8.
climbing which they gleaned from the genteel tradition in Victorian alpinism. In the post-World War II years, many club members, a tight-knit contingent of elite mountaineers primarily from East Coast cities, began to worry that the impending democratization of their sport - and its localized development in the West - could threaten the integrity of the club’s “established Alpine tradition.” This class anxiety manifested into an all out effort to communicate and maintain safety standards in rock climbing and other mountaineering activities. As the editors of Mountaineering Safety explained, “Previously, many Americans had received valuable indoctrination at climbing centers abroad from guides and from accomplished amateurs. The great distances in America have hindered the effective growth of a coordinated alpine tradition on this side of the Atlantic. And now ‘budding extremism,’ in some sections, if not controlled, could influence adversely the ‘conservative’ doctrines of our sport.” While maintaining good relations with the Sierra Club in California, the Mazamas in Oregon, the Mountaineers in Washington State, the Rocky Mountain Alpine Club in Colorado, and other Western mountaineering clubs, AAC leaders viewed the postwar recreation boom as a threat to gentlemanly virtue in North American climbing.

The AAC safety committee meticulously detailed the mistakes of accident victims in order to dramatize the tragic consequences of inexperience and overconfidence among the “occasional rash and impetuous climber.” Aimed at the independent American climber who felt that regulations and organized mountaineering clubs “restricted his freedom,” the publication would, according to its authors, “succeed in fostering national

75 Jones, Climbing in North America, 55-57.
76 Safety Committee of AAC, Mountaineering Safety, 18.
respect for high places, wider understanding of established techniques, and a saner philosophical approach to the benefits which accrue to those who would know the mountains.” The solution, the AAC’s safety committee proposed, was not to restrict climbing, but to implement “a system of persuasive but friendly advice by authorities.” In the national parks, the AAC suggested that administrators could require registration for difficult ascents in order to advise prospective climbers of the dangers involved without actively prohibiting climbing activities. Independent climbers seeking the personalized risk of a difficult ascent would therefore “be induced to register for their own protection without feeling required to do so by edict.”

Even as administrators in Yosemite embraced these suggestions, accidents related to climbing or rock scrambling continued to occupy a significant portion of the AAC’s annual report. In March of 1949, two teenagers fell nearly three hundred feet to their deaths from the cliffs near Lower Yosemite Falls. The pair had been roped together and had been carrying a piton hammer and few pieces of equipment. However, as the editors concluded, “So far as can be learned, the boys never had any organized training at all.” The accident not only indicated the need for a registration process, for AAC leaders it also exposed “the urgent need for efforts by organized climbing groups to pass information and proper mountaineering attitudes to the younger generation.” In November of that year, a soldier from a nearby air base fell to his death in nearly the same location after a loose block gave way beneath his feet. He had not informed rangers of his intentions and had been carrying no climbing equipment.  

77 Ibid., 18-19.
In 1952, the AAC reported five similar incidents in which park rangers were fortunately able to save the lives of the victims. One rock scrambler fell thirty feet from a sloping ledge more than 1,000 feet above the Valley floor. He bounced off a ledge and tumbled another twenty five feet into a live oak tree “which prevented him from falling to certain death.” The editors’ analysis of these incidents emphasized the persistent administrative challenges of accommodating visitors seeking to participate in rock climbing and other potentially dangerous activities in Yosemite. Exuding the AAC’s discomfort with the intersections between romantic individualism and class in a democratizing climbing culture, the authors wrote:

One is impressed by the number of difficult and dangerous rescue operations which the rangers in Yosemite Park are required to carry out as a result of the actions of unwary and sometimes irresponsible visitors. To the extent that organized mountaineering clubs can reach potential climbers and combat the false aspects of drama and heroics which “Hollywood” and the popular press so often impart to mountaineering, the number of incidents of this kind can perhaps be lessened. It is recognized that the immediate accessibility of steep cliffs and the great number of visitors in Yosemite National Park will create a continuing problem there and in similar locales.79

The AAC’s contributions to accident prevention motivated the Sierra Club to assist the NPS in prioritizing safety procedures in Yosemite. Richard Leonard organized a “safety committee” in 1949 and began forwarding incident reports and accident analyses from Yosemite to the AAC’s editorial board. Leonard also provided park officials with lists of climbers qualified to lead difficult ascents.80 Such arrangements positioned visitor

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80 Ibid., 18.
protection as a vital administrative tool by which park officials could accommodate rock climbing and other risk-oriented activities.

While serious climbing accidents remained relatively infrequent in Yosemite, especially considering the more than one million tourists visiting the park annually by the mid-1950s, the 849 rock climbers registering with park rangers for ascents in 1954 alone confirmed the need for additional precautionary measures. The most proactive of these early attempts at managing climbing safety in the park involved the implementation of a voluntary registration process, as suggested by Richard Leonard in 1939 and again by the AAC in 1948, in which rock climbers were to notify park officials of their objective, the date of the climb, and their qualifications to lead the attempt. Rangers advertised this process as a means to keep track of climbing activities and individual climbers so that a rescue force could be assembled at a moment’s notice if the need arose. However, the registration process also revealed a growing anxiety among park officials over their inability to respond adequately to climbing-related accidents in the park. The program, according to one ranger, served “not only to protect climbers, but also to protect rangers, as there were relatively few who were really qualified to do much in the way of rescue at that time, and some unwilling and relatively unskilled rangers were pressed into service when a climbing accident occurred.”

Park authorities had neither the resources nor the will to enforce climbing prohibitions, especially since the influential Sierra Club remained the primary backer of climbing

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82 Wayne Merry to Gary Colliver, March 19, 1993, YOSAR office files.
activities in the park. Concerned more with maintaining safety in the park than advancing a preservationist ideology, NPS administrators nevertheless voiced objections to especially bold or dangerous proposals. Climbers responded to these perceived slights with indignation. In 1954, experienced Sierra Club climber Jerry Gallwas - who later accompanied Royal Robbins in the first ascent of the northwest face of Half Dome - submitted a request to climb John Salathe’s route on Lost Arrow in the spring of that year. Superintendent John Preston protested that “not only is the Lost Arrow climb a dangerous one, but is considered something of a show or a stunt.” Preston cited a number of concerns including the “precarious” weather of that time of year and the fact that “right now our protection forces are at a low ebb, and we would be in no position to undertake a major rescue operation.” Gallwas, with obvious frustration, responded: “the desire to make that particular climb has been with me for five years, and I find it rather difficult to banish the thought from my mind.” Richard Leonard, the president of the Sierra Club at the time, also wrote to Superintendent Preston in defense of Gallwas. While supportive of the climber registration process, Leonard overtly challenged the superintendent’s authority to restrict climbing activities in the park. Restating the AAC’s primary argument in *Mountaineering Safety*, and prescient of disagreements between rock climbers and administrators to come, Leonard wrote “it is our feeling that...rules and restrictions do little to increase safety.”


To maintain amicable relations between Sierra Club climbers and the Park Service, and to mitigate obvious deficiencies in the park’s ability to respond to climbing accidents, Leonard proposed a direct line of communication between park officials and a group of thirty San Francisco Bay area club members qualified to perform rescues. Since October of 1953, this volunteer rescue force “had collected equipment, practiced raising and lowering stranded or unconscious persons from exposed spots on cliffs, and developed a list of contact people, possible participants, and contact procedures.” Leonard suggested that when needed, these individuals could be dispatched from the bay area on a moment’s notice and could reach “the valley about as quickly as climbers can be called in from various scattered points about the valley itself.”\(^86\) Soon after, club members Hervey Voge and Al Baxter (the same Al Baxter that had been rescued from Cathedral Spire seven years earlier), submitted an official offer on behalf of the Sierra Club Mountain Rescue Service to provide rescue services in Yosemite. Clearly outlining the limits of this commitment, the proposal read:

> Members of the Mountain Rescue Service are volunteers. It is not their intention to assume public responsibility, but simply to offer their aid to public agencies in rescues from steep cliffs when normal means available to the agencies do not suffice for rescue... The Rescue Service is a last recourse. Members of this service are highly skilled climbers, and they should only be called out for rescue work on very precipitous rock, ice, or snow.\(^87\)

Through the 1950s, rangers and climbers trained through the Sierra Club’s rescue program devised a number of innovative strategies for lowering and raising injured rock

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\(^86\) Ibid.

climbers from the vertical landscapes of the Valley. This ability to perform complex
climbing rescues distinguished Yosemite’s rescue force from similar volunteer networks
being organized at the same time by mountaineering clubs in the Pacific Northwest and
the Colorado Rockies. In Yosemite, the first major rescue requiring technical climbing
skills occurred on May 28, 1955 when Sierra Club climber Helen Von Rykervorsel fell
ninety feet before being stopped by the rope three hundred feet above the talus on
Washington Column; she suffered “two broken legs and a broken arm and possible head
injuries” in the fall. Two rangers ascended ropes to join the remaining party of three
Sierra Club climbers, all of whom had been trained in rescue procedures. The makeshift
team then hauled up a “stokes litter,” a rigid stretcher developed during the war for
evacuating casualties, in which Rykervorsel was carefully lain. Belayed from above and
guided with ropes by rangers below, two climbers accompanied the litter, maintaining it
“in a horizontal position due to the extensive nature of the victim’s injuries.” Perhaps
understating the technical complexity of the process, Superintendent Preston described
the four hour effort as “a rather difficult rescue.”

Such operations demonstrated clear advancements in the technical efficiency and
experience of the park’s rescue personnel. Occasional training programs in rope-work
had improved the response capabilities of the ranger force while new climbing and
emergency medical technologies had allowed for more complex rescues. Of these new
technologies, helicopters became the most significant tool of rescue for future

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88 For a brief outline of other mountain rescue teams in this period see Farabee, Death, Daring, and
Disaster, 139-145

National Park Library, Preston’s report also included several pictures of the rescue taking place.
administrators. Used sporadically for medical evacuations in Yosemite since the late 1940s, helicopters promised a myriad of possibilities.

Yet early air rescue techniques and technologies were often dangerously inadequate. In responding to a stranded hiker in the summer of 1949, rescuers had to disassemble a tiny Hiller 360 helicopter and drive it by flatbed truck to White Wolf campground on the Tioga Road near Tuolumne Meadows. Crews then hastily rebuilt the helicopter and dispatched the pilot to locate a twelve year old boy who had been lying injured near the isolated Benton Lake for the past five days. After locating the boy, placing him in the chopper, and dumping fuel in order to lift off in the thin air at 10,000 feet, the pilot promptly got lost. Rescue crews, spotting the helicopter flying aimlessly in the wrong direction, lit a small brush fire to signal the pilot who was finally able to land the craft, literally on fumes. Helicopter capabilities improved dramatically following the implementation of the National Search and Rescue Plan in 1956. The plan mandated that military and other federal agencies perform civilian rescues when needed. In subsequent decades, arrangements with Army and Navy helicopter units proved critical to the park’s protection division. By the late 1950s, helicopters had become integral components of search and rescue in Yosemite and other parks.90

For the Park Service, by the mid-1950s, cooperative search and rescue efforts involving Sierra Club volunteers, local law enforcement, helicopter pilots, and occasionally personnel from nearby military installations, had seemed to alleviate many of the safety concerns brought on by heavy visitation and the increasing presence of rock climbers in the park. The Sierra Club’s “qualified leader” program, a policy in which

90 Farabee, Death, Daring, and Disaster, 181-182, 185-186, 191.
prospective climbers had to demonstrate thorough, working knowledge of belay techniques, rappelling, and piton use before leading climbs in Yosemite, allowed rangers to readily judge the capabilities of parties registering for rock climbs in the Valley. In addition, the AAC’s annual accident report encouraged administrators to communicate safe mountaineering practices to new climbers in order to limit the need for rescue. Despite some isolated incidents involving unregistered or inexperienced climbers, and a few clashes between Sierra Club qualified leaders and overcautious administrators, the voluntary registration program worked surprisingly well through the early 1950s. Most rock climbers in the park took safety seriously and felt that by keeping rangers informed of their activities, NPS authorities would remain supportive of rock climbing as an appropriate recreational use of the park.

As such, administrators expressed no pressing need to make significant adjustments to the long-standing structure of the park’s protection division. Through the 1950s, search and rescue remained a secondary duty of rangers, classified under a job category of “other functions.” The 1952 management plan, for example, placed search and rescue last on a long list of ranger duties behind fee collection, supervision of picnicking, information services, insect control, campground maintenance, patrolling for illegal hunters, removing bears from campgrounds, traffic control, and fish stocking among a number of other routine assignments. Park administrators regarded rescue as an ad hoc operation “to be taken care of by rangers assigned to specific duties who let their regular jobs go for the period of emergency.”

operations and a few rangers had received training in rock climbing techniques, there were no full-time search and rescue specialists on staff, nor did the protection division have a clearly outlined set of procedures in place to deal with accidents. Additionally, the Sierra Club rescue service, which the park increasingly relied on to perform backcountry searches and climbing rescues, remained a volunteer force with no legal responsibility to the park or its visitors. Remarkably, this informal search and rescue arrangement sufficed through the 1950s with few serious mishaps. However, by the late 1950s, as a new generation of rock climbers set their sights on the still largely untouched big walls of Yosemite, park officials recognized that formalized regulatory policies, better trained personnel, and more advanced rescue technologies would be necessary to accommodate a spectrum of new accident possibilities.

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The rich history of rock climbing and rescue in Yosemite receives only passing mention in traditional histories of the national parks. This neglect has persisted in part because the manner in which climbing and rescue became cemented in popular and administrative imaginations of the park complicated the preservation/use dichotomy that historians have relied upon to explain the transformation of national park management in the age of environmentalism. Fortunately, rock climbers have compiled their own narrative of this formative period in the development of their sport. Steve Roper, Yosemite’s resident historian, characterized the “golden age of Yosemite rock climbing” between 1947 and 1971 by emphasizing a persistent dialogue around the picnic tables of Camp 4 over the social, technological, and environmental imperatives constituting appropriate “style” in the rock climbing experience. Symbolized by an ideological conflict between Royal Robbins, the stringent proponent of technological restraint, and Warren Harding, the enigmatic former race car driver who climbed because, as he wrote, “I truly enjoyed busting my ass trying to somehow get up something,” the style debate...

illustrated the changing recreational preferences of park-goers as Americans began to
embrace the tenets of wilderness preservation. ⁹⁴

While admittedly over-stated, the debate between Royal Robbins and Warren
Harding nevertheless underscored the tense interaction between nature, technology,
individual freedom, consumerism, and risk in popular environmental discourse through
this period. For Park Service officials, the emergence of rock climbing as a popular
activity in the 1950s and 1960s created a profound sense of anxiety over their ability to
ensure the safety of visitors and the park rangers charged with rescuing them. The
manner in which NPS administrators and rock climbers negotiated this very real
apprehension blurred the lines between culture and nature in the modern national parks
movement. The co-evolution of rock climbing as a recreational construction of nature in
Yosemite, and rescue as an administrative means to accommodate that construction,
reflected the complex web of cultural hierarchies shaping national park management
philosophies in the second half of the twentieth century.

Warren Harding’s highly publicized ascent of the three thousand foot “Nose” of El
Capitan set in motion the gradual formalization of Yosemite’s search and rescue
apparatus. Requiring forty seven days spread out between July of 1957 and November of
1958, the climb demonstrated that the highest, blankest walls in the Valley could be
scaled with deliberate applications of boldness, stamina, and technology. Observed by
thousands of tourists from El Capitan Meadows, the climb also generated an emotionally
charged debate in the press. A number of observers railed against the ascent,
commenting that Harding’s unprecedented reliance on expansion bolts and fixed ropes

constituted nothing more than a "feat of engineering." Citing these concerns, acting
director of the NPS, E.T. Scoyen questioned whether rock climbing could remain an
appropriate form of recreation. Writing to the Sierra Club, Scoyen indicated that the
climb and its accompanying media frenzy "exerted a strong negative influence on the
normal use of the park by visitors and on the normal park atmosphere."95 One observer
even claimed that upon seeing the climbers scaling the famous landmark "the great
view...had been impaired...forever."96 Notwithstanding the emotional intensity of these
reactions, for the NPS, the debate over the Nose revolved around matters of safety; both
for climbers and, more importantly, for rangers charged with rescuing anyone unlucky
enough to become injured or stranded high on the wall.

Though the El Capitan climbers were markedly overcautious in their slow progress up
the face, accidents remained a distinct possibility.97 In September of 1957, Mark Powell,
the most accomplished climber other than Harding participating in the early stages of the
ascent, fell in a moment of inattention from an easy climb on the Royal Arches,
shattering his ankle and effectively ending his career as an elite Yosemite rock climber.

On the Nose climb itself, the climbers narrowly averted a series of close calls. In one
instance, a fixed hemp rope Wally Reed had been ascending suddenly snapped (early on
Harding had fixed hemp ropes instead of nylon for cost effectiveness). Luckily when the
line broke Reed had been only a few feet above a ledge and merely tumbled backwards

95 E.T. Scoyen to Thomas Kendall, March 27, 1959, Yosemite Central Files, Mountain Climbing 1957-

96 E.T. Scoyen to George Whitmore, April 2, 1959, Yosemite Central Files, Mountain Climbing 1957-

97 Wayne Merry even suggested that Chief Ranger Oscar Sedergren, who Merry described as "a crusty
old bastard," actually encouraged the controversial fixing of ropes "as there was no one capable of coming
to help." Wayne Merry to Gary Colliver, March 19, 1993, YOSAR office files.
onto it. Soon after, while leading a difficult pitch, Harding dislodged a huge boulder which miraculously caught in a crack just above his belayer.

In addition, the “appalling exposure” of the upper pitches and long hours spent hanging in space in belay loops instilled a profound psychosis in the more inexperienced climbers. On November 8, 1958, only a few hundred feet below the rim, twenty one year old Rich Calderwood suddenly decided to retreat, making the long rappels down to the Valley and hastily returning to his home in Fresno after he “found himself sobbing uncontrollably, for no reason he could fathom, maybe other than missing work, missing classes, and missing his pregnant wife.” Later Calderwood admitted that while sorting gear unroped on the wide Camp VI ledge he had become distracted for a moment and nearly stumbled over the edge from which he would have plummeted more than 2,500 feet straight down to the forest floor. If any such accidents were to happen in plain view of hundreds of tourists and media representatives, as park officials worried, how would the ranger force respond? In a letter to Superintendent John Preston, Richard Leonard suggested that rangers would have to attempt a rescue or recovery, “for public opinion will always force the administrative agency to do its best.”

With such concerns in mind, Superintendent Preston began laying out plans for the first official management strategy for climbing and rescue procedures in Yosemite. On November 20, 1958, less than week after Harding’s team had reached the summit of El Capitan, Preston issued a statement of the park’s position on rock climbing. Though remaining ambivalent toward the future of technical rock climbing as a safe, manageable

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98 Roper, Camp 4, 79.
form of recreation in the park, the superintendent voiced many of the arguments Richard Leonard and other representatives of the growing constituency of Yosemite climbers had been suggesting for some time. Setting the tone for future discussions over climbing and rescue in the park, Preston wrote:

We feel we should recognize rock climbing as one of the many ways people can find recreation and pleasure in our National Parks. Because of the risk involved we do not believe we should encourage climbing but we do not believe we can stop it unless we set up special regulations to do so and we doubt that such regulations would be enforceable. On the other hand, well organized climbs by qualified climbers are actually desirable as we can call on such people for help in rescue cases where we do not have enough trained men for the job. As a rule, we have very little difficulty with well qualified climbers; it is the inexperienced and ill-equipped persons who get into trouble and require rescue operations which sometimes lead to unfavorable publicity for the National Parks.\textsuperscript{100}

Partly a demand for climbing regulations, partly a means to appease the influential "rock climbing fraternity," and most importantly, a plea for the establishment of a workable plan to ensure the safety of an inevitable wave of recreational climbers (and to avoid "unfavorable publicity"), Preston's statement set the stage for a series of debates between independent climbers, the Sierra Club, and Park Service officials over the implications of accommodating climbing activities in the park.

In December 1958, Park Service Director Conrad Wirth, through a series of ill-advised comments to the press, drove a wedge into a developing rift between climbers and park officials that Preston had hoped to smooth over with his earlier statement. In response to persistent questioning from reporters, Wirth, who had "not had too much experience with rock climbers" declared that "trick climbing," which he defined as

\textsuperscript{100} John C. Preston to Regional Director, November 20, 1958, Yosemite Central Files, Mountain Climbing 1957-1969, L3423-L48. For the Sierra Club's critique of the expansion of the Tioga Road see Michael Cohen, \textit{History of the Sierra Club, 1892-1970} (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books), 140-142.
“driving iron pitons or bolts into a mountain,” would be banned in Yosemite. Wirth’s declaration sparked a firestorm of protest from climbers pointing out that the proposed ban amounted to an outright prohibition of the sport since rock climbing, especially as practiced in Yosemite, depended on such devices. Harding called the proposed ban “ridiculous” and argued that pitons and bolts in no way degraded the scenic qualities of the rock. Rich Calderwood responded to Wirth’s accusations by attacking the director’s support for the ongoing expansion of the Tioga Road along the granite shores of Tenaya Lake: “We don’t believe a few bits of iron which can hardly be seen even with binoculars deface the wilderness as much as blasting out entire sections of rare glacier polished granite in making new roads,” he told reporters, echoing critiques of Ansel Adams and an increasingly confrontational Sierra Club.

In his response, Superintendent Preston complicated his earlier declaration of support for climbing by distinguishing the ascent of El Capitan from other “normal mountain climbing expeditions.” Instead, he asserted, the Nose constituted “nothing more or less than a ‘stunt’ climb which...cannot be considered a legitimate form of recreation.” George Whitmore, a Sierra Club climber participating in the final days of the climb, fired back in an angry letter directed at Wirth and Preston: “Your implication that ‘tricks’ and ‘stunts’ were used in a carnival-like spectacle again indicates a complete disregard for the truth,” he wrote. “If you had taken the trouble to inquire...you would have found that we

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101 Scoyen to Whitmore, April 2, 1959.
103 Quoting Richard Calderwood in “Park Service May Ban Climbing Aids.” undated newspaper article, Yosemite National Park Library.
used standard climbing techniques which have been commonly accepted and practiced in Europe and this country for years." In a letter to Wirth, Thomas Kendall of the Sierra Club’s Rock Climbing Section also chimed in on behalf of the El Capitan climbers and rock climbing in general: A look at the record will show that those who have contributed the most to preserve our wilderness areas have been guilty of this type of “stunting” – from John Muir on up. It is axiomatic that those who know the mountains most intimately want most to preserve them as they are. Rock climbing is a way of achieving this intimacy. It is much, much more than a “stunt.”

Such invocations of Yosemite’s mountaineering tradition proved influential in guiding rock climbing management policies in subsequent years. In fact, NPS officials generally agreed with Kendall in spite of Wirth’s earlier comments and Preston’s vague assessment of the El Capitan climb. The anxiety expressed by Wirth, Preston, Scoyen, and others stemmed more from anticipated administrative difficulties related to visitor safety than from a conflicting preservationist ideology. Conceptually, rock climbing remained a “wholly proper use of the park,” as Scoyen insisted. In practice, however, climbing had become problematic both for its spectacle in the eyes of less active visitors and more importantly for the challenges it posed for an understaffed, technologically deficient, and otherwise ill-prepared internal rescue apparatus. The unprecedented scale of the El Capitan climb, the intense publicity it generated, and the potential disasters it


held for both climbers and rescuers presented a very real dilemma for NPS officials struggling to manage the repercussions of rock climbing as a popular recreational pursuit in the park. The strained ambiguity of Preston's distinction between a "normal" rock climb as opposed to a "stunt" reflected this apprehension and presaged the gradual institutionalization of visitor protection in Yosemite.

In lieu of the El Capitan controversy, National Park Service officials met with representatives of the Department of the Interior in Washington to devise a system-wide policy for managing climbing activities and implementing safety procedures in national parks. Soliciting advice from the superintendents of major parks and prominent mountaineering organizations including the Sierra Club and the American Alpine Club, the Park Service sought to "bring the use of National Parks by mountain climbers in consonance with basic park principles." While supporting climbing as "an entirely proper and appropriate use of areas within the National Park System," the management plan also empowered administrators to compel climbers "through persuasion and mutual understanding" to behave in manner consistent with "the service's responsibilities for the protection of human life, the protection of natural, esthetic, and scientific values and the protection of the rights and privileges of others in their normal use of these areas." This meant that climbers and park officials were to work together to ensure that climbing would remain a safe, manageable form of recreation that did not detract from the scenic qualities of Yosemite or compromise the experience of other visitors. The plan seemed consistent with Richard Leonard's contention that "the freedom of the individual to enjoy the area in his own way without harming [the] park or others should be carefully

preserved." Yet the policy proved easier said than done since it chafed with a web of recreational hierarchies that an increasingly diverse set of park users had been constructing since the earliest days of the park.

Many Sierra Club rock climbers, hoping to protect their long-standing claim to recreation in Yosemite, remained skeptical of the plan. Climbers worried that the policy would result in arbitrary regulations and closures enacted by park authorities with no demonstrable knowledge of the abilities of individual climbers and little familiarity with advances in modern climbing techniques. Michael Laughlin, chairman of the Qualifications Committee of the Sierra Club Rock Climbing Section, argued that the mountaineering and rescue policy would have a “measurable effect in weakening the purposefulness of the qualified leader program both for the Sierra Club and the Park Service.” Building on arguments previously made by the AAC and Richard Leonard, Laughlin stressed that safety concerns would not be assuaged by restricting climbing. Instead, he suggested that “climbing activity is sufficient to warrant the presence in the Valley of a fulltime climbing ranger, one who climbs actively himself and who is personally familiar with the routes and the climbers.” Laughlin and other Sierra Club leaders understood that assuaging safety concerns would give NPS officials confidence to support the club’s claims to recreation in the park.

Laughlin made a number of other recommendations that underpinned later search and rescue policies including the need for a “trained and equipped rescue personnel,”

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although as he rightly pointed out, “personnel would more likely be employed in rescuing a stranded hiker than a climber.” Anticipating financial roadblocks to establishing an internal rescue apparatus in Yosemite, Laughlin suggested that “if budgetary considerations do not permit this, then perhaps the climbers and climbing organizations could be of assistance in convincing the holders of the purse strings that money is needed for this purpose.” NPS officials expressed a measure of agreement with these proposals, though most still viewed discretionary authority to monitor climbing as a necessary step towards assuming responsibility for “the direction and control of rescue efforts to assist mountaineers who are in serious difficulties.” The tension between climbers’ desire for individual freedom in the national park experience and the NPS’s efforts to determine the boundaries of this freedom characterized subsequent discussions of social responsibility and safety in climbing.

In Yosemite, officials influenced by close ties to the Sierra Club continued to advocate relaxed restrictions on climbing. As such, the management plan functioned less as a regulatory policy than as a set of guidelines for developing the park’s visitor protection infrastructure. In effect, the plan codified many of the safety precautions suggested earlier by Richard Leonard and the Sierra Club and already informally practiced by the park’s ranger force. For instance, the plan specified a continuation of the voluntary registration process, recommending that “insofar as it is possible to do so, rangers who are experienced and competent in mountain climbing and who are acquainted with local conditions and climbing techniques will be assigned to registration

111 Ibid.

centers." The plan also expressed a need for the "employment of a sufficient number of Service personnel who are experienced mountaineers to cope with the normal rescue requirements of the park." Rescue personnel would be required to receive annual training in the most up-to-date rock climbing and rescue techniques. In addition, the plan called for "the development and maintenance of advance plans and agreements with nearby mountaineering organizations which would provide assistance when rescue operations exceed the limitations of the Service's resources." With a thinly veiled reference to Harding's El Capitan climb, the authors suggested that "there are certain types of ascents which require special considerations." In these still rather vaguely defined situations, the climbing party would be responsible for providing a qualified, self-sufficient rescue party to remain on-call if needed. Ultimately, the plan's significance lay in its plain expression of the apprehensions and inadequacies facing Yosemite's visitor protection division in continuing to accommodate rather than directly regulate mountaineering and rock climbing activities.

Mounting concerns over the dangers of rock climbing and the problems of responding to climbing accidents were soon realized. On March 19, 1960, seventeen year old high school student Irving Smith fell into the "prehistorically dark and damp" Lost Arrow Chimney, becoming the first experienced climber to die on a big wall climb in the Yosemite Valley. Rappelling unseen by his climbing partners above, Smith uttered a "brief howl" before the rope went slack and the "unmistakable sounds of a body tumbling deeper into the nearly vertical gully" echoed from below.

113 Ibid.
114 Roper, Camp 4, 110.; Farabee, Death, Daring, and Disaster, 243.
The following day, using a telescope from the Valley floor, ranger and expert climber
Wayne Merry located Smith’s body crumpled on a chockstone about six hundred feet
below where he had fallen. Soliciting the cooperation of Warren Harding, Merry
proposed to make a series of long exposed rappels to retrieve the body but the chief
ranger at the time prohibited the attempt arguing that recovery from such an
“inaccessible” spot would be too dangerous. The boy’s father even suggested, rather
morbidly, that leaving the body to decay in this dark chasm which Steve Roper
considered “one of the most sinister places in the valley” was perhaps “the way Irving
would have wanted it.”

Frustrated and ready to “damn near quit the force,” Merry regarded the chief ranger’s prohibition as “a vote of no confidence.” More than a
personal slight to the experienced Merry, who had been Harding’s most reliable
companion in the final days of the El Capitan climb, the chief ranger’s decision to leave
the body exposed the lingering inadequacies of a ranger force supposedly responsible for
the safety of all visitors, even those taking it upon themselves to risk life and limb on
progressively more difficult rock climbs.

The pressures rock climbing brought to bear on the park’s protection division
followed from the transformation of Camp 4 from a quiet, non-descript campground in
the early 1950s into the cultural hub of modern rock climbing by the 1960s. Tucked
under the sunny north wall of the Valley across the Merced from the Sentinel Rock
monolith, the inconspicuous campground became the spiritual home for Yosemite rock
climbers and a significant locus for the co-evolution of modern rock climbing and

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115 Roper, *Camp 4*, 111.

116 Merry to Coliver, March 19, 1993.
professional rescue in the national parks. In the spring of 1957, Mark Powell, before his accident on Royal Arches, discovered he could subsist for long periods of time with little money camped among the boulders and sparse pines of Camp 4. A select group of self-proclaimed “climbing bums” quickly followed suit, carving a semi-primitive existence out of this newly co-opted rock climbers’ base camp.

Comprised predominantly of white male college dropouts and other disaffected middle class youths, the contingent of elite rock climbers inhabiting Camp 4 through the 1960s included such soon-to-be rock climbing luminaries as Royal Robbins, Warren Harding, Chuck Pratt, Yvon Chouinard, Steve Roper, and Layton Kor. Invoking a range of literature from Henry David Thoreau to Jack Kerouac to the heroic alpinists of the Victorian era to the original mountaineer/preservationist John Muir, Yosemite’s climbing bums fashioned themselves as rebels pitted against mass consumer culture and the “softening influence” of modern technological society. For these self-styled bohemians, life in Camp 4 affirmed an elemental individualism in a society populated by what social critic William Whyte labeled “organization men.” Climbing invigorated a direct connection to the natural world that the postwar economic boom seemed to have buried under endless rows of reproducible suburbs, television sets, and automobiles. As Yvon Chouinard later reminisced, “We were like wild species living on the edge of an ecosystem – adaptable, resilient, and tough.”

As semi-permanent residents of the park engaged in an activity they considered to be transcendent of mere “tourism,” climbing bums maintained a dismissive attitude towards other visitors. Often appearing dirty, long haired, and bearded, climbers loitered around

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the Mountain Room Bar at the Yosemite Lodge, scrounged for leftovers in the cafeteria, and held noisy wine-soaked parties in Camp 4 long into the night. Through the 1960s, these behaviors created frequent headaches for concessionaires, law enforcement officials, patrolling rangers, and especially for non-climbing campers who set up their tents in Camp 4 unaware that they had “penetrated into a magic circle” where, according to climber Doug Robinson, “they stand undazedly at the focus of a force-field of tradition and emotion.” Camp 4 had become not only a gathering point for climbers but also a spiritual home where culture and nature intersected to form new conceptions of Yosemite’s value in a modern consumer society.

Much like other “bum” subcultures forming around surfing and skiing, the climbing bum lifestyle was by no means outside the realm of consumer culture. The strenuous physicality of climbing - and daily life in Camp 4 - reflected a conscious choice on the part of climbers to embrace a socially divergent, but ultimately reformist method of consumption that emphasized a conscious physical engagement with the natural world over the passive acceptance of modern convenience. Sleeping in tents and subsisting on whatever food they could scrounge from the National Park Service’s tourist infrastructure, climbers in the “sprawling al-fresco slum” of Camp 4 reveled in denying themselves the comforts of modern mechanized living. This practice of inconspicuous consumption allowed rock climbers to act out what environmental writer Bill McKibben describes as

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119 For ski bums see Annie Gilbert Coleman, Ski Style: Sport and Culture in the Rockies (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004); For surf bums see Drew Kampion, Stoked! A History of Surf Culture (Salt Lake City: G. Smith, 2003).

“turning [inconvenience] into a pleasurable commodity.” Rather than scripting their lifestyle in terms of the accumulation of material goods - the trait of modern consumption they most adamantly rejected - climbers sought to build a relationship to the vertical landscapes of Yosemite by resisting the urge to conspicuously consume, or more precisely, by consuming a limited selection of specialized items that isolated their desired interaction with the climbing environment. Interestingly, these efforts to divorce climbing culture from mass-culture would propel rock climbing into the mainstream commercial marketplace in the coming years.

Residing for extended periods of time in the Valley also allowed climbers to significantly improve their physical capabilities to ascend more difficult - and more dangerous - routes. Mike Borgoff, a regular in Yosemite but an admittedly timid climber, deemed the Camp 4 crowd “salamanders” referring to their seemingly inhuman ability to scamper up the slick cracks of the Valley. Beginning in the early 1960s, “free climbing” or the practice of moving upward by hand and foot using only the existing features of the rock gradually took precedence over aid climbing in the minds of many climbers as the purest form of ascent. When not putting up bold new free climbing routes on the Valley walls, Camp 4’s resident climbing bums practiced challenging gymnastic moves on the numerous boulders dotting the campground. These “boulder problems,” Borgoff wrote, were “calculated to assure a visiting climber’s complete psychological annihilation before he ties onto a rope.” For climbers deeply engaged in this elitist atmosphere, ever more


difficult ascents and the pursuit of risk became “a way of life - generously spiked with brutal competition.” This competitive mood heightened over the course of the 1960s, creating a complex set of new safety concerns for park officials. In the wake of the “impossible” technical achievements of Harding’s El Capitan climb and Royal Robbins’s equally significant ascent of the northwest face of Half Dome a year earlier, ambitious climbers, their bodies honed on the practice boulders of Camp 4, discovered that “huge, unclimbed ‘impossible’ walls lay in all directions.”

Fresh ambitions required specialized technologies which climbers largely manufactured themselves specifically for the unique qualities of the Yosemite granite. The Valley’s steep, glacier-polished walls presented technical and psychological challenges unlike any other climbing environment in the United States or Europe. Consistently vertical or overhanging and nearly absent of ledges, the big walls instilled a terrifying sense of exposure, sending many overconfident visitors back to their tents in Camp 4 to “complain about the heat or the bears or somesuch.” Compared to the highly featured limestone of the European Alps where technical rock climbing had first developed, Yosemite’s polished granite lacked convenient handholds and boasted few climbable contours. Vertical cracks existed but were rarely continuous, typically shooting upward for hundreds of feet only to disappear into holdless swaths of blank granite. On the big walls such as El Capitan and Half Dome, this discontinuous topography required numerous pendulum traverses in which climbers, at times facing

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124 Roper, Camp 4, 80.
thousands of feet of air beneath their feet, made long looping runs across blank spaces to reach parallel crack systems. These traverses often made retreat, and more significantly, rescue, either uncommonly difficult or impossible.

Yosemite's cracks also tended to be too wide, too small, or too shallow for secure piton placements. With Salathe's homemade steel pitons becoming a rarity in the late 1950s, other climbers began forging their own imitations. Chuck Wilts, Jerry Gallwas, William "Dolt" Fuerer, Dick Long, Ed Leeper, and others manufactured a number of pitons of various sizes to fit the unaccommodating cracks of the Valley. Prior to the El Capitan climb, Frank Tarver hammered out a set of ultra-wide pitons from the legs of a cast iron stove he had pulled from a scrap yard in 1956. These "stoveleg pitons" attained legendary status in the Camp 4 climbing circle after proving essential on a particularly problematic pitch on the Nose. Most significantly, Yvon Chouinard and Tom Frost, through their garage-operated Chouinard Equipment Inc., (which later gave rise to the Patagonia Corporation), designed, manufactured, and marketed a number of new chromemoly pitons that became vital to the subsequent development of rock climbing in Yosemite and ultimately other destinations around the world. Chouinard's postage-stamp sized RURP (Realized Ultimate Reality Pitons) and Frost's wide angle bong-bong, named for its distinctive echo when being pounded into cracks, enabled climbers to ascend increasingly difficult routes which would have previously been impossible without rock-defacing permanent expansion bolts.  

In the wake of Harding's El Capitan climb, expansion bolts, fixed ropes, and other technologies which arguably "guaranteed success" on a climb, fell increasingly out of

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favor among the stringent aesthetes inhabiting Camp 4. Co-opting a Spartan technological imperative practiced by British rock climbers and Alpine mountaineers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Royal Robbins, T.M. Herbert, Yvon Chouinard, and others criticized Warren Harding’s tendencies to choose routes requiring numerous permanent expansion bolts. Climbing should be conducted as an aesthetic adventure in a natural setting, they argued, with as little technological assistance as possible. This delineation of appropriate “style” in the application of technology meant that new routes in Yosemite were to be completed in single continuous pushes from the ground up using gear that enhanced rather than insulated the climbers’ direct muscular engagement with the rock. New technologies such as RURPs, bong-bongs, skyhooks, haul bags, and the jumar, a devise Royal Robbins modified to significantly ease the difficulties of ascending ropes and hauling up supplies, while in effect making climbing easier, also made the most difficult routes possible without resorting to “insulating technologies,” namely permanent expansion bolts and fixed ropes. The intended function of this technological hierarchy was to force climbers to encounter the climbing environment in accordance with its natural features. Stylistically inclined climbers in Yosemite did not utilize technology “for its own sake,” but rather for the purpose of isolating a strenuous experience in a natural setting and an individualized confrontation with risk. This delineation of appropriate style allowed Yosemite climbers to associate their sport with the notion of an appropriate “wilderness experience” gaining currency in popular environmental discourse at this time.127

Changes in the technological sophistication, physical capabilities, and cultural imperatives of climbers in Yosemite had worrisome implications for park officials seeking to manage this increasingly emboldened class of park visitor. In 1961, the park recorded almost two thousand registrations for climbs, a more than two hundred percent increase from 1953. Out of approximately two dozen accidents in the park requiring ranger response in 1961, nine either involved rock climbing or required “mountaineering techniques for evacuations.” Most of these incidents resulted from inexperienced and often unregistered park visitors attempting to scale cliffs for which they were unprepared. For example, on July 22, four Explorer Scouts had to be pulled from the exposed ledges east of Lower Yosemite Falls, even though earlier they and their scout leader “were given some advice concerning unauthorized climbing and staying on marked trails.” In another instance, an unregistered solo climber had to be guided off a “very precarious position” on Tenaya Peak in a dangerous night rescue.128

The Sierra Club, now involved in a nationwide movement to preserve wilderness extending well beyond its traditional focus on Yosemite and the Sierras, expressed concern that these unaffiliated climbers had rendered the registration process and the club’s qualified leader program inadequate in maintaining safety standards. Carl Weisner of the club’s rock climbing committee wrote to Chief Ranger Fladmark, “We climbers of the Sierra Club are...quite concerned with the technical competency of some of the newer free lance climbers. We do not wish to see this fine sport deteriorate because of a

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few delinquents, and certainly do not want any accidents.” Fladmark responded with assurances that the park would “continue to screen climbers as carefully as possible.” Highlighting the park’s continued reliance on the judgment of the club to patrol the boundaries of rock climbing in the park, the Chief Ranger wrote to Weisner, “We are pleased to know of your willingness to take action to discipline incompetent climbers who do not follow good mountaineering practices.” This exchange demonstrated the park’s dependence on the Sierra Club while also illuminating the club’s growing anxiety that it could lose its grasp on the cultural development and technological evolution of rock climbing and other recreational activities in the park.

Despite the presence of this user group that administrators and Sierra Club officials regarded as “free lance and very disreputable rock climbers,” accidents involving even the most highly skilled climbers occurred with surprising frequency. On July 29, 1961, experienced Sierra Club rock climber Roger Ulrich suffered severe injuries after a bad fall on Higher Cathedral Spire. The difficult rescue involved a number of park personnel and a private contracted helicopter to fly rescuers to the scene and evacuate the injured Ulrich. A few weeks later, Steve Roper, a noted Camp 4 climbing bum and a Sierra Club qualified leader, slipped and fell on a patch of ice at the base of an unregistered climb on Half Dome while “trying to emulate my alpine heroes, Hermann Buhl and Gaston Rebuffat,” as he later recalled. Roper slid almost six hundred feet down a steep, ice-

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covered slope, suffering “deep bruises and abrasions and contusions of the kidneys.” Superintendent Preston reported that Roper and his partner “had inadequate equipment and both admitted using very poor judgment.”

Though the pair was able to return to the Valley without a rescue, the accident indicated that experience, knowledge, and affiliation with the Sierra Club did not negate the need for a more sophisticated rescue apparatus. In response to such concerns, Preston delegated responsibility for coordinating SAR operations to the district rangers, writing: “This is done in view of the wide divergence of visitor use, terrain, and other conditions that exist between the various districts.” Preston emphasized annual rescue training programs and the need to invest in additional rescue and climbing equipment; yet his delegation of rescue duties lacked specific instructions for coordinating communications between the various parties within and without the NPS involved in rescues, and as a result, only further de-centralized operations.

Changes in the park’s rescue priorities in the 1960s occurred in the context of the unprecedented boom in outdoor recreation in the nation’s parks. In 1962, the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission, an investigative body convened during Dwight Eisenhower’s administration, released Outdoor Recreation for America. The report highlighted the profound significance of leisure and outdoor activities in postwar, middle class American culture. In the wake of World War II, an “eager Nation,” the commission argued, had developed millions of acres of open space into subdivisions, highways, and industrial sites while “the resources for outdoor recreation – shoreline,

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133 Ibid.
green acres, open space, and unpolluted waters – diminished in the face of demands for more of everything else." The report found that as incomes rose and automobile travel became more accessible between 1951 and 1959, trips to recreation areas skyrocketed 143 percent while visits to the national parks rose 86 percent. The commission concluded that not only were more recreation areas needed, but the nation’s diverse socio-economic population required a similarly diverse set of options for recreation. The report proposed categorizing recreation zones into six “classes” from open spaces in urban areas to reserves of monumental scenery and finally to “primitive areas” in which signs of human intervention were minimized.

These recommendations reflected the Park Service’s rethinking of its strained recreation facilities during the same period. This renewed emphasis on the increasingly diverse recreational demands being placed on the parks was embodied in Mission 66, a plan to revitalize the tourist infrastructure of the parks by the NPS’s fiftieth anniversary in 1966. Advanced by NPS Director Conrad Wirth, who many feared would sacrifice opportunities for primitive recreation to accommodate less-active travelers, Mission 66 was intended to bring the parks “up to a consistently high standard of preservation, staffing and physical development.” The Sierra Club, embroiled its bid to stop the proposed Echo Park Dam in Dinosaur Monument, while tentatively supportive of the


plan’s goals early on, rapidly discarded its historic alliance with the Park Service in an effort to protect the parks, and Yosemite in particular, from over-development. Ansel Adams argued that the NPS should focus on accommodating only those visitors to Yosemite “who specifically seek its intrinsic values.” ¹³⁷ Yet the process of determining who possessed the physical and intellectual traits necessary to enjoy nature in Yosemite— and what that nature was to look like—remained an elusive goal for both the Sierra Club and the Park Service in subsequent years.

Heated debates between the NPS and the newly radicalized Sierra Club over Mission 66 gave rock climbing, even with its potential hazards and unaffiliated practitioners, the appearance of an appropriately physical means to encounter the wilderness, or primitive, qualities of the park. While locked in disagreement over road expansions, development plans, natural resource management, and the influx of mass-recreation in the parks, both the Sierra Club and the NPS remained at least passively supportive of climbing as an acceptable activity consistent with the goals of the national park system. A report of the 1961 Mountaineering and Rescue Conference held in Rocky Mountain National Park reiterated the service’s stance on climbing: “It was concluded that our objective must be to control, guide and direct the activity by a positive approach rather than to regulate against it.” ¹³⁸ Rock climbing seemed especially appropriate when viewed in contrast to popular, but intensely criticized, resort-style activities such as auto-touring, golf, and stays in the luxurious Ahwanee hotel. Efforts to formalize Yosemite’s search and rescue

¹³⁷ Quoted in Cohen, *The History of the Sierra Club*, 140.

capabilities, while in many respects a reactive countermeasure to rock climbing, also
functioned as a distinctly proactive sign of support for the growing constituency engaged
in this particularly dangerous use of the park.

On April 19, 1962, in an incident suggestive of the complex rescue scenarios to come
if the park maintained an accommodating stance on climbing, Camp 4 regulars Glen
Denny and John Weichard became stranded in a snow storm after descending from the
Lost Arrow tip into the notch separating the spire from Yosemite Point (the same
cavernous slot where Irving Smith had plummeted to his death two years earlier).

Preston, in his monthly report indicated that Denny and Weichard “knew in advance that
a storm was expected” yet proceeded with the climb nonetheless. Dispatched after calls
for help could be heard from the cliff face, Ranger Wayne Merry and George Whitmore,
of the Sierra Club volunteer rescue force, reached Yosemite Point late that night finding
that while descending, the climbers’ ropes had become “frozen to the cliff.” Merry
lowered himself into the notch by rappel “entirely in darkness,” joining the stranded
climbers at 1:30 a.m. The next morning, Whitmore and a force of rangers raised Denny,
Weichard, and Merry to the Valley rim using a manual winch constructed from two free
standing pulleys wound with steel cable which the rangers had hauled up the Yosemite
Falls trail in the early morning hours.139

Another incident in September of the following year further exemplified the life and
death challenges facing the park’s maturing rescue infrastructure. That afternoon, novice
climber Edward Hsu, belayed by his even less experienced fourteen year old brother, fell

National Park Library; While such devices had been employed by volunteer rescue forces in the Alps since
the 1940s, this was the first time a rescue force in Yosemite had used a winch to enact a climbing rescue in
the Valley.
ninety feet onto a sloping ledge on Cathedral Peak in the high country southeast of Tuolomne Meadows. Wayne Merry and ranger John Ward responded to the accident, requesting the services of a private contract helicopter. In his account of the rescue operation, Merry recalled the delicate handling skills of the chopper pilot: "it was really stretching the altitude limits... but he managed it – [the pilot] put a skid down on the edge, and one at a time we cautiously slithered out, eyeballing the drop on either side... I remember glancing up at the pilot...and I still remember his face – pale, absolute concentration, big beads of sweat on his forehead.” After landing on the precipice, the rescue team found Hsu “unconscious and very critical” while his younger brother sat paralyzed with fear on a ledge “still belaying the motionless body.” After immobilizing the critically injured climber and raising him to the hovering chopper, Merry and Ward “managed to secure the basket to the skid tray without dropping it or falling off in the process.” The efforts to save Hsu’s life proved futile as Merry later recalled: “I have always thought afterward of many ways each operation could have been done better – but this one remains in my mind the only one that was almost picture-perfect. We did everything we could - but the patient still died.”

These incidents demonstrated the extent of the National Park Service’s willingness to accommodate rock climbing activities despite the delicate margin of error involved. Due in part to improved technical capabilities, access to helicopters, and the employment of rangers with significant climbing experience, park officials continued to regard climbing as a manageable form of recreation in the park. Yet administrators increasingly faced the alarming reality that rock climbing in Yosemite had become even more heavily infused

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140 Merry’s account quoted in Farabee, Death, Daring, and Disaster, 255.
with risk than in the previous decade. By the mid-1960s, climbers had begun to shun the use of fixed ropes and expedition style rock climbs in favor of less conspicuous ascents involving only two or three climbers and a minimum selection of gear. In terms of style, even inexperienced climbers began emulating breakthrough climbs such as Royal Robbins’s ascent of the Salathe Wall on El Capitan in which he, Tom Frost, and Chuck Pratt cast off their fixed ropes at the nine hundred foot level making retreat or rescue from the remaining two thousand feet all but impossible. Yvon Chouinard credited the safety standards making such risks feasible to “the American’s love of safety and security and his innate fear of death, which have caused revolutionary innovations in belaying and equipment.”

Yet the increased security made possible by technical advancements only encouraged climbers to take greater risks.

This balancing act with risk gave the most accomplished climbers a fatalistic attitude towards the possibility of death. Steve Roper, in an effort to “break the tension” upon finding Irving Smith’s desiccated remains in the Lost Arrow Chimney in 1961, shouted to his belayer below, “Goddamn it! His parka doesn’t fit me!” Jim Bridwell recalled his mixed emotions after being asked to carry out the body of Jim Baldwin, a regular Camp 4 climber that had been killed in a sudden fall from Washington Column in 1965: “From the tense faces and reddened eyes of the climbers around me as we lifted him arose a sense of deep, abiding brotherhood. Afterward...I determined to never let my awareness lapse and always remain self-reliant.”

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142 Roper, *Camp 4*, 111.

Royal Robbins described his thoughts regarding the possibility of “inevitable death” on the first ascent of the terrifying North American Wall on El Capitan in 1965: “Mankind is truly insignificant,” he wrote. “Man’s fate...is to have to swallow these truths and still live on. If one could only find meaning to make these hard truths of insignificance and omnipresent death acceptable. Where to find this meaning? Again the search...and we climb on.” Such attitudes reflected evolving conceptions of risk and recreation in the burgeoning wilderness movement.

Though not immediately applicable to the national parks, the landmark Wilderness Act, passed by the United States Congress in 1964, threatened to undermine the National Park Service’s long standing autonomy in promoting what it considered to be appropriate recreation in its holdings. Incorporating a more sophisticated ecological perspective with the older critique of mechanized recreation, Harold Zahniser of the Wilderness Society, the primary drafter of the legislation, argued that certain tracts of public land, including portions of the national parks, were to be preserved as wilderness “untrammeled by man” with no roads or other obvious signs of mechanization to mar the natural processes shaping the landscape. For the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society, and other increasingly radicalized proponents of “the new conservation,” this punitive level of protection would prevent the Park Service from accommodating forms of mass-recreation that could corrupt both ecological integrity and the psychic effect of an appropriately self-reliant engagement with wild nature in as yet undeveloped portions of the parks. The act added fuel to a long standing discussion between preservationists, park-goers, and the

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For many outdoor enthusiasts, rock climbing fit the model of “primitive recreation” newly codified in the Wilderness Act. In subsequent years, through climbing periodicals, advertisements for equipment, and guidebooks, elite climbers in Yosemite perpetuated a romantic narrative of rock climbing as a transcendent pursuit of calculated risk and an opportunity to come in closer contact with the “untrammeled” nature that Zahniser had referenced in the Wilderness Act. Yvon Chouinard, for example, in a 1965 article for the \textit{American Alpine Journal}, celebrated his eight day first ascent with T.M. Herbert of the Muir Wall on El Capitan as an embodiment of the self-reliant adventure that modern, wilderness-oriented climbing techniques enabled:

\begin{quote}
The new philosophy of climbing is characterized by small expeditions going to remote areas and trying new and extremely difficult routes with a minimum of equipment, no support parties nor fixed ropes to the ground; living for days and weeks at a time on the climb and leaving no signs of their presence behind. This purer form of climbing takes more of a complete effort, more personal adjustment, and involves more risk, but being more idealistic, the rewards are greater.\footnote{Chouinard, “Muir Wall – El Capitan,” \textit{American Alpine Journal} 15, no. 1, issue 35 (1961): 46.}
\end{quote}

Chouinard compared this emerging “Yosemite style” to the wanderings of John Muir who “used to roam the Sierra for weeks, eating only bread and whatever he could pick off the land, sleeping under boulders in only his old army overcoat, and rejoicing with the summer storms.” Chouinard further canonized Muir as a model wilderness climber who “chose to accept nature without trying force himself onto the mountains but rather to live...
with them, to adjust himself to the rigors of this sort of life.”

For Chouinard and other elite climbers engaged in this scripting of history and space in Yosemite, the Valley served as a historic point of origin for the technical, philosophical, and environmental imperatives in modern rock climbing.

Due in no small part to the commercial activities and literary output of Camp 4 climbers, by the mid-1960s rock climbing had transformed into a far more democratized activity than it had been through the 1950s. With the expanding availability of equipment, mountaineering schools, and guidebooks, rock climbing could be pursued not only by those initiated into Camp 4’s “elite brotherhood” but also by vacationing climbers from other parts of the United States and Europe, as well as neophyte climbers, like Edward Hsu, who sought to experience the park in new intimate ways. Climbers in Camp 4 became increasingly anxious about their ability to maintain control over these changing recreational preferences. In response, Chouinard, Robbins, Roper, and other elite climbers deliberately stepped up their involvement in the commercialism driving the popularity of climbing. Climbers used their connections to the dynamic commercial marketplace to communicate the technological imperative and cultural hierarchies embedded in Yosemite climbing to new participants. This did not necessarily represent a contradiction in their critique of consumer culture but was instead entirely consistent with the evolution of consumer capitalism into the primary framework by which postwar...

148 Ibid.

149 Chouinard, “Modern Yosemite Climbing,” 327.
Americans communicated cultural and political hierarchies, notions of “the good life,” and even standards of environmental responsibility.\textsuperscript{150}

Indeed, for these entrepreneurial climbing bums, the growing industry surrounding rock climbing and other wilderness activities seemed to provide the most reliable channel for communicating standards of appropriate recreation to a disconnected cohort of neophyte outdoor enthusiasts. Through advertising and guidebooks, climbers sought to establish class distinctions within climbing culture based on physical skill, technological restraint, and an environmental sensibility.\textsuperscript{151} Steve Roper’s 1964 \textit{Climber’s Guide to the Yosemite Valley}, for example, with its “inevitable red cover,” included descriptions and detailed maps, or “topos,” of more than two hundred climbing routes in the Valley, providing an essential tool for those unfamiliar with Yosemite climbing to be initiated into its unique challenges.\textsuperscript{152} While the guidebook ultimately facilitated an increase in climbing activities in the park, Roper made a concerted effort in his introduction to assert the cultural hegemony embedded in Yosemite climbing, stressing the strict technological standards and humility demanded of visiting climbers:

\begin{quote}


151 Pierre Bourdieu, Richard Nice Translator, \textit{Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 2, 11-12, Bourdieu argues that through “taste” in the acquisition of consumer goods and experiences, a person establishes “distinction” which then serves as an indication of their class. This model accurately captures the dynamic relationship between Camp 4 culture and consumer culture in this period.

\end{quote}
Many climbers from out of state have left the Valley with no desire to return. There are several reasons for this, and occasionally it is the fault of the outsider himself. No matter who he is or how good he is in his own area, if he arrives in Yosemite with even a faint trace of arrogance, he is in for an unpleasant time: not only will he not gain the respect of the Valley climbers, but it is unlikely he will ever fulfill his ambitious climbing schedule.\textsuperscript{153}

The romanticism and blatant elitism expounded by entrepreneurial climbing bums influenced the standards of practice in rock climbing as it transformed into a mainstream recreational activity in the late 1960s.

Elite climbers’ attempts to police the boundaries of the sport also engendered a level of competition and hubris in Valley climbing that contributed in no small part to the dramatic rise in climbing accidents in the late 1960s. While responses to these accidents remained the responsibility of the park’s visitor protection division, independent climbers played an increasingly important role in assisting with the more technically demanding rescues. Through rescue, climbers forged an unlikely working relationship with the often antagonistic ranger force. The first major cooperative effort involving park rangers and climbers occurred in June of 1965 when Berkeley “weekender” Pete Spoecker broke his leg on a fall from the north face of Sentinel Rock. A relatively easy “warm-up” for elite big wall climbers in 1965, the route had been the hardest climb in the United States when John Salathe and Alan Steck made the first ascent in 1950.\textsuperscript{154} Though straightforward in comparison to the several new routes on El Capitan, the Sentinel climb remained a significant ordeal for less experienced climbers. Lacking sufficient technical knowledge or manpower to perform a rescue from this imposing monolith, park rangers recruited

\textsuperscript{153} Roper, “Bolts, Publicity, and Sloth,” in Ordeal by Piton, Roper, ed., 120.

four climbers from Camp 4 to secure the victim before they could raise him by winch from the face. The effort demonstrated, according to Steve Roper, “that Camp 4 bums were good for something.” More importantly, the success of this rescue smoothed over, at least temporarily, the tense relationship that had been developing between park officials and the Valley’s vagrant climbing community.¹⁵⁵

A series of events in 1968 solidified cooperative rescue as the linchpin holding rangers and climbers in consensus over the continued viability of rock climbing as an appropriate, largely unregulated activity within park boundaries. On October 14, a fierce snowstorm overwhelmed expert climbers Chuck Pratt and Chris Fredericks high on the Dihedral Wall, a difficult route ascending the nearly ledgeless west face of El Capitan. From the ground, twenty year old Jim Madsen, an “impulsive fellow” who had arrived on the Valley scene two years earlier, determined that the pair was likely suffering from hypothermia and in desperate need of rescue. A park helicopter shuttled Madsen, a team of Camp 4 climbers, and several rangers to the summit in the early morning hours of the fifteenth. With a pack loaded with rescue equipment, Madsen rappelled over the edge and out of sight - the last time anyone saw him alive. In the moments that followed, the horrified rescue team heard Madsen shout an expletive as he rappelled off the end of the rope, plummeting 2,500 feet to his death. Pratt and Fredericks later reported hearing “something big whistle past” as they hung in slings huddled against the cold. Finding traces of blood on the wall as they made their way to the summit when the weather cleared, the climbers hoped it had been a deer or other large mammal that had fallen but

¹⁵⁵ Roper, Camp 4, 203.
soon found Madsen’s broken glasses on a ledge, confirming their worst suspicions.\(^\text{156}\) Ranger Pete Thompson, the park’s first “rescue specialist,” later recalled that “Jim’s passing served one enormous purpose... It pushed rescue safety in Yosemite to the forefront where it is firmly established.”\(^\text{157}\)

Madsen’s death, the first fatality on a climbing rescue in the park, alerted climbers and park officials to the possibility that despite advanced technologies and increased safety standards, the atmosphere of risk permeating the culture of Yosemite rock climbing and the ad hoc organization of rescue procedures could lead to horrific tragedies involving even the best climbers and rescuers. Within the ranger force, such apprehensions had been brewing beneath the surface for some time. In fact, the very day before Madsen’s rescue team choppered to the summit of El Capitan, Ranger Steven Hickman, the most experienced rescuer in the ranger force, had issued the park’s first ever draft plan for organizing a centralized internal visitor protection apparatus. In his introductory statement, Hickman expressed concern that search and rescue lacked any consistent set of guidelines which volunteer rescuers, rock climbers, and incoming rangers could follow. “It is my experience...that too often the ‘plan’ for handling such priority visitor protection activities has existed only in someone’s head and when they transfer out, this knowledge goes with them. It then falls upon the next man to essentially start from scratch, benefiting only from his own mistakes and experiences.”\(^\text{158}\) Less than twenty-four hours after Hickman handed his memo to the Valley District Ranger, Madsen

\(^\text{156}\) Ibid., 202-203.; Farabee, \textit{Death, Daring, and Disaster}, 271-272.


\(^\text{158}\) Steven D. Hickman to District Ranger, October 14, 1968, YOSAR office files.
fell to his death in the midst of an ill-planned and hastily contrived rescue effort, proving the ranger’s warning to be strangely prophetic.

Critiquing administrators’ apathy towards centralized rescue, Hickman framed his plan with the assertion that “the saving or safe-guarding of human life takes precedence over all other Park activities.” The first step towards accomplishing this goal, in Hickman’s view, was to clearly delegate responsibility for SAR operations among the most capable park personnel. Building on the recommendations in the 1959 NPS Mountaineering Policy, he wrote: “The most essential element of planning is a recognition of the need for qualified personnel... A team of strong, experienced, and well-trained mountaineers is the backbone of any rescue plan, and without these men, no plan will succeed.” Establishing a clear management structure for SAR operations, Hickman placed the Chief Ranger at the top of the chain of command as “the man in charge of the Protection Division... responsible to the Superintendent for all Visitor Protection activities.” He also designated the Assistant Chief Ranger as the immediate supervisor of the various District Rangers who would be responsible for overseeing operations within their respective zones of the park.159

Hickman stressed that a set of new job duties within the protection division would be necessary to formalize rescue procedures. The “Search and Rescue Officer” would “supervise the activities of the technical search and rescue team,” maintain rescue equipment caches around the park, organize training sessions, issue incident reports, and establish communications with outside rescue forces. In addition, the “Field Operation Leader” would be in charge of delegating duties as each rescue scenario demanded.

Hickman stressed that this person “must be capable of making sound judgments based on experience and a thorough working knowledge of both rock climbing and search and rescue techniques and equipment.” A trained rescue team would also be available at all times for response to emergencies. The “Primary Team Members,” which Hickman envisioned as being composed of rangers, helicopter operators, and fire control forces, would “function as the basic operational unit under technically adverse conditions and must be capable of carrying a rescue attempt to any extreme necessary if a life is at stake.” A “Support Team” consisting of at least six “men” (though women ultimately played a significant role) would “provide logistical support and non-technical assistance to the primary team.” Hickman also called for the maintenance of open channels of communication with members of the Mountain Rescue Association, a newly formed nationwide support network of professional and volunteer rescue teams that Yosemite’s fledgling rescue force had yet to join.\footnote{Hickman, “Search and Rescue Plan.”}

Up until this point, with the exception of brief references in the Superintendent’s Monthly Reports and scattered reports in the press, very little documentation of search and rescue operations had been preserved for future reference. To remedy this “information” problem, Hickman argued for the mandatory implementation of a standardized incident report form detailing what happened, where it happened, when it happened, to whom it happened, and most importantly, why it happened. Compiled information would be readily available and easily transmittable to rescue teams in the field through improved radio communications capabilities. Hickman also proposed a revamping of rescue training for the park’s ranger force. Rangers involved in visitor
protection operations would receive regular training in rock climbing techniques, scuba
diving, and helitack procedures. The acquisition and maintenance of a readily available
supply of the most up-to-date rock climbing and rescue equipment would also be a
necessity. Emphasizing the need to establish a rescue apparatus capable of enacting even
the most difficult climbing rescues, Hickman wrote, “Yosemite should have on hand
equipment adequate to effect an evacuation (from above or below) the middle of...El
Capitan.”\textsuperscript{161} The plan served as a clear indication to park administrators that an internally
managed set of specific rescue procedures would be needed to accommodate rapidly
changing patterns of recreation in the park.

A narrowly averted disaster a month later confirmed the need for the implementation
of Hickman’s plan and set the stage for the official incorporation of Camp 4 climbers into
the park’s protection apparatus. After two years and a number of false starts, Warren
Harding, accompanied by a young Galen Rowell, finally succeeded in ascending past the
massive overhanging arch donning the otherwise blank two thousand foot south face of
Half Dome. After six days of painfully slow climbing, the pair managed to ascend about
two hundred feet up the slabs above the arch, with Harding leading desperate, holdless
pitches using “bat hooks,” an aid climbing device of his own design that could be placed
temporarily in hastily hand-drilled holes too superficial for bolts. That evening, the
climbers hung in a shallow “pothole” from bolts in “bat tents,” another Harding
innovation which would, in principle, keep the climbers warm and dry even high on a big
wall in November. From this uncomfortable stance, the pair watched with guarded

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 4-7.
apprehension as clouds streamed into the Little Yosemite Valley below. Rowell described what followed:

midnight: awakened by raindrops...four a.m.: snowing...dawn: everything is white...our vertical wall is plastered with a layer of snow...as the temperature warms we witness a graphic demonstration of how the potholes were formed: they are the focal points for the drainage on the upper wall...both of us are soaked to the skin...we puncture holes in the floor of the Bat tents to let out water...we shiver and pray for sun.162

For three days Harding and Rowell hung in this tight spot, too cold to move, with their ropes and gear frozen in a tangled mass as a series of storms sent torrents of icy water rushing through their cramped pothole. On the third day Harding managed to reach Pete Thompson at ranger headquarters through a sporadically functioning two-way radio, which in Harding’s telling “went dead almost immediately after we had transmitted our Mayday call.”163 That night the climbers listened to a helicopter making passes over the wall but remained hunkered down and shivering, believing that a rescue could not be performed at night. But soon after, as Rowell recalled, “we hear a strange squawking...a light is coming down the wall...an angel with a radio, down jacket, and headlamp...a ranger?...chopper pilot?...no, Royal Robbins...guardian angel brings hot soup, dry jackets, gloves, and a lifeline to the summit.”164 Though hypothermic and slightly frostbitten, Harding and Rowell managed to jumar to the summit up Robbins’s rope where they were soon “ensconced in sleeping bags, sipping brandy in the moonlight.”165 Had it not been


for the preparedness of Pete Thompson and the ranger force, the availability of a fire
response helicopter from Sequoia-King Canyon National Park, and the presence of Royal
Robbins, perhaps the most capable big wall rescuer in the United States, the two climbers
would likely have not survived the ordeal.166

In 1968, rescue teams enacted fifty three major search and rescue operations in
Yosemite, amounting to nearly thirty percent of the approximately three hundred total
incidents over the previous twenty years.167 Given the complexity of many of these
rescues, the park’s ranger force could no longer rely solely on its own resourcefulness;
nor could administrators count on the Sierra Club to maintain its commitment to rescue in
this era of democratized recreation in which most accident victims had no relation
whatsoever to the club. Moreover, the National Park Service - increasingly under fire
from old allies in this period - could no longer impose its will in management decisions
as it had in the days of Mather and Albright. In the adversarial climate of the late 1960s,
administrators had neither the authority to restrict dangerous activities, or the ability to
keep up with rapid changes in the culture and practice of rock climbing and other
wilderness-oriented activities. Facing mounting accidents, administrators began
exploring alternative courses of action, the most significant being the establishment of an
internal rescue force staffed with the most capable rock climbers in Yosemite, even if
these climbing bums-turned-rescuers had been loitering in Camp 4 in defiance of park
authorities year after year for months at a time.

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165 Roper, Camp 4, 209.

166 Farabee, Death, Daring, and Disaster, 272-274.

167 YOSAR, tally of total rescues from 1948 to August 7, 1967, undated. YOSAR office files.
The incorporation of independent climbers into the park’s protection division indicated more than administrative concern over the technical deficiency of the ranger force; it represented a profound shift in the ordering of national park constituencies in the age of environmentalism. The Sierra Club, increasingly at odds with the Park Service over wilderness designations and development plans, remained conspicuously absent from the new arrangements being forged in Camp 4. The club’s growing emphasis on broader environmental issues, its distance from changes in Yosemite’s climbing culture, and the quiet disappearance of its volunteer rescue force in the late 1960s made room for unaffiliated climbers, backpackers, and other visitors to define for themselves how recreation should be managed in the park. In the wake of the controversial Mission 66 and the 1964 Wilderness Act, the Sierra Club, like the Wilderness Society in the interwar years, concerned itself with determining what activities should be excluded from a national park setting. In contrast, independent climbers and other user groups assumed a more active role in defining what recreational behaviors should be included as appropriate means to experience wilderness in parks. This pragmatic, visitor-oriented view of wilderness as recreational space proved comprehensible to the park-going public and conformed to the NPS’s historical mission to provide for the enjoyment of visitors.

The professionalization of search and rescue through the 1970s became the tool by which the National Park Service could accommodate these changing cultural perceptions of recreation and wilderness in Yosemite.
CHAPTER 3

CAMP 4 AND SAR CULTURE

In November of 1970, Assistant Valley District Ranger Pete Thompson, the park’s first “rescue specialist,” prepared a set of policy guidelines for the incorporation of independent rock climbers into Yosemite’s visitor protection division. In Thompson’s proposal, a group of twenty climbers would have permission to live full time in four designated campsites in Camp 4 (and one in Camp 12). The climbers would receive on-call wages as emergency hires - much like the park’s fire response team - on the condition that they remain available to perform search and rescue operations when needed. Under persistent pressure from Thompson, administrators agreed to formalize the arrangement in December of 1970. In the following spring crews erected a circle of tent cabins in the northwest corner of the campground where the climbing bums-turned-rescue staff would live for most of the year. In subsequent decades, the “rescue site” became the epicenter of the rock climbing universe and the point of origin for a number of technical procedures and administrative policies that revolutionized modern wilderness search and rescue in the national parks.

For years park rangers had called on climbers to assist with technical rescues on and around Yosemite’s cliffs, but the official hiring of Camp 4 climbing bums in 1970

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represented a significant cooperative effort that bound these frequently antagonistic constituencies under an official edict to provide for the safety of visitors. Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, incidents of disorderly (often criminal) behavior of climbers employed as rescuers persisted as an administrative nightmare for rangers, maintenance workers, law enforcement, and concessionaires. In spite of frequent clashes with authorities, these rogue park employees became crucial figures in the park’s protection apparatus, successfully performing thousands of search, rescue, and recovery operations. Rescue site climbers became integral to Yosemite Search and Rescue (YOSAR) – an internal rescue apparatus comprised of rangers, medics, climbers, and helicopter operators - innovated a number of rescue technologies, vastly improved the investigatory capabilities of the protection division, and devised wholly new methods of pulling stranded rock climbers from the vertical walls of the Valley. Over the course of the 1970s, rescue site climbers became not only the technical experts in conducting climbing-related rescues but also cultural liaisons between the centralized authority of the Park Service and a younger generation of individualistic Baby Boomers seeking to both preserve nature in the park and experience it as wilderness.

Until 1970, park officials did little to challenge the climbers’ ascendancy in Camp 4. At a time when the National Park Service was renovating many of the park’s drive-in campgrounds, setting up numbered campsites and actively discouraging the free-for-all auto camping practices of the prewar era, Camp 4 remained a haphazard collection of ragged tents and communal picnic tables where rock climbers and other “hard-to-classify and vaguely undesirable” visitors could park their cars anywhere and remain for as long as they wished. A few attempts by park authorities to instigate seven day camping limits
went unheeded and easily transgressed by resident climbers who simply left the park for a day or secreted into the woods to escape patrolling rangers. Climbers actually gained a measure of celebrity status among rangers who, though were often forced to break up parties and investigate shoplifting incidents and visitor complaints, largely avoided disciplining the unruly Camp 4 crowd. In one instance recounted by Chris Jones, an irate camper, after being berated by an intoxicated Warren Harding, summoned a ranger who, upon confronting the offending party, smiled and gushed, “Why, you’re Warren Harding, I’ve never met you.” The two shook hands and Harding staggered back to the campfire where “the party continued into the small hours.”

Camp 4’s quaint anti-authoritarianism little prepared the park’s ranger force for the widespread cultural upheaval that spilled over into Yosemite in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As an iconic symbol of wilderness and a counterpoint to the Cold War military-industrial complex, Yosemite became a flash point for the anti-establishment fervor gripping the nation’s youth culture in this period. Legions of young people congregating in San Francisco for the “Summer of Love” invariably made their way to Yosemite where they vented their frustration with “the establishment” by rebelling against the patriarchal airs of the National Park Service and flaunting the authority of the starched-suitied ranger force. Drug use became rampant, even among rock climbers who codified the hedonism of the changing times in their choice of names for new climbing routes. In guidebooks, this new generation of climbers inscribed hallucinogenic references such as “Tangerine Trip,” “Psychedelic Wall,” and “Magic Mushroom” to the now world famous granite walls surrounding the Valley. By the early 1970s, the individualistic counterculture, a

mainstream pop phenomenon since the mid-1960s, had not only filtered into the beat
intellectualism of the Camp 4 scene, it had also left its mark on the distinctive cultural
geography of the "Incomparable Valley."

In light of the changing cultural composition of visitors, administrators worried that
their "traditional...soft-sell law enforcement policy" had become ineffective in
maintaining order in the park. In June of 1970, Valley District Ranger James Olsen
expressed concern that the old system of issuing warnings to offenders before citing them
indicated "an attitude of weakness to the younger age group frequenting the park at an
accelerated rate." As a solution, Olsen suggested a number of changes to law
enforcement protocol with an emphasis on strict vehicle inspections. He instructed
rangers to refuse entrance to visitors whose automobiles failed to meet any one of a
number of obscure requirements in the California Vehicle Code. A visitor could be
turned back if their vehicle lacked fenders or an appropriate muffler; they could be cited
if their license plate was not illuminated or their brakes were not adequate, if the vehicle
had no windshield wipers, or lacked a rear-view mirror on the left side. Visitors could
even be denied entrance if their car's center of gravity had been raised or modified "so as
to unsafely affect its operation or stability." Olsen also stipulated that hitchhikers were to
be cited and transported out of the park immediately. Rangers were given the authority to
cite "out-of-bounds" campers, hikers with unleashed pets, or anyone operating motorized

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vehicles on trails. Any failure to comply with these regulations could, and often did, result in arrest.\textsuperscript{171}

Olsen’s plan to step up law enforcement, while an understandable response to rapid increases in crime and overcrowding, had the effect of further aggravating the large groups of “hippies” gathering in the park who felt that these measures were directed at them specifically. On July 4, 1970, tensions erupted as horse-mounted rangers confronted a contingent of approximately six hundred young people who had been defiantly camping out and conducting loud, drug infused parties in Stoneman Meadows over the holiday weekend. Ill-prepared for a full-scale riot, the over-anxious horse patrol charged haphazardly into the crowd. Chaos ensued. Rioters hunkered down behind bulwarks constructed from fallen trees and pelted rangers with rocks, bottles, camping equipment, and anything else they could find. Rangers were forced to retreat. The confrontation then devolved into a tense standoff which lasted for the next two days until reinforcements arrived from the Mariposa County Sheriff’s Department. Over two hundred rioters were arrested in the melee, shattering any illusions that the narrow corridor of the Yosemite Valley was or ever could be a true sanctuary from the stresses of modernity. As Alfred Runte observes, “even the national parks...were not invulnerable to urban tensions and social problems.”\textsuperscript{172}

While Camp 4’s climbing bums had little to do with the Fourth of July riots, park officials associated their disheveled appearances, vagrant lifestyles, and casual disregard for authority with the countercultural tendencies at the root of this blemish on the

\textsuperscript{171} James A. Olsen to District Rangers, June 17, 1970, Yosemite Central Files, Law Enforcement.

\textsuperscript{172} Alfred Runte, \textit{Yosemite: The Embattled Wilderness} (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 202.
administrative history of the park. In an effort to provide structure in camping accommodations and avoid a repeat of Stoneman Meadows, administrators stepped up their “renovation” of Camp 4, a project that had been initiated in fits and starts since a flood closed the campground temporarily in the winter of 1969. By the fall of 1970, in addition to closing the upper forested part of the campground (the climbers’ favorite section) and enforcing length-of-stay limits, park authorities established designated sites complete with fire pits and chained down picnic tables, a parking lot, and most importantly a fee collection booth. At three dollars a night, the camping fee proved to be a strain on resident climbing bums, many of whom had been scraping by in the Valley on little or no income for several months out of each year. Even more galling to climbers, administrators renamed the campground “Sunnyside,” apparently as a means to erase any lingering associations with the Camp 4 climbing bum lifestyle. Royal Robbins famously mourned these changes as the end of “laissez faire camping” while another climber responded with the simple lament of “freedom lost.” Galen Rowell regarded this moment as the closing of a significant era of exploration in the history of climbing. With the renovations occurring in Camp 4, Rowell expressed a lament that “the creaking door suddenly closed on the Golden Age of Yosemite.”

This sense of loss seemed counter-intuitive. By 1970, Yvon Chouinard and other adamant defenders of the cliquish, laissez faire Yosemite climbing scene of the 1950s and 1960s had transformed their small-scale entrepreneurial efforts – through which they sold


homemade gear to each other in order to afford climbing trips - into globally recognized names in the manufacture and sales of some of the best climbing equipment on the market. By 1970, Chouinard and Tom Frost had turned their garage-operated Chouinard Equipment Inc. into the most respected brand in the burgeoning climbing industry. Royal Robbins even endorsed a brand of climbing boots by the late 1960s. He also published a rock climbing manual, *Basic Rockcraft*, in 1971 and had begun operating his own climbing school near Lake Tahoe through which he hoped to educate neophyte climbers to appropriate standards of style and risk in climbing.\(^{175}\)

This participation in the marketplace, which climbers professed to reject, made sense when considering Robbins's efforts to communicate the Yosemite style to new climbers. In this era of fragmented markets and disconnected recreational constituencies, the commercial marketplace became the most effective means to pass on the technological hierarchies, philosophies, and social values of Yosemite climbing to an increasingly affluent, mobile, and environmentally-enlightened middle class population seeking new means to experience nature in their public lands. For many elite Yosemite climbers, the popularization of their sport seemed inevitable, and only by meshing their corporate ideologies with the messages of the burgeoning environmental movement did they believe they could maintain a semblance of the adventure and risk they associated with the early years of Yosemite's rock climbing.

Yosemite's climbing bums-turned-businessmen little comprehended the enthusiasm with which American consumers in the age of environmentalism embraced the elitist environmental standards built into the climbing lifestyle. In the context of the social

upheaval, rampant individualism, and unprecedented affluence of the late 1960s and early 1970s, middle class Americans found much to support in the seemingly contradictory promises of what environmental historians have labeled “quality-of-life environmentalism.” Inspired by bestselling books including Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* and Stewart Udall’s *The Quiet Crisis*, concerned citizens organized into local and nationwide environmental groups in record numbers to speak out against the destructive consequences of industrial progress. At the same time environmentally-aware Americans emphatically embraced the technological conveniences, financial security, and high standard of living industrialization had made possible. Quality-of-life environmentalists desired the benefits of modernity without the destructive environmental consequences. These consumer-environmentalists did not reject modernity but instead proposed a new modern experience in which the individual’s opportunity to engage with wild nature through recreation remained a fundamental right.  

Keeping with this paradoxical marriage of social responsibility and individual gratification, Americans, especially active Baby Boomers with the money to invest in the specialized products and the time to learn the rudimentary techniques, regarded the wilderness experience to be had by rock climbing, backpacking, or other outdoor pursuits as an integral criterion of improved quality of life. The expanding constituency of these rucksack-toting park supporters in the 1970s regarded themselves as morally entitled to the intensely personalized experience with wild nature celebrated in the wilderness.

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movement, and in the commercial activities of Yosemite rock climbers. The tensions developing between the notion of individual freedom to experience wilderness and an often blatantly elitist sense of social responsibility to conform to communally policed standards of appropriate wilderness appreciation played out in high relief among the dust, boulders, and communal picnic tables of Camp 4.

Contrary to the nostalgia of older climbers, Yosemite rock climbing underwent a renaissance in subsequent decades as a generation of younger climbers including Jim Bridwell, John Long, Ron Kauk, John Bachar, Peter Croft, Lynn Hill, and others put down roots in the newly refurbished Sunnyside campground. These "yogurt-eating health food faddists," as Royal Robbins labeled them, pushed the boundaries of Valley climbing to levels of difficulty and risk that the "crew cut climbers of the 1950s" could scarcely have imagined. "The terror barriers are down," Robbins declared in 1970, "the big walls not so fearsome." Not only were the new Yosemite regulars scampering up terrifyingly difficult free climbs all over the park, sometimes even without the security of ropes, hundreds of unknown climbers from all over the world were completing successful, lighting-fast ascents of big wall routes that only five years earlier had been the most difficult rock climbs ever completed. The buzz that surrounded the Yosemite climbing scene in this period also attracted thousands of younger neophyte climbers who created new recreational expectations for Yosemite and new concerns for veteran Camp 4 climbers, the ranger force, and park administrators.¹⁷⁷

Not surprisingly, the surge in climbing activities brought about a corresponding spike in serious accidents. Through cooperative rescues, the NPS hoped to develop a

relationship with the climbing community that would facilitate open channels of communication over appropriate standards of risk and safety in climbing. In this sense, administrators believed, the creation of the rescue site, in addition to filling a gap in the technical capabilities of the ranger force, could also serve as a vital link between park authorities and a growing constituency of regular and visiting Yosemite climbers. Still, relations remained strained between park rangers and rock climbers, many of whom resented the Park Service's ongoing renovation of Camp 4. In a November 1970 column for *Summit*, a popular California-based climbing periodical, Royal Robbins announced to readers the details of the Park Service's plans to allow twenty climbers to live for free on the rescue site. Robbins's pretense of neutrality did little to mask his underlying sarcasm: "This seems a marvelous solution to indigent climber's problem of camping fees in the Valley," he wrote, "at least for the lucky twenty." ¹⁷⁸

While Robbins largely resigned himself to the reality that the "halcyon days" of Yosemite rock climbing had run their course, the American Alpine Club (AAC), in an attempt to represent a broader constituency of recreational climbers, offered a harsher critique of the newly formalized camping arrangements in Camp 4. In a letter to NPS Deputy Director Harthon Bill, AAC secretary James McCarthy argued that the service's efforts to "allow the maximum usage by the largest number of the public" by enforcing length-of-stay limits in Camp 4 limited opportunities for climbers who often required more than seven days to prepare for and complete the Valley's famous big wall climbs. Yosemite, McCarthy noted, had "become something of an international mecca for climbers." Climbers from around the world were zeroing in on the famous Valley which

¹⁷⁸ Robbins, "Yosemite Notes," 33.
McCarthy called “a unique area for which the most natural use is climbing.” Unlike the Sierra Club, which in the late 1960s increasingly shied away from advocating recreation of any sort (indeed the term had become something of a bad word in preservationist circles), the AAC had no qualms about advancing a strict recreational hierarchy in which rock climbers and other visitors engaging in wilderness-oriented activities deserved preferential treatment over the majority of tourists who stayed only for a short time and rarely distanced themselves from the roads, hotels, restaurants, and shops lining the Valley floor. “I am sure that I don’t have to spell it out for you,” McCarthy wrote to Bill, “that to adequately use and acclimatize to the conditions of the Park, it is necessary for climbers to spend extended periods of time there.”

In McCarthy’s view, the rescue site did little to mitigate a “series of conflicts between climbers and the Park Service” which he perceived as stemming from new camping limits and fee collections in the new Sunnyside camp. As a solution to this “sticky wicket,” McCarthy proposed organizing a separate climbers’ camp to be administered by the Park Service but developed, maintained, and operated by the AAC. “Such an arrangement would solve a great many problems,” he explained. “The Superintendent of the Park would be released from the burden of constantly policing the campgrounds where climbers tend to congregate.” McCarthy further suggested that an “unobtrusive” climbers’ campground, closed to the non-climbing public, would be “a great boon to American climbers as well as to those foreign climbers who have been attracted to Yosemite.” The AAC, assuming a role as the representative body for an increasingly disjointed constituency of climbers, sent veteran mountaineer Raffi Bedayn to Yosemite

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to meet with administrators regarding this proposal to provided alternative camping arrangements for rock climbers in Camp 4.\textsuperscript{180}

Pete Thompson welcomed the meeting with Bedayn, who had in the 1930s participated in a number of groundbreaking climbs in Yosemite and the high Sierra with Dave Brower, Richard Leonard, and other Sierra Club rock pioneers. Yet Thompson also expressed frustration with McCarthy's characterization of the strained relationship between the NPS and rock climbers in this period. Instead, he insisted that "we are enjoying the best climber-Park Service relationship that has ever been." While agreeing that special arrangements should be made for rock climbers not employed on the rescue site, Thompson felt that the AAC would not be an appropriate mediator between recreational climbers and park officials: "The AAC, an old, very conservative organization with but 900 or so members, is not in the best position to knowledgeably represent 5000 or so long-haired and hip rock climbers," he concluded.\textsuperscript{181} Thompson's response was indicative of the re-organization of park constituencies in this period. With the Sierra Club reluctant to outwardly support its traditional recreational constituents, the Wilderness Society and other conservation groups largely preoccupied with natural resource protection, and the gentrified AAC increasingly out of touch with the new generation of wilderness enthusiasts, the fragmented constituency of rock climbers passing through Yosemite in this period had little organized representation in forging a working relationship with the Park Service.\textsuperscript{182}

\textsuperscript{180} Ibid.

Thompson’s tireless campaigning to assert the success of the rescue site, more so than any other factor, ultimately gave climbers a voice in park politics. Defiantly referring to the renovated Sunnyside as “Camp 4” in correspondence to park authorities, Thompson recommended a second overhaul of the camp to render it more suitable for independent rock climbers, even those not employed as rescuers. He suggested constructing showers, secure lockers, a climber registration booth, and living quarters for “rescue rangers” who would anchor the campground and serve as liaisons between climbers and NPS administrators. This official “climber’s camp” would be administered as a walk-in only site and the number of campsites would be halved. (The current fifty-two sites had become “an ecological disaster,” according to Thompson). Thompson also recommended lowering the camping fee for climbers and establishing an identification system for rescue site hires, who he referred to as “Camp 4 residents.”

Thompson’s efforts proved influential in swaying park administrators anxious to explore new avenues of support for park management plans, especially in light of the increasingly adversarial position of the Sierra Club and other preservationist groups. For the National Park Service, an accommodating stance on rock climbing and other wilderness-oriented activities seemed a pragmatic solution to the ever-present problem of maintaining the park “in a purely natural state yet available for those who wish to take the time and vigor to visit the wonders.” Park Service officials in Washington and the majority of visitors through this period for the most part agreed with administrators’

182 For a critique of the ineffectiveness of the AAC in representing climbers from a climber’s point of view see Chris Jones, “Who Needs the AAC?” in The Best of Ascent: Twenty Five Years of the Mountaineering Experience, Steve Roper and Allen Steck, eds. (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1993), 203-209.

support for wilderness-oriented forms of recreation, including rock climbing, which did not necessitate the large-scale infrastructural development that preservationists in this period so adamantly rejected. As a means to accommodate rock climbers, in the spring of 1972, administrators agreed to reserve a portion of Camp 4 as a walk-in climbers’ campground. Park officials reduced the fee from three dollars a night to fifty cents and allowed climbers with plans to undertake multi-day ascents on the big walls of the Valley to apply for permission to remain in Camp 4 beyond the seven day limit. Superintendent Lynn Thompson, in his annual report for 1972, confidently declared that “this experiment worked very well and will be continued.”

Even as the culture of Camp 4 persisted as a thorn in the side of NPS administrators, park officials gradually become more supportive of climbing as an appropriate form of recreation in Yosemite. A post-Wilderness Act policy statement described climbing as among those activities that could be “accommodated without material alteration or disturbance of environmental characteristics or the introduction of undue artificiality into a natural environment.” In 1969, the Yosemite Park and Curry Company (YPCC) cited the NPS’s recreation policy as rationale for establishing a Yosemite Mountaineering School and Guide Service in the park. Emphasizing Yosemite’s history as the birthplace of modern American rock climbing techniques, the YPCC argued that a mountaineering school would facilitate the communication of the “Yosemite style” to new climbers while providing “an opportunity for the park visitor to learn basic backcountry safety techniques as well as a chance to enjoy the high mountain environment under the

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guidance of a trained mountaineer. In subsequent years, the ubiquitous “Go Climb a Rock” t-shirt worn by participants in the Yosemite mountaineering school indicated that the NPS not only tolerated climbing, it also actively promoted the sport as a legitimate form of wilderness recreation in the park.

The co-evolution of rock climbing and rescue as integral components of the wilderness experience in Yosemite was not without controversy. In the fall of 1970, Warren Harding, Camp 4’s resident renegade, once again brought national attention to rock climbing in the Yosemite Valley with his audacious ascent of the blank, overhanging “Wall of Early Morning Light” on the southeast face of El Capitan. Preparing for twelve days on the wall, Harding and his partner Dean Caldwell ended up bivouacking through a series of storms and nailing bolt ladders up long sections of blank granite, reaching the summit after an incredible twenty seven consecutive days. As with the earlier ascent of the Nose, the climb garnered attention from tourists, the Park Service, and the national media. Attempting to put a stop to the mounting spectacle (though inadvertently aggravating it) Park Service officials organized a daring rescue involving a contingent of Camp 4 climbers and an Army helicopter. Pete Thompson described his reasoning for initiating the rescue, even though it was not clear that Harding and Caldwell felt they were in need of assistance: “They had been up for many days longer than anyone had ever been on a wall before, their rations should have been critically short, and they reported that their feet were numb, their gear got wet when it rained, and that

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they were suffering from open sores brought on through lying in wet bags during the first big storm. They were ten days overdue and had 1600 feet to go!\textsuperscript{186}

Park officials on the ground had difficulty discerning communications from the climbers. Harding had been dropping notes in film canisters indicating that they were fine and did not need to be rescued, however, Caldwell had responded to rangers shouting through a bullhorn that a rappel to the ground would be impossible and that “we know that our asses are in a sling.” Thompson questioned whether this vague reference meant that the climbers were indeed in serious trouble or that Caldwell “was merely referring to his belay seat.” Thompson concluded that the men were “in unknown psychological condition” and, given that forecasters were predicting yet another winter storm, the most logical course of action would be to initiate a rescue.\textsuperscript{187}

Concerned that weather conditions would prohibit a helicopter from shuttling supplies to the summit, Thompson mobilized climbers in Camp 4 to haul supplies to the summit on foot. (Climbers were also recruited by film crews to carry news equipment to the summit; a task for which they were paid handsomely). In the afternoon of November 11, after all rescue equipment had been assembled, a would-be rescuer rappelled down to the ledge where Harding and Caldwell were bivouacked. To the delight of the news media, Harding angrily refused the rescue and determined that he and Caldwell would continue climbing the next morning. On the twelfth, the dire weather predictions proved false; the sky cleared and “snowplumes blew from the peaks to the east while a great debate raged

\textsuperscript{187} Ibid.
on the summit,” as Thompson later recalled. Seven days later, the climbers finally emerged onto the summit to meet the paparazzi.\textsuperscript{188}

A photograph of Harding’s grizzled, devilish face coming over the lip on the twenty-seventh day made a striking image in the national media. The San Francisco Chronicle called the climb “a heroic achievement in these days when there is precious little adventure to be found anywhere.”\textsuperscript{189} Harding and Caldwell later made the rounds of late night talk shows, appearing on the “Merv Griffioth Show” and various sports programs including an interview with Howard Cosell on the ABC network’s “Wide World of Sports.”\textsuperscript{190} While Harding and Caldwell were hailed as heroes in the press, the conspicuous rescue fiasco revealed the delicate position visitor protection occupied in an emerging culture that associated self-reliance and risk with the national park experience. Rescue was both a desperately needed component of park management and a potential impediment to the national park experience for ambitious park users seeking an individualized adventure. Technical rescues could also be distractions for tourists seeking quiet contemplation in a natural setting. In subsequent decades, search and rescue served as the gauge by which the boundaries of the wilderness experience could be drawn and administered by the Park Service.

Further complicating the issue, a number of climbers in Camp 4 objected to Harding’s and Caldwell’s copious use of permanent expansion bolts as an affront to the strict

\textsuperscript{188} Ibid.


technological imperative embedded in the Yosemite style. For Royal Robbins, Yvon Chouinard, and others, Yosemite’s walls provided an interaction with nature that could be all too easily compromised by an over-reliance on technology. If bolts were acceptable in all situations, anyone could force their way up any climb with no regard for the climbable contours of the rock. This group of climbers, who an embittered Harding later labeled “the Valley Christians,” viewed rock climbing in Yosemite as an activity to be conducted in solitude through muscular activity and an intellectual appreciation for the non-human elements of the landscape: in essence, climbing was to be a wilderness experience, accessible only to those with the requisite skills to function within the set of strict (yet arbitrary) technological parameters that elite climbers had been devising around the picnic tables of Camp 4 for years.

Harding was quick to pounce on the blatant elitism underlying such pronouncements. Resurrecting an often-repeated argument of the early Park Service, Harding wrote, “Theoretically, the use and preservation of our mountain areas would seem to depend on the vote of the masses. How, then, can we expect the support of the average citizen in conservation if he is told the mountains are too good for him, that they should be reserved for a minority of self-styled “good-guys?” By arguing over the role of technology in climbing and the democratization of their sport in the familiar terms of conservation, Harding, Robbins, Chouinard, and others exhibited the fundamental connection between recreation and popular conceptions of wilderness that persisted into the modern national

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193 Harding, “Reflections of a Broken-Down Climber,” 34.
parks movement. Rather than existing as oppositional motives - preservation as an altruistic philosophy on a higher plane than use, and recreation as a profane embodiment of a corrupting consumer influence – for administrators, rock climbers, and other park enthusiasts, recreation remained the only practical means by which the value of preservation could be comprehended. Defining the terms of use - specifically the behaviors, philosophies, and technologies constituting appropriate recreation - became the focus of rock climbers, wilderness enthusiasts, and national park administrators in this period of rising environmental consciousness and skyrocketing participation in wilderness-oriented outdoor activities.

As a vehicle for the promotion of an environmentally responsible recreational ethic, Chouinard Equipment Inc. embodied an elitist moral economy in the commercial outdoor recreation industry. Chouinard and Frost’s 1972 *Chouinard Equipment Catalogue* promoted an elitist formula of physical skill and technological restraint in the outdoor experience as prerequisite for participation in rock climbing. In the catalogue, Chouinard and Frost struggled to balance the enabling and despoiling potentials of new innovations in climbing technology. They recognized both the liberating qualities of technology and the ease in which new equipment could be misapplied. In the introduction Chouinard expressed the values to be gained by limiting reliance on technology in the climbing experience. “The fewer gadgets between the climber and the climb, the greater is the chance to attain the desired communication with oneself – and nature,” he wrote. While clearly expressing an aversion to technology as a hindrance to the climbing experience, the catalogue was ultimately an advertisement for “gadgets” needed to climb rocks. For Chouinard and Frost, the solution to this apparent contradiction lay not in the
abandonment of technology altogether but through the promotion of new, highly specialized equipment that enhanced the physicality of the climbing experience while leaving no permanent markings on the rock.  

Deliberately minimalist in design and oriented towards the most skilled climbers, "clean climbing" technology enabled an even closer contact to the climbing landscape. Royal Robbins, in a 1967 article for *Summit*, advocated the use of "nuts," a British innovation from the mid 1960s originally consisting of a typical machine nut attached to a sling. As alternatives to pitons, which had to be forcefully pounded into cracks in the rock with a hammer, Chouinard's stoppers and hexentrics, his own innovation of the crude British nuts, could be eased with the fingers into cracks and other contours of the rock face without damaging the rock. Although this new equipment could stop falls as effectively as pitons, clean climbing technology required a significantly more advanced knowledge of the intricate features of the rock.  

Climber Doug Robinson, in an essay in the 1972 catalogue made it clear that the use of nuts relegated climbing to an activity for an elite few: "Pitons have been a great equalizer in American climbing," he asserted. "By liberally using them it was possible to get in over one's head, and by more liberally using them, to get out again. But every climb is not for every climber; the ultimate climbs are not democratic." With its elitist connotations, Robinson's essay reiterated the social hierarchy of Yosemite climbing as an integral aspect of the moral economy developing within the specialty outdoor recreation industry.  

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From the Search and Rescue Officer to the Chief Ranger to the Director of the Western Region, NPS officials supported the environmental aspects of clean climbing and began encouraging climbers to discontinue the use of crack-destroying pitons in favor of less-invasive nuts and hexentrics. This communication between the commercial climbing industry and the NPS highlighted the shifting constituencies within the national parks movement in this period. These efforts also continued beyond the cliquish dialogue of climbing. Through the late 1960s and early 1970s, backpacking emerged as the most popular means to experience wilderness in Yosemite and other national parks. This widespread appeal of wilderness recreation signaled to long-time backpackers, leaders in the conservation movement, and NPS officials that park goers might “love the wilderness to death.” Growing numbers of backcountry hikers were creating havoc in Yosemite and other popular destinations; backpackers polluted campsites with trash and human waste; they scavenged for firewood in fragile alpine regions where trees were scarce; they trampled vegetation; and in many cases they marred the psychic impact of the wilderness experience for each other by their mere presence.197

In response, administrators in Yosemite implemented a wilderness management plan in 1972 which included a mandatory backcountry permit process. Whereas in the relatively small climbing community, standards and ethics could be communicated rather effectively through advertising and peer pressure, backpacking attracted a far larger constituency that did not follow such ethics as uniformly. While limiting the individual freedom of wilderness recreation by requiring backcountry users to camp in designated

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197 Roderick Nash, Wilderness and the American Mind.
sites, avoid campfires, and show permits to patrolling rangers, regulatory policies also allowed the NPS to avoid what environmental critic Garret Hardin had called “the tragedy of the commons.” If every individual exercised their freedom to maximize their personal gain, Hardin argued, they would invariably lessen the utility of the environment for all others including themselves since every environment has limits.198 The notion of a human “carrying capacity” informed wilderness management policies in the national parks and elsewhere through this period, serving as one administrative means to bridge the contentious preservation/use divide in park politics.199

Search and rescue functioned as the linchpin holding this together. Given the increasing popularity of wilderness-oriented activities and the unprecedented volume of complicated and dangerous rescues this trend encouraged, emergency response capabilities became ever more critical. In fact, the institutionalization of search and rescue became essential to the NPS’s review of potential wilderness areas in the parks as stipulated by the 1964 Wilderness Act. The authors of a report for the National Parks Centennial Commission in 1973 contended that managing the parks as wilderness would present “a completely new set of philosophical problems and arguments on access which compound the basic problems of administration.” Basing their analysis on recreation and the assumption that “parks are for people,” even considering the wilderness bill’s emphasis on limited access and ecological protection, the drafters determined that the most problematic administrative issue raised by the implementation of the act would be visitor safety and the organization of a search and rescue infrastructure. The commission

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observed that “There are those who feel that the Wilderness user goes into the
backcountry at his own risk and that his safety need not be a concern of the Service nor
the public at large.” However, as the drafters ultimately concluded, “In our society, the
safety of a person cannot be ignored. Legally, since the national parks are federal
property, the National Park Service cannot abdicate its responsibility to protect the
public.” Accommodation through rescue became the administrative framework through
which the NPS interpreted new wilderness legislation.\textsuperscript{200}

The commission argued that the new generation of wilderness users visiting the
national parks would have to be educated in regards to the safety requirements of
backcountry travel and other forms of wilderness recreation. However, even with safety
controls, certification programs, and guide services, the commission found that “a
manpower rescue system will have to be available to rescue those who have not returned
from wilderness areas when scheduled to do so.”\textsuperscript{201} As a response to the perceived
dangers of allowing visitors to venture into undeveloped terrain, the creation of a rescue
force seemed the most pragmatic means for administrators to accommodate wilderness
recreation. Guide services, registration policies, and education programs did not
guarantee the safe, responsible behavior of wilderness users; in fact, reliance on such
policies caused even greater concerns by removing safety standards from the exclusive
control of the NPS and placing it on independent, often untrustworthy visitors. The
formalization of YOSAR over the course of the 1970s exposed this apprehension and

\textsuperscript{200} National Parks Centennial Commission, \textit{Preserving a Heritage: Final Report to the President and
118-121.

\textsuperscript{201} Ibid., 120.
provided the foundation for an accommodating policy towards rock climbing and other potentially dangerous forms of wilderness recreation.

Park officials could not conceivably accommodate wilderness recreation, nor could they endorse independent climbing and the operation of the mountaineering school without the quick-response capabilities of the rescue site hires. In 1972, YOSAR responded to 102 documented incidents, a high proportion of which would likely have resulted in the death of the victim had the park's protection division not maintained a cadre of physically capable expert climbers in Camp 4. Rescue site hires were, of course, most effective in performing climbing rescues which comprised anywhere from fifteen to twenty-five percent of the total emergencies annually. On September 22, 1972, a team of twenty-two park rangers and climbers performed an evacuation from the face of El Capitan that park Superintendent Lynn Thompson described as "the most spectacular and hazardous rescue ever attempted." That morning at sunrise, 600 feet below the rim on the Nose route, climber Neal Olsen dislodged an enormous granite boulder which toppled backwards, crushing his right leg badly. Ranger coordinated from above as five rescue site climbers rappelled to the ledge where Olsen lay anchored to the wall. Unable to raise the injured climber due to the massive overhangs between his position and the summit, the rescue team scrambled to obtain enough climbing rope to lower Olsen the daunting 1,800 feet down to the Valley floor.

Lloyd Price and rescue site hire John Dill began the task of knotting together more than 7,000 feet of yachting rope that had been flown in that morning by helicopter from San Diego. (An arson fire had recently destroyed the rescue cache where YOSAR had

kept most of its long ropes.) After protecting the exposed knots with water bottles which had to be cut and then duct-taped in place along the rope, Dill and Price lowered two lengths of 3,000 foot rope to the ledge. Rescue site “guru,” and the best climber in Camp 4 at that time, Jim Bridwell, accompanied Olsen’s litter as the remaining climbers at the accident site lowered them “very delicately...through a simple braking system” until they reached the ground approximately an hour and a half later. As the longest single rope lowering ever completed, the rescue received considerable attention in the media. Thompson described the operation as “entirely professional, and carried out with expediency despite the fact that it was a step into the unknown.”\footnote{Pete Thompson, “Search and Rescue Incident Report,” September 22, 1971, YOSE SAR files, 1971.} The climbers involved later received a unit award for excellence of service from the Department of Interior.\footnote{Charles R. “Butch” Farabee, Jr., Death, Daring, and Disaster: Search and Rescue in the National Parks, revised edition (Lanham: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2005), 305, 306.} Following this unprecedented rescue, few administrators in positions of power questioned the value of maintaining the rescue site in Camp 4, even as the anti-authoritarian tendencies embedded in the culture of Camp 4 created a persistent human resources nightmare for park authorities.

While Thompson had cast the rescue team as “Camp 4 residents,” presumably as a way to give legitimacy to the rescue site, these full-time climbers continued to pride themselves as “climbing bums” and subverted NFS authority whenever the opportunity presented itself. In one instance, Jim Bridwell and a handful of rescue site climbers secreted into an unlocked maintenance shed near Camp 4 where, on a Mission Impossible-style undertaking, they made off with an extension cord. They then “purloined the Park electricity,” running the extension chord from the camp restroom to
Bridwell’s tent on the rescue site where they “hosted an almost continuous party, playing Jimi Hendrix, Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones.”

Bridwell, the ringleader of the rescue site through the 1970s, had arrived in Yosemite in 1964 as a wide-eyed seventeen year-old lacking experience or even a pair of proper climbing shoes. By 1970, after being taken under the wing of physically gifted climbers Layton Kor and Frank Sacherer, Bridwell gained a reputation as the strongest free climber in the Valley. Glen Denny described Bridwell’s unusual training regime for which he “designed specialized exercise machines that raised climbing performance to new heights... His campsite became an outdoor gym,” as Denny recalled. More than a decade younger than Robbins, Chouinard, and other golden age climbers, Bridwell bridged the generation gap in Camp 4. He became a mentor for younger climbers in the Valley through the early 1970s. Meeting the tanned and toned Bridwell for the first time in 1970, a teenaged John Long, who in the next decade made his own significant mark in Yosemite climbing, rattled off a list of myths he had picked up around the picnic tables of Camp 4: “He told me he'd heard I did sets of a hundred pull-ups, tore three phone books in half at once and pulled a stop sign out of cement to throw at a car that wouldn't pick me up hitchhiking,” Bridwell recalled.

Such rumors of mythic feats reinforced Bridwell’s stature in Camp 4. With his wild curling hair and drooping mustache reminiscent of Dennis Hopper in Easy Rider, Bridwell set himself apart from the clean-shaven, uniformed rangers who relied on his

207 Ibid.
expertise in hundreds of search, rescue, and recovery operations during his tenure in Camp 4. As the central figure of the rescue site - which at that time housed the best climbers in Yosemite – the bell-bottom-clad Bridwell exuded a smug independence that was representative of both the rescue site climbers and the parade of Camp 4 transients passing through Yosemite in this period. At first, administrators maintained a favorable opinion of the rescue site and its “non-traditional” human element. This budding relationship with climbers represented a concerted effort on the part of administrators to adjust to the changing times and refashion the Park Service with a more contemporary image. In 1972, Superintendent Lynn Thompson heralded this effort by announcing that the park had hired its first “summer ranger with shoulder length hair.” Similarly, in an attempt to build rapport with climbers in Camp 4, ranger Mead Hargis submitted a letter to the editor for a 1973 issue of Summit offering, in the vernacular of the day, to “rap” with anyone concerned with camping arrangements in Camp 4 or any other “climbing-related happenings in Yosemite.”

These attempts to reach out to the Camp 4 counterculture did little to inspire climbers to conform to the strict standards of behavior park authorities expected. In February of 1974, in response to “a myriad of concerns” from campers, maintenance workers, concessionaires, law enforcement officials, and the newly established natural resources division, Valley District Ranger James Brady issued a memorandum to all “Camp 4 users” that park authorities would begin clamping down on vagrancy and misbehavior in the walk-in camp. Brady cited a number of problems including out-of bounds camping,

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littering, and the doubling up of campsites: “Most distressing was the lack of camping manners and environmental sensitivity,” he wrote. “Dirty unattended camps, which continually blocked the site for other visitors, misuse of the adjacent service station facilities, scarfing in the lodge cafeteria, ‘rip-offs’ within the camp itself, hassles over quiet hours, and disorderly conduct complaints were all part of the ‘Camp 4’ scene during the past few summers,” according to Brady. As a solution to these persistent problems, he proposed, once again, that mandatory camping registration, nightly fees, designated sites, and length-of-stay requirements (seven days in the summer and fourteen in the off-season) would be strictly enforced.\footnote{James Brady to Sunnyside “Camp 4” users, re: “Management of Sunnyside Campground,” February 25, 1974, YOSAR office files; Brady also published an editorial in \textit{Summit} repeating many of his concerns to the larger climbing community. James Brady, “Open Letter to Yosemite Climbers,” \textit{Summit}, 20 (March 1974): 1.}

It was also apparent to Brady that the rescue site had become the centerpiece of the entire “Camp 4 scene.” Jim Bridwell, Eric Beck, John Long, and other rescue climbers had indeed became cultural figureheads for visiting climbers seeking to participate in the now world famous Yosemite climbing bum lifestyle. Beck, one of the most notoriously impoverished climbers since the mid-1960s, celebrated the transcendent upending of class-lines the climbing bum lifestyle represented: “At either end of the social spectrum there lies a leisure class,” he remarked. Beck, like most climbers in Camp 4, little understood the realities of less voluntary forms of poverty.\footnote{Jones, \textit{Climbing in North America}, 330.} John Long best encapsulated the romanticism of Camp 4, writing, “Yosemite is the homeless and the brave, gray granite monoliths and Jeffrey Pines, lush meadows and farting tour busses, a dime-bag of bunk weed and a twelve pack of Lucky Lager, 10,000 campfires and twice
as many tourists." For rangers, "Camp 4 was the biggest Babylon of rogues in California, full of ‘no-counts, grifters, dare-devils, and punks,’” Long wrote, “But had you pasted the same punks up on El Capitan, they were dreamers and heroes and even the rangers couldn’t argue the fact.” Such attitudes generated concern among short-handed administrators who had grown increasingly dependent on the manpower and technical capabilities of the Camp 4 rescue team.

In comparison to their relative infrequency through the 1960s, serious climbing accidents became epidemic by 1973. Out of total of eighty seven search, rescue, or recovery operations that year, more than two dozen involved rock climbing or required rock climbing techniques to carry out. Of these incidents, an unprecedented eleven had resulted in death. The majority of these tragedies stemmed from carelessness on the part of inexperienced rock scramblers or novice technical climbers who ventured onto terrain for which they were unprepared. In one instance, a group of four teenagers were ascending difficult slabs above Sunnyside Bench when their leader slipped and fell. He plunged, “twisting in mid air,” as witnesses later reported, one to two hundred feet down to the talus slope below. When rescuers arrived, they found that the victim had suffered multiple fractures and massive internal trauma. With the severity of these injuries, the rescue team was unable to save the young man’s life. Pete Thompson called the incident “a ridiculous death” upon discovering that the group apparently “had a clothesline along, but they were not even using that!”

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Even “respectable and fairly experienced” climbers were not immune to poor judgment. In an article for *Summit* in June of 1973, Thompson described, in detail, four climbing deaths that had occurred within a span of only a few weeks. In one instance a climber had drowned while attempting to cross a swollen Bridalveil Creek after completing a nearby climb. Two climbers died from falls after failing to set proper rappel anchors. A fourth died on a foolish solo climb of the Steck-Salathe route on Sentinel Rock when he relied on a fragile 3/8 inch rope tied into his primary line to stop a fall. He fell, and the knot “burned through” the rope, sending the nineteen year old plummeting over one thousand feet to his death on the ledges at the base of the cliff. In light of these mishaps, Thompson implored climbers to be “good mountaineers...who know their limitations, and the technical, designed, limitations of their equipment.”

Despite warning signs, he had little confidence that such accidents would taper off.

“When will these absurd, outrageous, and mind boggling wastes of lives cease?” he asked. Directly addressing the cost of continuing to accommodate climbing and other dangerous activities, Thompson answered his own question: “Obviously, never. Their frequency may just be a function of numbers. Camp IV this spring is full of inexperienced, ill prepared, or rankly unqualified, overly ego-involved people with huge aspirations. By anyone’s measuring stick, these past few weeks have been the grimmest in Yosemite’s rock climbing history.”

Thompson’s previous optimism and his perception of the rescue site as the saving grace of wilderness recreation in Yosemite became tempered by a recognition that the popularity of climbing and other dangerous activities threatened to overwhelm even the advanced capabilities of YOSAR.

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Yet administrators expressed no intention to actively restrict rock climbing or any other potentially hazardous, wilderness-oriented activities. Partly in response to pressure from user groups, yet also due to the fact that these activities were widely considered to be historically appropriate uses of the park, administrators maintained a positive approach towards rising participation in rock climbing, backpacking, and other activities. In correspondence to the associate director of the National Park Service in 1970, Superintendent Lawrence Hadley celebrated the park's climbing possibilities, writing, "The great walls are perhaps without equal anywhere for the several types of challenges offered." Later that year Valley District Ranger Olsen stated that administrators would be "heartily in favor of" a proposal by the British Broadcasting Corporation to televise a climb of El Capitan by live satellite to Europe. In 1974, in a controversial move purportedly related to the Park Service's concessions contract with MCA, administrators allowed a Hollywood film crew to tape a television drama, titled "Sierra," within the park. Advertised as a story of rangers dealing with "the conflict between trying to preserve the natural beauty of the wilderness and accommodating the flood of tourists wanting to utilize the resources of the park," the short-lived series glamorized the altruism of rescue rangers and romanticized the feats of climbers. YOSAR functioned as a psychic safeguard allowing administrators to maintain this accommodating approach towards rock climbing, despite the troubling increase in accidents and the fragile consensus between park rangers and Camp 4 rescue site climbers.

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217 Quoted in Farabee, Death, Daring, and Disaster, 312-313.
In 1974, in an effort to professionalize the rescue site climbers and mold them into functional representatives of the Park Service, ranger Mead Hargis and Anthony Anderson, the first full-time search and rescue officer in the park, compiled a set of requirements for the hiring of rescue site employees. In light of the disconcerting number of serious accidents and deaths in the previous year, Hargis recognized that the Camp 4 site served a vital function in providing for visitor safety. For one, a high turnover rate in the ranger force made it difficult for district rangers to maintain an adequately trained rescue force. Also, rangers trained in search and rescue techniques were often burdened with other duties that limited their ability to respond to emergencies. In order to address rescue site climbers' problematic disregard for authority, Hargis stressed that “when victims, rescuers, and rangers lives are at stake,” no member of park’s protection division should “participate because of monetary considerations, ego whims, political or social cliques.”\footnote{Mead Hargis to Search and Rescue Officer and Valley District Ranger, re: “Rescue Team,” March 20, 1974, YOSAR office files.} With this hiring plan, rangers and park administrators hoped to cultivate a more professional SAR culture in Camp 4 that would temper the countercultural tendencies of the Yosemite climbing scene.

Hargis and Anderson determined that the most critical qualification for an effective member of the rescue site should be their capacity to “avoid conflicts” and “deal with National Park Service policies and personnel.” Of course, rescue site climbers were also to demonstrate good judgment, advanced climbing skills, and a “desire to learn rescue techniques.” Rescuers would be required to posses knowledge of Yosemite’s complex terrain, first aid experience, a willingness to attend regular training sessions, and the ability to “keep and orderly, neat, and clean campsite.” Rescue site climbers were also to
"obey all Park rules and regulations” and be capable, as representatives of the NPS, of setting “an example of good camp manners.”

Yet while the YOSAR team continued to improve upon SAR techniques through the 1970s and early 1980s, the rescue site climbers remained a constant personnel headache for administrators. In January of 1977, Joe Windsor, the chief of campground maintenance, proposed closing Camp 4 and the rescue site for the winter to facilitate “better and more efficient management.” Windsor expressed frustration that the rescue site climbers had failed to assume any responsibilities for maintaining order in the sprawling camp. In fact, Windsor observed that the rescue site climbers seemed to be “leading the vandalism and misuse of the area facilities.”

Windsor had reason to complain. In addition to dealing with disappearing electric cables, filthy campsites, and blatant, pervasive drug use, his maintenance staff faced a host of other minor but persistent problems in Camp 4. Shelves in the bathroom were being ripped off and used as firewood; fire pits were being dismantled and moved to other areas in the camp; someone had been cutting the chain-anchors on picnic tables and moving them around the campground and into the rescue site; the rescue site sign had been “chipped away on its top and side...as though somebody spent their idle time banging away on the post;” campsite posts had been pulled out of the ground and turned upside down so that the numbers could not be seen; and the collapsible stanchions placed at the entrance to the parking lot to prevent unauthorized vehicles from entering had been


destroyed and then stolen. Windsor recommended that if the rescue site hires could not “follow established rules, regulations, and policies that the present courtesies extended to this group be discontinued.”

In response to such complaints, Superintendent Leslie Arnberger requested that the Chief Ranger and other protection staff “tidy up and ‘regularize’ the management of the climbers’ sites at Sunnyside Campground.” Chief Ranger Charles Wendt then wrote to Tim Setnicka, Anthony Anderson’s replacement as the search and rescue officer, charging him to clean up the “general disarray and mess” surrounding the rescue site. If these problems could not be resolved, Wendt voiced concern that “the whole concept of the climbing site and its value of liaison between the climbing community and the National Park Service is at stake.” Considering the necessity of the rescue site in ensuring visitor protection, such a possibility remained for Wendt, “a position which I do not want to take.”

Valley District Ranger James Brady agreed and called on shift supervisors to “police and enforce the regulations” in order to “see that climbers do a better job all year round.” Administrators ultimately determined that the rescue site could not be disbanded; instead, individual perpetrators would be singled out, dismissed from the climbers’ camp, and replaced by any number of qualified Yosemite rock climbers hoping to be employed through YOSAR.

222 Windsor to Chief Ranger, re: “Sunnyside Campground management.”
224 Valley District Ranger to Shift Supervisors, undated, YOSAR office files.
Such a policy proved easier said than done. As the global epicenter of a burgeoning rock climbing culture by the mid-1970s, Camp 4 had sprawled well beyond its already impossible-to-regulate boundaries. In the busiest times, this nomadic “shantytown” spilled over into the parking lot of the nearby Yosemite Lodge where “crusty, dust-covered” climbers milled around, frightening “tidy Bermuda clad tourists.” The sprawling encampment had become what one journalist described as “a refugee camp for survivalists.” During the long days from early spring until late fall, countless dilapidated tents, dispersed at random throughout the camp with no regard for designated sites, fluttered in the breeze; spare climbing gear lay in haphazard piles throughout the campground; and food containers and laundry hung on crisscrossing lines through the trees, weaving “a colorful thread through the dreary camp.” By dusk, the resident climbers, draped with pitons, carabiners, and other tools of the trade, returned in “clanking hordes” from the vertical walls of the Valley. Once settled in and relieved of their heavy equipment, climbers separated into cliques, transforming the slum into raucous “Animal House al-fresco.” “Camp 4 is a very romantic, anarchistic kind of place,” one climber explained, “at night everyone sits around the fire telling stories and getting high.” Rangers, law enforcement, and other authorities could do little to restrain the sprawling encampment. “The climbers aren’t going to leave,” Camp 4 regular Phil Bard observed, “this place is too important to them.”

Indeed, to the frustration of administrators responsible for overseeing the formalization of rescue procedures in this period, replacements for troublesome rescue site hires were invariably drawn from the same pool of Camp 4 miscreants. In spite of

administrators’ drafting of a series of management proposals designed to “change the overall atmosphere and acceptance of responsibility by site members,” personnel problems continued well into the 1980s.\textsuperscript{226} True to their word, park authorities were quick to discharge any rescue site climbers who exhibited signs of unprofessionalism. Site veteran Russ Walling recalled a number of dismissals including one climber who was sent packing after showing graphic pictures of “some very expired humans” to reporters for \textit{Playboy Magazine}. Another climber lost his rescue site privileges after overdosing on PCP and nearly dying before an ambulance evacuated him from Camp 4. And it was “Paradise Lost for yet another Site member” after authorities discovered that he had posed for pictures “in mock frozen form” alongside two deceased climbers whose bodies had been recovered from the face of El Capitan.\textsuperscript{227}

Law enforcement officials were called in on numerous occasions to handle complaints from visitors, concessionaires, and rangers over the criminal behavior of some rescue site employees. Rescue site climbers in this period were arrested for a myriad of offenses including illegal camping, slashing tires, public intoxication, and even the cultivation of marijuana in the dense, boulder-strewn forest behind Camp 4.\textsuperscript{228} In one instance a well-known rescue site climber, who had previously been disciplined for public drunkenness, was detained and charged with sexual harassment after numerous reports surfaced that he had been harassing a female ranger over an extended period of time. The incident report described the perpetrator’s actions in the Mountain Room Bar at the Yosemite Lodge -

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\textsuperscript{227} Walling, “Death Valley Days,” 50-51.

\textsuperscript{228} “Hugh” to Bob Howard, SAR Officer, re: “Standards of SAR Site Personnel,” January 3, 1988, YOSAR office files.
\end{flushright}
including staring at the woman while licking his lips and making inappropriate gestures involving a cactus plant - as behavior "contrary to the image that has been established by the Chief Ranger for members of his division." \(^{229}\)

While the culture of the Camp 4 rescue site remained problematic for NPS administrators, rarely did misbehavior, criminal or otherwise, interfere with the rescue climbers’ stipulated responsibility to respond quickly and efficiently to accidents in the park, particularly those involving other climbers. An incident on May 23, 1977 demonstrated to rescue site hires that, at the potential cost of their own lives and the lives of others, the anarchistic, anti-establishment lifestyle of Camp 4 could not be allowed to interfere with what had become a professional responsibility. At three in the morning, rangers assembled a rescue team in Camp 4 to respond to two climbers calling for help from an easy climb near Upper Yosemite Falls. Jack Dorn, an experienced rescue site climber (and among those who allegedly profited from the Dope Lake scheme), followed the team up the well-worn Upper Yosemite Falls trail. In a moment of inattention, possibly because he had been "listening to tunes on his portable tape cassette" or because he "had partied too long" or "climbed too hard," Dorn missed a turn on the trail and stumbled over a cliff, falling six hundred feet to his death on the rocks below. Much like Jim Madsen’s death nearly a decade earlier, the suddenness of Dorn’s accident shocked Yosemite’s visitor protection staff. His death produced an atmosphere of consensus among rangers and rescue climbers who agreed that a strict formalization of the procedures YOSAR had innovated over the previous decade would be needed to maintain a high standard of performance, especially as the number of emergencies requiring

organized rescue continued to mount. In subsequent years, the countercultural cliques of Camp 4 blended with the administrative pragmatism of the NPS to create a distinct SAR culture in Yosemite that revolutionized rescue in the parks.

Three years after Jack Dorn’s accident, Search and Rescue Officer Tim Setnicka completed *Wilderness Search and Rescue*, a detailed and often entertaining account of the techniques, technologies, and procedures YOSAR had developed or adapted over the previous decade. The work represented the culmination of the cultural and technical evolution of visitor protection in Yosemite, becoming the “SAR bible” for mountain rescue outfits around the nation for years to come. With the release of *Wilderness Search and Rescue*, YOSAR came of age; it became a professional organization, coordinated through a web of cooperative arrangements with not only Camp 4 rock climbers but also local law enforcement, medical technicians, helicopter pilots, and military personnel. YOSAR’s full time staff of SAR experts and climbers including Pete Thompson, Butch Farabee, Tim Setnicka, and former rescue site hire John Dill had both the practiced expertise and the technological capabilities to respond to emergencies in Yosemite’s diversity of terrains with a speed and efficiency unparalleled in any national park. By the early 1980s, YOSAR’s depth of talent, technological sophistication, and adaptability rivaled even the staid rescue outfits that had been operating in the European Alps since the late nineteenth century.

In *Wilderness Search and Rescue*, Setnicka presented SAR as “a problem of transportation” with the primary goal being “eliminating the victim’s isolation.”

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230 Farabee, *Death, Daring, and Disaster*, 341.

Though grounded in a highly complex system of technical equipment and the specialized knowledge of how to use it, Setnicka stressed that effective wilderness search and rescue derived from the basic survival techniques that had governed travel in mountainous regions since the beginning of human history. "This direct, modular approach," he wrote, "is a step back from the rush toward a vast quantity of technological wizardry that often floods our lives with complicated systems for attaining rather simple goals."^232

Setnicka’s approach struck a balance between technology and wilderness use that characterized cultural perceptions of appropriate recreation through this period. For the Park Service, Setnicka’s technological imperative rationalized the blending of preservation and use in administrative policy; his modular approach posited a pragmatic means, as historian Leo Marx would argue, to seamlessly incorporate the “machine” of modern technological search and rescue into Yosemite’s “garden” wilderness as efficiently and inconspicuously as possible.^233

Setnicka’s “soft path” for conducting SAR operations emphasized planning at the local level. He maintained that search and rescue procedures should be directed by the individuals most familiar with the terrain, weather conditions, and types of accidents particular to the specified locale. In Yosemite, this meant that rangers and rock climbers would continue to be the most qualified to determine how, when, and with what technologies the park’s search and rescue apparatus should respond to any given emergency. Though Setnicka insisted that SAR procedures should remain as simple as possible, the YOSAR team had at its disposal the most sophisticated arsenal of rescue

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^232 Ibid., viii.

technologies ever assembled under one mountain search and rescue outfit. By the late 1970s, YOSAR was either equipped with or had access to a staggering array of rigging systems, climbing devices, field medical equipment, communications systems, tracking technologies, high-powered spotlights, transportation devices, swift water rescue gear, and other emergency response paraphernalia. As emergencies became more prevalent, Yosemite’s localized outfit could call on an expanding regional network of military installations and volunteer rescue groups to provide additional resources for visitor protection needs in the park. This coordinated effort, which Setnicka explained as “a highly regionalized response to growing local problems,” became the hallmark of modern wilderness search and rescue in the national parks.234

Helicopters brought the most significant changes to Yosemite’s search and rescue network. From the mid-1960s until 2004, the NPS maintained a working relationship with a rescue outfit at Lemoore Naval Air Station about thirty miles south of Fresno. Through the 1960s, the Navy employed a handful of UH-34 “Seahorse” crafts which had considerable difficulty operating at high elevations. These small airships were typically too dangerous for use in high mountain rescues. However, in 1970, Lemoore transitioned to the HH-1N “Huey” which could operate at altitudes up to 15,000 feet. In subsequent years, YOSAR developed personal relationships with a number of Lemoore pilots, most of whom veterans of the Vietnam conflict. The Lemoore “Rescue Angels” participated in at least 950 SAR operations throughout the Sierra Nevada range including hundreds of

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234 Setnicka, Wilderness Search and Rescue, 29.
missions in Yosemite and Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Parks before the Navy terminated the helicopter response unit in 2004.\textsuperscript{235}

Lemoore’s airships could be used to search vast areas for lost hikers, covering more ground at a much faster rate than searchers on foot or horseback. Helicopters could extract an injured person from an isolated location and transport him or her to a medical facility, often within minutes. Chopper pilots could rapidly shuttle additional rescuers and supplies to remote locales to supplement the efforts of ground crews. Helicopters also became critical tools in performing difficult climbing rescues. In the mid-1970s, rescue pilots at Lemoore devised a helicopter rescue technique known as “cliff evolution” which allowed YOSAR an efficient but risky option for pulling critically injured climbers from high on Yosemite’s big walls. The technique involved lowering a rescuer from the helicopter as the pilot hovered in a fixed position, often dangerously close to the cliff face. Dangling below, the rescuer would work to secure the victim to his or her own harness after which the pilot would transport both the victim and the rescuer, still suspended beneath the craft, to a safe landing zone.\textsuperscript{236}

Lemoore crews employed this technique for the first time in May of 1978 after a climber suffered severe head trauma in a fall from a difficult big wall route on Quarter Dome near Half Dome. YOSAR immediately called in Lemoore pilots John Sullivan and Don Swain to assist in the evacuation. The rescue crew, which included YOSAR permanent staff, park rangers, rescue site climbers, and the Lemoore pilots, concluded that a standard cliff rescue, in which a team of climbers would be lowered from the

\textsuperscript{235} Michael P. Ghiglieri and Charles R. “Butch” Farabee, Jr., \textit{Off the Wall: Death in Yosemite} (Flagstaff: Puma Press, 2007), 322.

\textsuperscript{236} Setnicka, \textit{Wilderness Search and Rescue}, 396.
summit to immobilize then raise the injured climber, would take too long since darkness threatened to delay the evacuation until the next morning. So, Butch Farabee, Yosemite's search and rescue officer at the time, gave the Lemoore crew permission to attempt the difficult cliff evolution before nightfall.

Within minutes Sullivan and Swain found a position from which they could hover while Crew Chief Benny Revels prepared to be lowered three hundred feet from the helicopter to the injured climber. Revels backed out of the craft and immediately began spinning in space as another crewman carefully lowered him into position. Meanwhile, Sullivan eased the whirling rotary blades to within six feet of the granite wall, where he maintained his hover while Revels struggled to secure the semi-conscious victim.

Setnicka described the anxious moments that followed: “Sullivan could feel the sweat running down the inside of his flight suite. After twenty minutes of hovering, he felt his arms and back tense up from the tension of constantly working the controls.” Revels had difficulties of his own. After several moments of “twisting around” trying to reach the rock, he finally managed to clip the injured climber’s harness to his own and cut the ropes attaching them to the wall. “The victim was barely conscious and kept sporadically fighting him,” Setnicka wrote, “Continuous bleeding all over Revel’s hands made it difficult to determine what his injuries were.” Finally, rescuer and victim swung free from the wall; Sullivan deftly anticipated the redirection of weight and five minutes later, Revels and the injured climber settled down in Ahwahnee Meadows. An ambulance rushed the victim to a local clinic where doctors prepared him to be transported to a hospital outside the park for “immediate surgery to relieve the pressure on his brain.” The
entire mission took less than an hour and if not for the speed and proficiency of the Lemoore crew the victim would not have survived.\textsuperscript{237}

Despite the obvious utility of helicopters, Setnicka stressed that it would be a mistake to consider air evacuations a panacea for all search and rescue operations. Helicopters were to be considered one of many components of an overall SAR plan; without a “Plan B,” he argued, an effective rescue outfit would be severely limited in its ability to deal with intangibles and effectively carry-out “each phase of the rescue operation.” Helicopters were fallible technologies, subject to mechanical breakdowns or pilot error and ineffective in poor weather conditions or darkness. During a body recovery on June 15, 1975, for instance, a Lemoore Huey stalled while lifting off. The chopper pitched left and the rotary blades chopped into a live oak tree before the skids hit and the entire craft rolled down a rocky slope. The crew managed to escape, but soon after, the wreckage burst into flames, charring the victim’s remains and burning the $1.2 million airship to a pile of twisted metal and ash.\textsuperscript{238} Considering this event, Setnicka concluded: “We therefore want to stay helicopter independent in SAR planning and thinking, in spite of the seductiveness of constant reliance on helo support.”\textsuperscript{239}

Setnicka further argued that basic backcountry skills and rock climbing techniques remained the foundational components of SAR operations in Yosemite. His elaboration on a modular SAR structure established the model used in subsequent decades by rescue organizations in wilderness destinations around the globe. “By relying on conventional

\textsuperscript{237} Ibid., 397-396.

\textsuperscript{238} Farabee, \textit{Death, Daring, and Disaster}, 317; Ghiglieri and Farabee, \textit{Death in Yosemite}, 340-343.

\textsuperscript{239} Setnicka, \textit{Wilderness Search and Rescue}, 401.
equipment,” contributing editor Kenneth Andrasko wrote, “the Yosemite SAR crew has a vast manpower pool available in the climbers that frequent the Valley. Training of support personnel is minimized, and roles become fairly interchangeable.” This structured approach allowed YOSAR to adapt technologies and procedures to what John Dill called a “matrix” of emergency scenarios. By coordinating missions based on the judgment and skill of the individuals most attuned to wilderness travel, YOSAR could adjust techniques to the particular combinations of terrain, season, weather, medical necessity, and type of emergency that each search, rescue, or recovery operation involved. Yet, even as administrators gradually resolved the cultural conflicts that marred the professionalization of YOSAR through the 1970s, a host of new administrative concerns related to the high costs of rescue, the legal liability of the NPS, and the philosophical function of search and rescue changed the way in which visitors to Yosemite engaged in their respective wilderness experiences.

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241 The concept of a SAR “matrix” comes from a conversation with John Dill, March 2007.
CHAPTER 4

WHO PAYS?

On July 19, 1978, Susan Cunningham, eight months pregnant with her first child, reported to rangers that her husband David Cunningham had failed to return from a three day solo backpack trip along the Illiouette Creek drainage in the southwest corner of the park. The couple had been camped at Bridalveil Campground when Cunningham decided to embark on his spontaneous excursion. Before departing from Glacier Point, Cunningham informed his wife that he would meet her three days later at Housekeeping Camp - he never arrived. On the afternoon of the nineteenth, as Butch Farabee and Michael Ghiglieri detail, Susan Cunningham’s “imagination painted mishap after potential mishap that may have left her husband stranded somewhere off-trail and injured, perhaps trapped, and now desperately in need of rescue.” Cunningham worriedly explained to ranger Craig Stewart that on July 15 she had driven her husband to the trailhead and watched him depart down the Illiouette Trail at approximately 9:00 a.m. Ranger Stewart determined that since David Cunningham was more than twenty four hours overdue, a search was warranted. The next morning, rangers Mead Hargis and Pete Hart conducted a two-hour helicopter search of the area. Finding no clues, YOSAR

initiated what would become the most extensive, frustrating, and expensive search operation conducted to date in Yosemite.243

Searches for lost or overdue hikers have historically cost the National Park Service more money, time, and effort than any other SAR operations.244 While big wall climbing rescues typically involved extreme levels of technical difficulty and risk, backcountry searches frequently required hundreds of searchers, complex investigative work, and thousands of hours of billable time for rescue workers and contract helicopters. As such, large-scale searches, in addition to climbing rescues, have been instrumental in initiating administrative dialogue over the organization, planning, and especially the funding of SAR procedures in Yosemite. The search for David Cunningham, though unusual in its outcome, highlighted the administrative challenges the Park Service faced in continuing to maintain a technologically proficient, professional search and rescue apparatus provided free of charge to the visiting public.

YOSAR operators began their full scale search for Cunningham on the morning of July 21. For six hours, rangers combed the Illiouette Creek drainage by helicopter, finding nothing. YOSAR also dispatched a horse patrol to search the area and interview "all persons encountered along the trails Cunningham would have walked on." Again, no leads surfaced. That same morning, contract pilots choppered a pair of professional trackers to the remote area on the north side of Red Peak where they followed a single hiker’s boot trail along a creek bed until it ended at the Merced River. Later,


244 Ghiglieri and Farabee cite numerous examples of expensive searches occurring after the Cunningham incident including a 1981 search for Timothy John Barnes which cost $178,501 and a 2005 search for Michael Ficery which cost the Park Service an astounding $452,000. Ghiglieri and Farabee, Death in Yosemite, 467.

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investigators determined that the boot track did not match the star-shaped pattern of Cunningham’s size ten-and-a-half Lowa Scouts. Thus, while rangers considered the find “a good clue” (in fact it remained the only clue anyone uncovered that day), it led nowhere. On the twenty fourth, search parties convened to conduct additional searches of the area. Searchers followed boot tracks and traversed creek drainages looking for any signs of Cunningham’s passing but found none.245

On the twenty eighth, John Dill began contacting by telephone all the backcountry permit holders that had been hiking in the area on the dates when David Cunningham went missing. Interestingly, a few permit holders had seen someone fitting that description, but these sightings seemed to have all occurred in the immediate vicinity of the trailhead. Apparently Cunningham did not make it very far. Armed with this new information, Butch Farabee, as mission coordinator, determined that the search should be reconvened. On July 30, Farabee requested the assistance of the Sierra Madre Search and Rescue team from Southern California and the Explorers SAR group from the San Francisco Bay area. The following day, twenty additional searchers arrived in Yosemite from these organizations, joining teams of rangers, climbers, law enforcement, and local volunteers to again traverse the entire southwestern quadrant of the park. Searchers uncovered some provocative clues. In one instance, a search party discovered an abandoned tent that had purportedly been in the same position for several days. Inside they found nothing but a single playing card, a Joker. The tent did not match the

245 Ibid.
description of the tent Cunningham had been carrying but the find sparked excitement and wild speculation among searchers.\textsuperscript{246}

The case finally broke on the afternoon of August 1. On that day, a friend of Cunningham’s received a postcard mailed from Bangor, Maine. The card was penned in what appeared to be David Cunningham’s handwriting. That afternoon, John Dill spoke with Cunningham’s father who confirmed that his son indeed had contacted him by telephone earlier that morning. It was clear, as one rescuer declared, “our pigeon had flown the coop.” Dill and Farabee called off the massive search that night and YOSAR investigators immediately began the task of piecing together the unusual chain of events that spurred this “most elusive mission.”\textsuperscript{247}

From an interview with Susan Cunningham on August 12, Tim Setnicka concluded that David had staged his backpacking trip in order to leave his wife. Susan explained that they had been dealing with marital problems in the months leading up to the Yosemite trip and that David probably “had leaving on his mind prior to taking the backpacking trip.” The next day, Setnicka reached David Cunningham by telephone. After being read his Miranda rights, David agreed to recount his actions leading up to and during his flight from marital commitment. He explained that not long after leaving the Glacier Point parking lot he began feeling ill and decided to return to the Valley. He hiked back by the Pohono Trail on July 16 and stayed one night in Camp 4, without attempting to contact his wife or anyone else. The next morning he purchased a thirty-day “anywhere in the U.S.” Greyhound bus ticket and spent two weeks traveling “from


\textsuperscript{247} ESAR, “Mission #50.”
Merced to Sacramento to Reno to Omaha to Minneapolis to Green Bay to Chicago to New York to Boston to Acadia National Park to Bangor, Maine to Great Smokey Mountains National Park and [back] to Maine where he got sick and decided to return home.” Not until meeting with friends in Santa Barbara on August 2, Cunningham claimed, did he learn that park officials had been conducting a massive search operation for him. He told Setnicka that he knew that park officials routinely conducted searches but felt, as he stated, “I thought my wife would know why I left... We did talk about how unstable our relationship was.”

Setnicka analyzed Cunningham’s behavior, emphasizing the unprecedented cost it incurred:

The cost to the National Park Service...was over $20,000.00 with thousands of paid hours spent on the operation. Over 75 sorties were flown into the backcountry with the Park helicopter. Hundreds of hours were spent walking around and flying in the helicopter by all rescue personnel. Every government employee is required to be compensated for this extra hazard by a 25% increase in their hourly wage... Hundreds of hours were also spent walking and riding by horse in the search areas which includes steep snow fields, wild rivers and sheer, steep rock faces and spending nights in the wilderness. Safety is the prime consideration for searches by the operations leader and some areas could only be searched by technical climbers or by helicopter... The physical hazards that his actions exposed the searchers to were totally unnecessary and Cunningham created these conditions with no legitimate purpose.

In September of 1978, The United States District Court charged Cunningham with the only violation park authorities could use to recover the costs incurred during the unnecessary search: namely, his creation of a “hazardous condition” for rescuers. The federal code stated specifically that an individual could be charged and found guilty if prosecutors could prove that he or she “create[d] a hazardous or physically offensive


249 Ibid.
condition by any act which serves no legitimate purpose of the actor, to wit: cause[d] a hazardous search and rescue operation to be undertaken without just cause or reason."^250 Unfortunately for park authorities, the maximum penalty for a guilty verdict under this violation was a disappointing fee of only five hundred dollars, hardly enough to make up for the $21,379 that the NPS had incurred over the course of the search. Through this period of continually mounting SAR incidents, the legal precedents determining the National Park Service's ability - or inability - to collect search and rescue costs became an increasingly paramount concern for administrators responsible for coordinating visitor protection operations in Yosemite.

In this period, searches for lost backpackers, helicopter rescues of climbers stranded on big walls, recoveries of the bodies of accident victims, and other SAR operations became progressively more expensive, costing the National Park Service (and hence tax payers) upwards of $400,000 annually by the late 1980s.251 In response, many local media outlets, rescuers, federal agencies, and environmentalists argued that since most accidents resulted from poor judgment on the part of inexperienced (or incompetent) visitors, the high cost of rescue should not be the sole responsibility of the Park Service but should be covered partially by victims upon assessment of their individual negligence. Some wilderness advocates even suggested the dissolution of professional rescue altogether, arguing that the promise of free rescue sanitized the psychological effect of an appropriate, self-sufficient wilderness experience, giving visitors a false sense of security.

250 Donald W. Pitts, "United States of America v. David Andrew Cunningham," Complaint heard before the United States District Court for the Eastern District of California, August 1, 1978, this document as well as a copy of a later summons is filed with Setnicka's incident report.

and encouraging irresponsible recreational habits. While park officials could not logically, or legally, disband YOSAR and continue to support potentially hazardous forms of recreation, debates over the high cost of search and rescue highlighted the philosophical, technological, and administrative imperatives shaping cultural perceptions of wilderness recreation in the national parks.

Prior to the 1960s, the cost of search and rescue remained insignificant. SAR operations were few and far between and most could be carried out without the need for expenditures beyond ordinary ranger payroll. A 1926 addendum to the Organic Act had established the National Park Service’s authority to perform search and rescue services, stipulating that “The Secretary of the Interior is authorized to aide and assist visitors within the national parks...in emergencies.” The legislation also indicated that the service would absorb the costs of food and supplies accrued in search and rescue operations, a policy that remained in effect through the 1970s.252 As the number of complex emergencies increased through this period, forcing administrators to implement extensive training programs, incorporate helicopters and other new technologies, and begin employing highly experienced specialists to perform SAR missions, costs spiked considerably. As early as 1966, Park Service officials began expressing concern over mounting SAR costs, particularly those related to the use of helicopters. In cases where helicopter costs were high, NPS Director George Hartzog concluded: “Considering the sensitive nature of judgment regarding payment of costs by persons rescued,” the Park Service would continue footing the bill for visitor protection. Hartzog’s system-wide policy statement urged the following:

252 Quoted in Krystal Jackson, Expenses of Search and Rescue Service in the National Parks: An Overview and Examination of issues of Charging Visitors (master’s thesis: Central Washington University, 2000), 44.
In emergent search situations, ground control forces may be deployed and assisted by aircraft. In rescue operations where prompt action is necessary to save a life or avoid more serious injury, available helicopters as well as any other means at the Superintendent’s disposal will be utilized. All expenditures necessary to effect the above will be absorbed by the M&P appropriation.253

The M&P appropriation, a regional fund covering emergency maintenance costs or fire related expenses, remained a limited financial resource. As such, the director stipulated that park superintendents “encourage all reasonable methods for cutting costs.” Edward Hummel, the regional director for the western region conveyed this request to the superintendents in Yosemite and Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Parks, recommending that park administrators encourage “voluntary payment” of SAR costs by relatives or friends of victims as a means to reduce the financial burden of visitor protection.254 In April of 1967, Yosemite Superintendent John Davis issued a memorandum of agreement. Davis described the hourly flight rate of ninety dollars specified in the park’s newly minted contract with a private helicopter service as a “substantial sum.” The Superintendent indicated that in the previous year, search and rescue forces logged approximately thirty five hours of flight time, constituting a “very costly function” of management. Davis rightly predicted that “with yearly increases in park visitation, the number to be rescued will likewise increase.”255


254 Edward Hummel, Regional Director, Western Region to Superintendents, Yosemite and Sequoia and Kings Canyon, re: “Helicopter Search and Rescue,” September 13, 1966, YOSAR office files.

255 John Davis, Superintendent, Yosemite to Regional Director, Western Region, re: “Funds – helicopter rescue and evacuation,” April 27, 1967, YOSAR office files.
With no legal means to enforce collection of SAR costs, regardless of the victim’s culpability, Davis suggested that park authorities inform rescuees, their families, or their guide services that they “would be expected to assume the cost of the helicopter services.” Of course, if the rescuee, their family, or their outing sponsor refused, the National Park Service would be forced to pay the cost. Such a policy had obvious problems. For one, administrators would likely face legal consequences if they failed to inform the parties involved that they were not legally required to assume costs. Second, that a rescuee or guide service would reward the park’s rescue force with voluntarily repayment remained an unlikely possibility. Even insurance companies typically refused to cover costs since the National Park Service had no clear legal authority to abdicate financial responsibility.\(^{256}\) Nevertheless, Director Hummel supported Davis’s policy of voluntary collections and authorized the superintendent to pursue this cost-cutting measure, however ineffective it proved to be.\(^{257}\)

In 1972, the problems of funding helicopter rescues in Yosemite became acute. The previous year, the costs for conducting SAR missions reached more than $20,000, far exceeding the maximum of $6,500 that administrators had been able to draw from the M&P appropriation since 1966. To make things worse, the regional contingency funds for 1971 had been entirely used up before YOSAR officials were able to seek reimbursement of that year’s search and rescue expenses. “The ‘pot of gold’ dried up,” Chief Ranger Jack Morehead explained to his protection staff, “we were told by Region

\(^{256}\) Ibid; Davis cites an instance in which an insurance company was considering reimbursing helicopter costs of 1,500 dollars on a rescue from Mount Whitney. Such cases proved to be a rarity and it is unclear whether Sequoia Kings Canyon officials were able to collect on this particular incident.

\(^{257}\) R.B. Moore, Assistant Regional Director, Operations, Western Region to Superintendents, Sequoia and Kings Canyon, Yosemite, re: “Funding of helicopter rescue missions,” May 4, 1967, YOSAR office files.
that no contingency funds were available.” The entire $20,000, a heretofore
unprecedented annual SAR bill, had to be cut from already financially burdened seasonal
services within the park. “This hurts!” Morehead exclaimed. He furthered cautioned
rangers that he “had no idea” whether any contingency funds would be available for the
current year, SAR costs for which already showed signs of exceeding the previous year’s.
“With the extra money being spent on the Yellowstone Centennial and the Tetons World
Conference of National Parks,” Morehead wrote, “I personally doubt if our chances for
receiving any rescue money are very good.”^ 258

For Morehead, costs could only be reduced by streamlining emergency response
procedures and limiting YOSAR’s reliance on expensive helicopters. The chief ranger
determined that on at least six of the thirteen total missions that year involving a
helicopter, ground crews could have adequately carried out the operation. These
instances involved evacuations of victims with minor injuries or illnesses including
constipation, the flu, and relatively insignificant cuts. Also, two helicopter searches were
conducted “for persons when the specific location or description was not known.” While
acknowledging that rangers did not always have the time or the manpower to fully
evaluate a situation before taking action - as in the numerous cases that season of boy
scouts reportedly suffering from appendicitis in the backcountry - Morehead encouraged
rangers to “research every call for a helicopter as thoroughly as possible” and clear any
requests for air support through Pete Thompson or the chief ranger’s office. As costs
continued to mount, it became clear to Morehead and other park authorities that since

258 Jack Morehead, Chief Ranger to All Permanent Rangers and Seasonals responsible for search and

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search and rescue remained an indispensable administrative function, means of recovering costs from victims would have to be thoroughly considered and perhaps implemented, particularly if the Park Service or the Department of Interior could not be relied upon to reimburse SAR expenses.259

The Interior and Related Agencies Appropriation Act of 1972 eased some of Morehead's concern by giving the NPS authority to use Department of Interior funds to "cover the unbudgeted costs of emergency and other unforeseen law enforcement situations in the National Park system." Yet, in effect, the act only formalized the regional contingency fund that had already been informally tapped for this purpose for at least the past decade; it was not clear to anyone in Yosemite or the regional office that additional funds would be made available or that the numerous annual system-wide demands for the funding of road improvements, fire fighting, unanticipated law enforcement incidents, and other "emergency" projects would not drain the appropriation before rescue costs could be covered.260

In preparation for future crises, Morehead and Pete Thompson began exploring a number of alternative possibilities for the collection of search and rescue costs. John Taylor, secretary of the American Alpine Club, suggested implementing a rescue insurance program in which individuals could purchase policies either through mountaineering organizations or while registering for rock climbs or backcountry permits.261 Taylor cited correspondence from AAC member David Bidwell, who had

259 Ibid.


261 John Taylor to Pete Thompson, undated, YOSAR office files.
been living in Switzerland for several years, indicating that in Europe, mountaineers could purchase accident insurance from nationwide institutions for fifty to sixty five dollars per year. Such policies, Bidwell explained, usually covered nearly one hundred percent of search, rescue, and recovery costs. Thompson expressed interest in pursuing such a policy but concluded that due to the particular structure of the NPS, accident insurance would probably not be feasible. "If a private organization somehow had the rescue responsibility in the parks the insurance approach would work," Thompson wrote to Taylor, "but...to put such a scheme into effect now would mean two very large waivers, both presumably from Congress. As a simpleminded mountaineer I shudder at the prospect of wrestling with that one!"

In February of 1974, a group of park superintendents, chief rangers, and National Park Service officials met at the Albright Ranger Training Facility in Grand Canyon National Park to discuss mounting search and rescue challenges in the nation's parks. The problem of increasing costs occupied center stage in debates. The "task force" ultimately determined what Jack Morehead had learned two years earlier, that regional funds set aside for all emergency situations were not reliable in covering SAR costs. There were simply too many hands in the pot. As a solution, the committee recommended setting up a separate regional account, similar to fire suppression and certain law enforcement funds, to support "our highest priority management responsibility - saving human life." Addressing Morehead's dilemma, the task force concluded: "Area supervisors and park managers should not be placed in a position of

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262 David Bidwell to John Taylor, October 19, 1972, YOSAR office files.

263 Pete Thompson to John Taylor, July 1, 1973, YOSAR office files.
having to make the decision to exert an all-out effort during a potential life-saving activity, knowing that when they do so, they are faced with the possibility of having to operate their area below standard later in the fiscal year.264

Even with a separate SAR account, costs escalated at an alarming rate. By July of 1974, SAR expenses for that fiscal year had exceeded $100,000 for 121 missions including more that $69,000 for the use of helicopters from Lemoore Naval Air Station. YOSAR operators became understandably worried that their newly activated funds would quickly dry up. In response, SAR Officer Anthony Anderson suggested that simple air evacuations involving the park’s contract helicopter should be billed to the evacuee. Anderson reasoned that since the contract helicopter was “essentially a commercial ambulance service,” victims could be charged for its use as they would be in any urban medical emergency when a ground ambulance was required. Maintaining a distinction between simple evacuations and technical SAR activities, Anderson wrote: “Though Yosemite National Park traditionally has paid for SAR expense, there is no reason why if should also pay for the ambulance service.” He calculated that of the 65.2 hours of contract helicopter use that fiscal year, only 14.3 hours (equaling $1,856 out of total of $8,476) were accrued in “technical support.” Anderson pointed out that Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Park had been successful in collecting approximately fifty percent of its air evacuation fees over the past year and argued that “perhaps this should be a Regional decision for all parks utilizing contract helicopters.”265


265 Anthony Anderson to Chief Ranger, re: “Payment for use of contract helicopter service by park visitors,” July 18, 1974, YOSAR office files.
Anderson’s primary concern revolved around the issue of individual responsibility in the backcountry. Since most SAR expenses were incurred due to the poor judgment or inexperience of the victim, many rescuers and administrators began to question the value of free rescue. Frustrated with the contradictions embedded in the emerging culture of wilderness recreation, Anderson wrote, “The philosophy of today tends toward the resentment of the bureaucracy and the ‘Big Brother’ attitude. Along with this should be the acceptance of consequences of the individual’s decisions and actions, which include paying for a helicopter when it is needed.” He concluded that in many instances the park helicopter had been used to evacuate victims who either suffered from minor injuries which probably did not necessitate an air evacuation or who were “not really sick or injured.” Referring to a group of handicapped boy scouts that had encountered problems while camping in the backcountry, he further indicated that “the charge might discourage some visitors from over extending themselves, especially if they have physical disabilities.” Anderson suggested that before YOSAR dispatched a helicopter, the victim or the person reporting the accident should be required to sign an agreement indicating their obligation to pay for the evacuation. Chief Ranger Charles Wendt agreed with Anderson’s conclusions, writing to the park superintendent that “the deterrent effect of this program is something that we cannot express in dollars and cents... We hope this will place more responsibility on the individual citizen.”

266 Ibid.

preparation, became the crux of subsequent debates over the philosophical implications of free search and rescue in Yosemite.

Yet the questionable legality of charging victims for air evacuations rendered this program short-lived. “There is one basic test that must be applied to all proposals to establish a reimbursable operation and credit collections to an appropriation,” cautioned a legal advisor for the western regional office, “You must be prepared to cite the legal authority for such action.” As it stood, neither Yosemite nor the NPS had any clear legal grounds to demand repayment, regardless of the victim’s culpability in causing his or her own emergency. In response to YOSAR’s decision, the regional office concluded that “the desirability of a reimbursable activity, no matter how compelling, cannot negate the fact that reimbursement authority has not been granted.”

As of February 6, 1975, Yosemite’s Assistant Superintendent discontinued the practice, stating, “In the future I don’t think we should bill any users until we have developed a Park policy on the matter and had it approved by the Field Solicitor.”

To date, the park had billed at least thirteen evacuees and collected approximately $900 out of total $2,626 charged. These instances ran the gamut of SAR scenarios. In one case a scout on a handicapped boy scout outing broke his shoulder and ruptured his spleen while scrambling over rocks; other rescuees suffered injuries ranging from a twisted back to a dislocated shoulder to a broken big toe; two teenagers experienced ruptured appendixes in the backcountry; and one backpacker had to be evacuated after

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268 Associate Regional Director, Administration, WR to Superintendent, Yosemite National Park, re: “Reimbursable Accounts,” January 31, 1975, YOSAR office files; Also see attached tally of helicopter evacuations, including the amount billed, the amount collected, and injuries sustained for each instance.

269 Assistant Superintendent to Chief Ranger, re: “Helicopter Services,” February 6, 1975, YOSAR office files.
loosing his vision due to “possible botulism or anaphylactic shock.” In response to the uncertain legal ramifications of pursuing collections from these victims, Superintendent Arnberger issued a request to the regional office to cancel an outstanding balance of $1,500. “It has been administratively determined that the bills were made in error,” his memorandum read, “They were emergency evacuations for injured park visitors and were erroneously billed into a reimbursable account.”

The debacle over charging for helicopter evacuations prompted the Regional Office to immediately prepare a policy statement outlining the NPS’s legal responsibility for the performance and funding of search and rescue operations. The document clearly detailed the extent of the NPS obligation:

The National Park Service has a moral and a legal responsibility for the welfare of visitors… The National Park Service will assume the responsibility for determining the whereabouts of visitors who are reported to be lost and for rendering assistance, if required, for their return to a point of safety. Any visitor who becomes injured to the extent that transportation is required will be provided such transportation by the National Park Service. Emergency Transportation will be provided only from the point of injury to the nearest facility where professional medical services are available… No charges will be assessed for such transportation and no efforts will be made to collect any costs incidental to such transportation.

The determination that the National Park Service would continue to pay for helicopter transportation did not end debates over the high cost of rescue. In fact, the decision vaulted the issue into the public arena, sparking heated arguments among wilderness supporters, national media outlets, and local taxpayers over the moral and financial

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270 Superintendent, Yosemite to Regional Director, Western Region, re: “Cancellation of Bills for Collection,” undated, YOSAR office files.

implications of maintaining a professional search and rescue infrastructure in Yosemite and other popular wilderness destinations. In an era of rising conservatism in which environmentalism, wilderness, and the spending of federal dollars faced renewed attacks, rescue costs became central to debates of NPS policy. Citing a 1976 rescue of six climbers who had been stranded in winter weather on the summit of Half Dome after they “ignored warnings of possible storms,” an editor for the Fresno Bee questioned the NPS policy of using tax dollars to pay for rescues in which the “rescued were victims of their own stupidity or carelessness.” The Half Dome rescue cost the park nearly $10,000, an amount that ultimately came from public coffers. “These are hard lumps for the average taxpayer to swallow,” the author concluded. While federal, state, and local rescue organizations including the Coast Guard, the Humane Society, and other public service agencies had historically assumed the costs for emergency response in urban or maritime environments, the mounting frequency of expensive rescues in the mountains of California and the media coverage they received inspired a sense of urgency among taxpayers. Interestingly, mounting SAR costs produced an unlikely political consensus. Reports of expensive rescues frustrated not only conservatives but also many wilderness enthusiasts who felt that through free rescue the NPS encouraged inexperienced tourists to engage in irresponsible behaviors in the backcountry.272

A number of prominent wilderness advocacy groups expressed concern that by providing a rescue service, the Park Service actually compromised the wilderness experience sought by the most active and experienced visitors. In March of 1976, the University of Oregon Outdoor Program hosted a conference titled “Wilderness and

Individual Freedom” to address a number of questions including: “Is individual freedom in the wilderness equivalent to minimization of management?” And, “What elements of a quality wilderness experience are essential freedoms?” The particular phrasing of these questions illustrated a pervasive tendency in 1970s environmental culture to associate individual freedom of expression with social responsibility through the preservation of wilderness, a perspective that further cemented the interrelatedness of recreation and preservation in the public imagination. The conference attracted a surprising number of prominent wilderness advocates including world-renowned climber Willy Unsoeld, Sierra Club lobbyist Brock Evans, the revered “arch-druid” of conservation David Brower, and even Edward Abbey, the petulant critic who in 1968 had challenged the NPS to “Let them take risks, for Godsake, let them get lost, sunburnt, stranded, drowned, eaten by bears, buried alive under avalanches – that is the right and privilege of any free American.” For Abbey, the psychological effect of entering an undeveloped area with the knowledge that rescue would be all but impossible if a mishap occurred defined the ideal wilderness experience.

Given Abbey’s influence, the conference attendees agreed that the promise of free rescue in wilderness areas should be scaled back. “Past governmental policies and practices of providing Search and Rescue operations have decreased the authenticity of the wilderness experience by discouraging self-reliance,” the conference’s statement on


rescue policy declared, adding: “Such policies have also increased use impact by encouraging the inexperienced to attempt performances beyond their ability.” The conference committee recommended that the NPS and other government agencies “cease to maintain” caches of rescue technologies and cancel appropriations for the funding of SAR operations and the wages of emergency hire rescue personnel. Search and rescue missions should be conducted only by volunteers, the committee argued, with the purpose of placing the “financial responsibility” of rescue on the wilderness user and not on government agencies, taxpayers, or other park users. As an attack on the democratization of wilderness recreation, the “individual freedom” to engage in wilderness-oriented activities, as outlined by the conference attendees, remained accessible only to an elite few with the physical capabilities, the specific philosophical proclivities, and the technical know-how to assume the high level of risk implicit in this particular conception of an appropriate wilderness experience. This seemingly contradictory notion of the meaning of individual freedom actually made sense since the idea of wilderness, while dependent on the support of the masses, was ultimately conceived of and advertised by an elite group of outdoor enthusiasts, including Edward Abbey and his cohorts, who fought hard to protect their claim to appropriate recreation.276

Interestingly, administrators generally agreed that free rescue contributed to irresponsible recreational habits, though their concerns were far more pragmatic and political than philosophical. Moreover, the Park Service had neither the authority nor the inclination to judge preemptively the relative self-reliance and responsibility of individual wilderness users. Park officials did not wish to scale back access in order to avoid rescue

costs; instead administrators sought means to recover costs after the fact by establishing, through legal channels, the negligence of rescuees. In 1976, YOSAR carried out 124 SAR missions, more than double the total operations from only seven years earlier, and at a cost to the NPS in excess of $100,000. Already faced with a drastically insufficient annual SAR budget of $70,000 (still up from only $6,500 just ten years before), Yosemite Superintendent Amberger predicted that “the end is not in sight.” In his estimation, costs would continue to rise and the park’s response capabilities would invariably require “special legal attention,” specifically, a legislated means to recover costs from negligent victims. “The National Park Service is burdened with the one-sided responsibility of not being able to regulate climbers or wilderness users who are incompetent from pursuing park activities,” Amberger wrote: “However, we must be totally responsible for rescuing or looking for them when they get in over their heads.” The Superintendent suggested a system-wide policy change authorizing the NPS to collect rescue costs from “any person who negligently places himself [or herself] in such a position as to request assistance, rescue, or any other type of help.”

In Amberger’s view, the recommendations of the Wilderness and Individual Freedoms conference seemed unrealistic, over-simplified, and ultimately self-defeating. Scaling back the park’s rescue infrastructure would mean one of two things from an administrative perspective: Either the National Park Service would be forced to require wilderness users to sign a legally questionable waiver stating that administrators would not perform a rescue if an accident occurred or, more likely, wilderness activities would have to be restricted to everyone, even the most experienced and environmentally

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enlightened wilderness enthusiasts. Both options would be highly problematic since rock climbing and other forms of wilderness recreation were widely regarded as historically appropriate uses of the park and were in fact codified as such in NPS policy; to forcibly regulate these activities would not only defeat the mandated purpose of the National Park Service to provide for the enjoyment of the parks it would also create a public relations nightmare for park officials. Neither the Park Service nor even the most adamant supporters of limited access to wilderness areas would support an outright prohibition on recreation in Yosemite’s backcountry.

Tim Setnicka, in an editorial for the popular climbing periodical Off Belay, warned that if inexperienced and negligent wilderness users continued to drain the park’s financial resources, the NPS would have no choice but to enforce more regulations, more restrictions, and more closures of popular climbing routes and remote backcountry areas. “Mountain and wilderness activities are among the freest forms of park use,” Setnicka observed. Yet in this purported freedom lay the problem: The Park Service had no means to restrict access based on the inexperience of individual wilderness users yet administrators had a responsibility to rescue any visitor “in direct danger of destroying himself or the environment.” Setnicka referenced several costly rescues that year involving poor judgment or inexperience. In a number of cases hikers and climbers had to be rescued after failing to bring adequate food or clothing even though bad weather was imminent. In one instance, a pair of climbers became stranded and hypothermic on their descent route near the Royal Arches after allowing their rappel ropes to be “blown away” in a storm. One persistent climber even had to be rescued from El Capitan twice

278 Ibid.
in the same month. Rangers concluded that in both scenarios the man probably could have helped himself instead of calling for a rescue. Setnicka stressed that park officials should not “attempt to babysit a person’s movement.” However, if wilderness users put themselves or others in danger, “they will be responsible for new restrictions which will unjustly affect all wilderness users.”

Solutions remained unclear. Setnicka vaguely proposed that climbers and other wilderness users willingly assume “moral and financial responsibility” for their actions or face charges of negligence in the courts.280 Chris Jones, in his authoritative Climbing in North America, spoke to the climbing community directly, writing: “When a public agency becomes responsible for our safety and pulls us off the crags, we must expect them to become increasingly concerned about what we climb. The precedents are clear. Either we bring our affairs into order by taking a greater responsibility for rescues, or the government will want to regulate us.”281 Galen Rowell, the notable Yosemite climber and adventure photographer, offered a particularly insightful analysis of the problem: “At stake is the most basic of wilderness values: the right to risk life and limb in the wilds,” he wrote. To protect this quality of the wilderness experience, Rowell suggested that perhaps “it is better to sacrifice some of the appearance of wilderness in order to regain self-sufficiency.” He argued that by placing SAR caches fully stocked with ropes, stretchers, radios, oxygen tanks, and other technologies of rescue in remote locations, wilderness users could conceivably help themselves or each other before calling in helicopters, which were not only expensive but also “noisy machines that intruded into


280 Ibid., 8

everyone's experience." Rescue, as a technological safeguard, had become both facilitator of and anathema to the wilderness experience depending on which conception of an appropriate wilderness experience the NPS adopted.

Indeed, whether or not the National Park Service should charge victims for rescues, or even provide a rescue service at all, became the policy hot potato by which administrators and park constituents debated the meaning of preservation and the role of technology in the national park experience. For Edward Abbey, the promise of free rescue compromised the psychological effect of an encounter with wild nature since it signified an over-reliance on the technologies of civilization at large. For Galen Rowell, the rudimentary technologies of rescue, including climbing gear and basic medical supplies, actually enhanced the wilderness experience by enabling wilderness users to push the boundaries of risk and self-reliance to greater lengths than would be possible if these connections to society were not available. Yet Rowell drew the line at allowing for the extensive use of helicopters to perform rescues since these "noisy machines" existed too far along the gradient of facilitating technologies that he and other recreationists considered appropriate in a wilderness setting. As administrators, Ambergere and Setnicka faced the delicate task of adjusting park policy to accommodate these varying recreational discourses of nature. YOSAR's struggle to construct a definitive plan for preparing for, coordinating, and funding SAR activities illustrated the challenges of balancing the freedom to experience wilderness with the increasingly costly need to mitigate the grizzly consequences of this freedom.

For all the active campaigning of Arnberger, Setnicka, and others to lower rescue costs and avoid regulating climbing and other wilderness activities, the decision-making power to recover SAR costs ultimately lay with NPS officials in Washington. In March of 1978, Associate Director Daniel J. Tobin determined that Arnberger’s proposal to charge negligent victims for rescue costs would be “neither necessary nor in keeping with the Department of the Interior and the National Park Service policies.” If search and rescue costs threatened park operations, Tobin suggested that administrators pursue a number of cost-cutting measures including the acquisition of less expensive helicopter contracts through private companies rather than through military installations - an unlikely possibility, especially in Yosemite, since few private contractors possessed the requisite skills or technologies to perform complex climbing rescues. Tobin also recommended seeking recovery through the federal “disorderly conduct” statute - though as park officials discovered in the aftermath of the Cunningham search, this violation carried a drastically inadequate penalty of only five hundred dollars. The Assistant Director concluded that if most SAR emergencies were indeed preventable, administrators should implement “an aggressive program in education and information to alert the visitors to these inherent dangers.”

While necessary, such a policy opened up a whole new legal can of worms for park administrators.

Observers often considered visitor protection a legal responsibility of the NPS, yet policy only established the service’s authority to provide for the safety of visitors; it did

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not directly convey legal responsibility. The Federal Tort Claims Act, passed by the United States Congress in 1946 as a check on the expanded power of the federal government, ultimately determined how the Park Service’s decision to act on this authority could be enforced as a legal mandate. The act stipulated that a defendant incurring a loss due to “the negligent or wrongful act or omission of any employee of the government” could sue the government and recover costs under the same standards of liability applicable to a private citizen. This meant that if park authorities negligently created an unsafe condition for visitors or failed to adequately respond to an emergency, the NPS could be held liable for damages. In 1948, a visitor to Yellowstone National Park, William Claypool, filed suit against the National Park Service after a bear attached him and his wife while they slept in the open in sleeping bags. That day, the defendants had twice asked rangers, who knew that a “problem bear” had recently been active in the area, if it would be safe to remain outside their tent. On both occasions, rangers advised the couple that “hundreds of people sleep outside in Yellowstone every night and that the bears never attack without provocation.” The federal district court determined that under the Tort Claims Act, the Claypools were classified as “invitees” of the NPS, and since rangers were aware that “a new and extraordinary danger” existed, they had a legal duty to inform the couple of that danger. The case set a clear precedent: the National Park Service had a legal responsibility to maintain not only search and rescue capabilities but also certain preemptive safety measures.

284 National Park Service (NPS), Yosemite National Park Search and Rescue Plan, revised May 14, 1986, YOSAR office files.

To avoid burdening the government with excessive legal costs (which would ultimately come from taxes and other public funds) and deter frivolous lawsuits, the Tort Claims Act also allowed for limitations on the Park Service’s responsibility to maintain a safe environment for park visitors or “invitees” as the federal courts regarded them after the Claypool decision. In order to prevent judicial “second guessing” of the legislative and administrative decisions of government bodies, the drafters of the act included a “discretionary function exception” which allowed agencies to determine the boundaries of their own liability through reasonable considerations of social, economic, and political policy. In the national parks, if safety measures proved too costly or otherwise impractical from an administrative perspective, the NPS could choose not to implement them. Park authorities also had discretionary authority to determine whether or not a preemptive safety program including but not limited to the widespread construction of safety railings, the posting of warning signs in dangerous areas, or the commencement of mandatory visitor education programs would unduly compromise the “atmosphere” of the park for visitors. Exercising discretion in visitor protection proved to be a delicate task. Once administrators established programs for search and rescue or sets of preemptive safety measures, the NPS would be liable for maintaining the standards derived from such policies. As a legal analyst for the Division of Conservation and Wildlife explained, “Once the bureau has committed to providing…SAR services, it has in all probability lost the discretion not to provide the service.”


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Thus, by implementing aggressive accident prevention measures, administrators in Yosemite could conceivably become more susceptible to tort claims. This concern was most evident in administrators' continued resistance to regulating or directly managing rock climbing activities in the park. A tragic accident in 1978 illustrated why the NPS maintained this surprisingly laissez faire approach to rock climbing, despite the high level of risk. On May 14, three experienced climbers in their twenties, Jeffery Graves, John Nygaard, and John Garton, decided to retreat from 1,500 feet up on the Nose route on El Capitan, presumably because they had run out of water. A number of witnesses on the ground and one on a nearby climb reported seeing the trio begin the process of rappelling off the route. While no one witnessed the moment in which all three broke free from their anchor, at least one climber heard the sound of "rip stop material brushing against rock" as the climbers fell. Another witness at the base of El Capitan looked up when he heard "what he thought to be stonefall." Others described the sound of the climbers breaking loose from the rock as a "roar" or a "rumble;" all reported hearing "no cries" from the doomed climbers. Brent Nichelin had been standing at the base of the Nose photographing the victims and another pair of climbers when "he looked up through his camera's 300mm [lens and] saw two people falling toward him." Nichelin explained to rangers that he watched in horror as "the people fell vertically and brushed the wall several times as they fell." Two climbers, Matthew Muchnick and Alan Nelson, heard the impact while sorting gear at the base of El Capitan. They walked over to investigate knowing "that something bad had happened." The pair immediately went to rangers after discovering the three climbers "all piled up on top of each other." Muchnick and Nelson reported to Ranger James Lee that three climbers had fallen from El Capitan and were
"obviously dead." John Dill, Butch Farabee, and a handful of YOSAR operators quickly roped off the site and began their investigation.

The process of piecing together the causes of this tragedy revealed both the sophistication of YOSAR's investigatory capabilities and the NPS's delicate liability in maintaining safety standards in the park. Rangers and YOSAR officers spent several hours taking pictures and collecting evidence at the accident scene. Strewn among the climbers' bodies, horrifically mangled from the impact of the 1,500 foot fall, investigators found a number of objects including "cans and food articles, a knife, a cut perlon sling, a shattered Timex watch," and most interestingly, "half of a metal Dolt hanger." Originally designed and manufactured by William "Dolt" Fuerer, who accompanied Warren Harding on the first ascent of the Nose in 1958, hangers were crucial to the development of climbing as a safe, accessible form of recreation in the park. After placing an expansion bolt in a hand-drilled hole in the rock face, a climber would then attach the looped hanger to the bolt. A carabiner could then be attached to the hanger, keeping the climber safely anchored to the wall. Though bolt hangers were nearly invisible to untrained observers on the ground, by 1978, the rock faces of Yosemite were covered with such devices. After examining the evidence found at the scene, YOSAR investigators deduced that immediately before the fall, the three climbers had clipped themselves and all of their gear into one single bolt, breaking a cardinal rule of safe climbing to never rely on just one piece of protection as a primary anchor, especially if the lives of the entire party hinged on it. Still, bolt hangers were designed to withstand shock loads of thousands of pounds; and these particular bolts had been placed less than one year earlier, most likely by climber Tom Rohrer, who had been establishing
dozens of “rappel routes,” or series of vertically aligned bolt stations, all over the park in the previous years. Even if the three climbers had indeed all clipped into only one bolt, it should not have failed. So, why did the “bombproof” hanger, usually the strongest link in an anchor, break at this particular moment?²⁸⁸

To answer this perplexing question, John Dill sent the broken hanger to a San Francisco bay area metallurgist, Gerald Fritzke, who had read about the accident in the local newspaper and volunteered to examine the evidence. In an analysis published in Off Belay magazine, Tim Setnicka explained that Fritzke had discovered preexisting cracks in the broken hanger: “Tests confirmed that both legs of the bolt hanger had been cracked and weakened before the total failure occurred,” Setnicka wrote: “Next with the aid of a computer, Fritzke estimated that the cracked hanger could have broken with a downward force of only 500 lbs.” Setnicka suggested that the reasons for the weakened hanger remained unknown. However, in a follow-up report Fritzke recognized that the hanger had been treated, post-production, with a bonding alloy, a process that Tom Rohrer had been known to use and which he assumed would increase the strength and durability of the bolt. In fact, as Fritzke surmised, the chemical reaction produced by this bonding process could cause the chromemoly steel from which the hanger was forged to weaken and perhaps even crack. Interestingly, this worrisome conclusion remained unproven and YOSAR never felt confident publishing the findings. While no further accidents could be shown to have resulted from Rohrer’s modifications of bolt hangers,

the incident underscored the extent of the NPS’s discretionary authority to assume few
direct controls of climbing safety in the park.\(^{289}\)

In correspondence to YOSAR officials, family members of the deceased climbers
began to ask questions regarding the NPS’s responsibilities in maintaining a safe
climbing environment in Yosemite. John Garton’s brother wrote to John Dill inquiring
about the history of the cracked hanger, demanding to know, “what is being done to
prevent such an accident from occurring in the future?”\(^{290}\) In a carefully crafted response,
Dill explained the limits of the NPS’s discretion in this regard: “In contrast to the
maintenance of our hiking trails,” Dill wrote, “the National Park Service is not involved,
that is we don’t design, maintain, sanction, or endorse any climbing or rappelling route.”
He further explained that “the term ‘maintenance’” in regards to rock climbing “is
probably a misnomer, not being a part of the technical jargon of climbing.” Completely
independent of NPS controls, individual climbers, Dill specified, assumed responsibility
for making decisions to replace bolts and other fixed gear, or to warn other climbers of
possible dangers: “Commonly, a climber may simply replace a questionable bolt, piton,
etc., if he finds one as he happens to climb or rappel by. No one can or will guarantee
that a newly placed bolt or piton is absolutely safe.” For these reasons Dill maintained
that individual climbers had to prepare for intangibles on their own by taking safety
seriously and always using backup anchors.\(^{291}\)

\(^{289}\) Setnicka, “A ‘Bombproof’ Anchor,” 16; Conversation with John Dill, March 2007; Ghiglieri and

\(^{290}\) Mark A. Garton to John Dill, December 18, 1978, YOSAR office files.

\(^{291}\) John T. Dill to Mark A. Garton, undated, YOSAR office files.
John Nygaard’s mother also began questioning why the NPS had not taken responsibility for inspecting and repairing defective fixed climbing gear. In a letter to Chief Ranger Bill Wendt, Mrs. Nygaard insisted that had the bolts been checked, her son’s accident would not have happened. “This will not bring them back,” she wrote, “the hurt is there and it seems to hurt more to know they could have been here today had the equipment been in good condition.” Her phrasing suggested an attempt to establish the legal liability of the National Park Service in her son’s accident. Chief Ranger Bill Wendt responded by emphasizing each individual climber’s responsibility to take into account the fallibility of fixed gear. “Since it is so difficult to know the structural integrity of a bolt,” he argued, “the only safe policy assumes that any bolt may fail and requires that additional gear be ready to take over instantly.” Indeed, the NPS had no reasonable capabilities to guarantee a safe climbing environment. Wendt’s placement of culpability on the individual climbers reflected administrators’ unwillingness, and inability, to affect more direct preventative safety policies, especially since such actions could open up the NPS to tort claims. In his letter to Mrs. Nygaard, Wendt clearly stated the NPS’s discretionary position in this regard:

In the field, climbing equipment is not checked in any formal or official sense. The National Park Service does not place equipment on the cliffs for the public to use..., nor does it advertise or sanction any of the climbing or rappelling routes in Yosemite National Park. These routes are developed solely by the climbing community, as they are elsewhere. Climbers themselves place the anchors on climbs and rappel routes. An anchor is “checked,” or should be, each time a climber comes to it. If he finds an anchor of dubious quality (a subjective judgment all too frequently), he may or may not replace it. The next climber has the same choice. His knowledge of equipment and safe practices comes from his own experience, conversations with friends, instructors, magazine articles and books.293

292 Mrs. O.V. Nygaard to Mr. Bill Wendt, January 22, 1979, YOSAR office files.
Tim Setnicka elaborated on this need for professional SAR operations to encourage individual responsibility on the part of wilderness users rather than establish convoluted safety inspection programs or other difficult-to-manage precautionary measures. "The best SAR event never occurs," he wrote, "it is only heard as a story in the inn after an epic on the walls or whitewater standing waves that eventually turned out fine without injury... The optimal SAR team activity is sitting around the rescue cache playing checkers." Setnicka proposed a fifth requirement of effective search and rescue to precede the four he presented in *Wilderness Search and Rescue*. In addition to the team's responsibility to "locate, reach, treat, and evacuate" the victim, professional SAR operators - who in addition to being technically savvy rescuers were also to be highly educated experts in safe, enjoyable wilderness recreation – should be adept at what Setnicka called "Preventative Search and Rescue" or PSAR. Basing his analysis on his experiences in Yosemite, Setnicka argued that "the use of PSAR to prevent and minimize as many potentially dangerous situations as possible through education and training should be one of the main objectives of SAR work."  

Rescuers in Yosemite had been contributing analyses of rock climbing and other mountaineering-related accidents to the AAC's *Accidents in North American Mountaineering (ANAM)* since the late 1940s. Yet while *ANAM* had become a widely read and highly respected educational resource for serious wilderness enthusiasts, few casual visitors to the national parks had read or even heard of the publication. Beginning in 1980, John Dill, in cooperation with a publishing

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293 Charles W. Wendt to Mrs. O.V. Nygaard, undated, YOSAR office files.; This position was never codified in policy but became the generally accepted practice over time as the NPS struggled to formulate a more detailed climbing management policy. Due to legal issues and anticipated public relations disputes, such a policy has yet to be officially approved in Yosemite.

agent in San Francisco, began compiling reviews of accidents in Yosemite in a bi-annual report to be easily available to all park visitors. However, due to time constraints and a lack of funding, YOSAR discontinued the publication after only three issues. Tim Setnicka recognized the scope of this communication problem in his description of the average accident victim in Yosemite. Citing wilderness survival researchers Rick LaValle and Gene Fear, Setnicka offered a telling portrait of the typical next-generation wilderness enthusiast visiting Yosemite and other parks in this period:

The average SAR victim is a composite outdoorsperson, a combination of part climber, fisherman, hunter, skier, camper, hiker all blended into one. He or she usually does not practice any one sport particularly well, but joins in a multitude of activities to varying degrees. Most wilderness users reside in densely populated areas, travel relatively far for seasonal recreation, and have a reasonable amount of time and money to spend on these pursuits. Usually too much emphasis is placed in material equipment advances and the latest mechanical devices.

Search and rescue, as an accommodative policy, also functioned as a front-line administrative tool to preserve nature in the park, though only in accordance with the recreational expectations of this particular demographic.

In an era in which travel in undeveloped areas involved engaging with wild nature without changing it - an ethic the Sierra Club called “going light” or “walking softly in the wilderness” - few wilderness users had the skills to survive independently if an unexpected event cut short their desired wilderness experience. As historian James Morton Turner explains, over the course of the twentieth century, the importance of

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“woodcraft” or survival skills involving hunting, gathering wood for fires, and building shelters gave way to an ethic of detached contemplation in which the tools of wilderness travel became increasingly specialized commercial products, available at often exorbitantly high prices at specialty retailers. Taking into account this increasingly popular conception of wilderness as recreational space, the 1985 search and rescue plan for Yosemite included a number of preventative SAR duties including “counseling the victim, correcting sign inadequacies, changing district information/registration procedures, and conducting interpretive P-SAR programs.” Still, these policies had limitations and were often too little too late in educating over-ambitious wilderness users who ventured into dangerous terrain.

Indeed, while the analyses offered by Dill, Wendt, and Setnicka were reasonable and correct from an administrative perspective, the sheer numbers of recreational wilderness users the NPS willingly accommodated could not be counted on to always follow safety recommendations. The popular culture of wilderness recreation, which valued a sensation of isolation and personalized risk in a natural setting without being completely cut off from a sophisticated tourist infrastructure, positioned SAR among the most necessary and pragmatic administrative duties of the modern NPS. Yet visitor protection remained a reactive administrative responsibility to be performed after the fact as a search, rescue, or recovery. The NPS’s discretionary liability for ensuring visitor safety also remained reactive. Rock climbers or other wilderness users who partook in dangerous activities assumed the immediate risk of that activity on their own. Protected

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by the discretionary function exception of the Tort Claims Act, administrators rightly determined that the NPS could not reasonably perform extensive preventative safety maintenance without inviting costly legal penalties if accidents persisted. Farabee and Ghiglieri offer a characteristic NPS explanation of this paradox by attacking a notion that "every possible location in the American West where someone might die accidentally should be labeled with warning signs." Even if this were feasible, the authors argue, the issue of liability would remain. To extend visitor protection liability to such an unreasonable length would not only compromise the NPS’s assumed responsibility to not “change anything in wilderness,” such a policy would also remove the legal safeguards provided by the discretionary function exception of the Tort Claims Act and open up administrators to tort litigation since accidents and deaths would in all probability continue to occur. As Farabee’s and Ghiglieri’s analysis suggests, a conspicuously proactive safety infrastructure would be both impossible to maintain for the understaffed and under-funded NPS, and undesirable for the expanding cohort of environmentally enlightened but ill-prepared visitors seeking to experience the park “without handrails” in Joseph Sax’s terms. Though YOSAR required an ever higher percentage of the park’s limited annual budget in this period yet had little authority to directly prevent tragedies caused by the poor judgment of inexperienced victims, free SAR remained the most reliable and most cost effective means for the NPS to accommodate the expectations of the park’s most influential constituencies.

This realization did not deter attempts to cut costs. In the mid-1980s, search and rescue expenses in the national parks ratcheted up to previously unimagined numbers.

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299 Ghiglieri and Farabee, *Death in Yosemite*, 575.
Funding problems were especially acute in Yosemite where costs spiked from $155,443 in 1983 to $294,955 only one year later, an alarming ninety percent increase. Numbers of rescues were also up considerably. YOSAR performed a record 168 missions in 1984, a full fifty seven percent increase from the 110 incidents in 1983. Even more distressing for administrators in Yosemite, the park’s total rescue bill for 1984 accounted for nearly seventy percent of the total SAR costs for the entire Western Region. Much of this expense came from the use of helicopters from Lemoore Naval Air Station. While the “Lemoore Angels” rescue team remained necessary for “its winching capabilities and ability to access vertical walls,” Valley District Ranger Jim Reilly expressed confidence in YOSAR’s efforts to adapt the smaller contract helicopter, stationed at Crane Flat, to perform more specialized rescues. Crediting John Dill, Bob Reese, Steve Collum, Mead Hargis, and Mike Durr with developing new helicopter rescue capabilities including “the helicopter rappel program, the short haul program, and the rope throw equipment exchange program,” Reilly believed that YOSAR could increase the efficiency and speed of SAR missions while at the same time reducing costs. By 1987, YOSAR credited a marked expense reduction of approximately $50,000 for fourteen more rescues than in 1986 to these adaptations to the park’s contract helicopter. Yet through the early 1990s, these reductions proved less than significant if not illusory as SAR costs leapt again to more than $420,000 by 1991, presumably due to increased numbers of “searches, helicopter evacuations, and wall rescues” in that year.

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As SAR costs rose, NPS officials system-wide began reexamining the possibility of charging victims for simple helicopter evacuations. In a June 1981 decision prepared by the office of the Controller General of the United States, legal advisers unearthed an obscure amendment to the Department of Interior’s User Charge Statute which offered a way of “recouping the cost of Federal activities which provide a special benefit to the individual.” The decision established a legal precedent that would “allow the head of an agency to charge the beneficiary for the value of the service rendered and help agency activities to be self sustaining.”

Writing to the Regional Director of the western region that prior to this decision “National Park Service policy did not conform with National Park Service practice,” NPS Director Stanley Albright incorrectly assumed that ambulance services were already being charged to evacuees. In many parks including Grand Canyon and Sequoia-Kings Canyon this had indeed been the case; in these parks the Controller’s decision had little effect other than legitimizing administrators’ established practice. In Yosemite where the distinction between an air ambulance evacuation and a technical rescue remained vague, the superintendent’s office had stopped billing helicopter evacuees in 1974, determining that the policy was unfeasible, insensitive, and probably without legal grounds.

Administrators in Yosemite paid only passing attention to the Controller General’s decision, in part because the funds collected through the User Charge Statute would have

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to be deposited into a service-wide treasury account and "would only be available through appropriations."[^304] Facing serious budget deficiencies, YOSAR officials hoped to use any monies that could conceivably be collected from evacuees or their insurance policies to pay for much needed training programs, rescue cache expansions, PSAR programs, and wages for emergency hires. In a November 1983 memo to Jim Reilly, Mike Durr argued that without these improvements YOSAR would be put in "a dangerously reactionary posture." If additional funding could not be secured, Durr feared that YOSAR "will be forced deeper into the hole of unpreparedness."[^305] In fact, earlier that year Reilly had initiated a creative, under-the-table means to recover costs and deposit them directly into the park's own emergency fund. Instead of billing rescues, the park would "solicit donations from persons using the ambulance service and have the proceeds go to the [Yosemite] Mountain Safety Fund."[^306] Reilly prepared an ingenuously suggestive letter to be released to victims evacuated by helicopter along with a self addressed return envelope. The "donation" request read:

The ambulance service you received was provided by Yosemite National Park out of the operating funds provided by the National Park Service. In these times of shrinking budgets the Park Service is finding it increasingly difficult to provide funds for that service. We need your help. If you received this service in any of the outlying areas you would be billed a rate of approximately $85 for the call-out and $5 per mile thereafter. We ask your help in offsetting these costs by making a tax deductible donation to a non-profit rescue fund... Thank you for your contribution.[^307]

[^306]: Jim Reilly to All Concerned, January 6, 1983.
The donation program enabled YOSAR and the park’s medical clinic to afford desperately needed supplies while avoiding the time-consuming burden of collections and the sensitive legality of demanding repayment.

Such a policy did not go unchallenged. The Department of Interior caught wind of this practice in 1994 during a system-wide audit of SAR and emergency medical services (EMS) practices. Still, auditors were less concerned with how the national parks recovered funds than what administrators did with collected monies and for which services individual parks chose to bill victims. In the final survey report, Assistant Inspector General Judy Harrison found that approximately $4.5 million in SAR and EMS charges system-wide were not recovered in 1993 and that collections of $757,800 “were inappropriately retained by park units.” The problem, according to Harrison, was that while the Controller General had legitimized collections, the NPS had “not established uniform procedures that ensure[d] the recovery of all appropriate costs associated with providing emergency assistance to park visitors.”

Still, the audit did not specifically define which expenses could be charged to the victim and which could not. Policy had historically allowed parks to charge for medical care received in park clinics and some ground ambulance services, yet the line between EMS and SAR expenses remained unclear. Moreover, while Death Valley National Monument, Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Park, and a number of smaller NPS-managed parks had been depositing most of their recovered funds into “the proper U.S. Treasury account;” Yosemite and Grand Canyon in particular had been recycling these funds back into the parks’ individual operating budgets in order to pay for new equipment.

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training programs, and other miscellaneous costs not adequately covered under
emergency appropriations. The Inspector General recommended in the initial report that
the NPS establish a uniform, system-wide policy for billing victims and for depositing
recovered funds into the designated treasury account.\textsuperscript{309}

The Park Service responded in defense of its historical practice of not charging for
SAR events. The NPS Ranger Activities Office argued that the legality of cost recovery
only covered “special benefits to recipients beyond those accruing to the general public.”
To extend this definition to park visitors who became lost, stranded, injured, or killed
would “stretch reason” and compromise the mission of the modern NPS to provide
opportunities for wilderness recreation in the parks. Charging for SAR events beyond
simple medical services could also negate the protection from tort liability provided by
the discretionary function exception in the Tort Claims Act.\textsuperscript{310} A joint statement agreed
upon by the 369 administrative units under NPS management stated: “If the NPS charges
a visitor a fee for SAR, then the government is receiving payment for a specific service to
be rendered and the activity is no longer a discretionary action. Charging fees will
certainly increase tort liability along with increasing the number of SARs by giving
people the false perceptions that rescue is automatic because they paid a fee.” Moreover,
if the NPS charged for rescues, accident victims may be reluctant to request a rescue in a
timely manner. If this occurred, costs for SAR could become even higher while instances

\textsuperscript{309} Ibid; The audit report found that Yosemite had not collected on SAR service of approximately
\$113,000 in 1993, though Harrison did not specify how the Inspector General determined the legal viability
of collection on these bills. Harrison also calculated that Yosemite had successfully collected
approximately \$285,100 in medical costs between 1991 and 1994, all but about 7.5% of which was retained
by either YOSAR or the park’s medical clinic, or deposited in a general park operating fund.

\textsuperscript{310} Chief, Ranger Activities Division to Acting Inspector General for Audits, re: “Comments on Draft
Survey Report on Emergency Medical and Search and Rescue Services, National Park Service,” October
13, 1995, YOSAR office files.
of serious injury or death would also likely rise. These arguments stalled Department of
Interior attempts to order parks to demand repayment for SAR operations and
universalize procedures. In 1996, the Inspector General determined that “given that
this is a sensitive area,” a final policy decision would await NPS “guidance on whether to
charge fees for search and rescue services.”

NPS legal advisors and SAR operators took this opportunity to defend each individual
park’s discretion to provide free rescue - even with the high cost and potential to
encourage irresponsible recreational habits - as an integral component of national park
policy. In May of 1999, the Deputy Associate Solicitors for the Division of Conservation
and Wildlife and the Division of General Law released an exhaustive study of case law
outlining the delicate protection afforded to NPS SAR services under the discretionary
function exemption in the Tort Claims Act. Short of either constructing extensive safety
accommodations into backcountry areas or discontinuing EMS/SAR services altogether
and closing these areas, the report concluded that individual administrators should be
permitted to determine the limits of their liability to perform SAR functions based on
considerations indigenous to each respective park. Such a policy, the authors explained,
“would help ensure the consistency recommended by the Inspector General. At the same
time, allowing each park to select the model that best fits its needs provides the flexibility
necessary for an effective EMS/SAR program.”

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311 “SAR and EMS IG Comments,” attachment to “Comments on Draft Survey Report on Emergency
Medical and Search and Rescue Services.”

312 Harrison, “National Park Service Response and Office of Inspector General Reply,” attachment to
These recommendations enabled administrators in Yosemite to adapt YOSAR to the malleable constructions of nature and changing expectations of visitors into the twenty-first century. As Farabee and Ghiglieri explain:

Most of the nearly four million people each year who drive or fly out of their way to visit Yosemite do so not because they have been assured that it has been made as safe as (or safer than) their local neighborhood park. Instead, they come to experience an inspirational and unique chunk of wild scenery… Some people come here specifically to push their own limits and to test themselves – to go up to “the edge.” Although a few visitors may want to see the Park completely “danger-proofed,” most of us know it is instead our job to safeguard ourselves by respecting its hazards.

Even with the assumption of risk implicit in modern ideas of wilderness recreation, a technologically sophisticated search and rescue apparatus continued to be necessary in Yosemite and other parks. Accidents persisted and few visitors to the national parks could be expected to possess the diversity of skills necessary to help themselves when they made mistakes, and even fewer park goers desired a wilderness experience entirely disconnected from the safeguards of technological society. Visitor protection thus remained a critical administrative responsibility; and while NPS policy determined that administrators could feasibly charge rescuees as recipients of “special benefits…beyond those received by the general public,” to do so would compromise the legal protections and autonomy the NPS possessed in facilitating the faux wilderness experience desired by the most active visitors to the national parks.  

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313 Memorandum, Deputy Associate Solicitor, Division of Conservation and Wildlife and Deputy Associate Solicitor, Division of General Law to Director, National Park Service, May 11, 1999, YOSAR office files.

314 Farabee and Ghigieri, Death in Yosemite, 577.

315 Memorandum, Deputy Associate Solicitor to Director, NPS, May 11, 1999.; Also see Mike Gautier, et al., Report to Congress: Analysis of Cost Recovery for High Altitude Rescues on Mt. McKinley, Denali...
In the NPS’s initial reply to the Inspector General’s 1995 audit, the authors had concluded that, in fact, rescuees did not receive a special benefit from the federal government because the “SAR/EMS function is totally humanitarian in character, having nothing to do with...commercialism.”[^316] Yet NPS analysts, in espousing this characteristic ambivalence to the role of consumer culture in informing nearly every aspect of resource protection policy in the national parks, did not grasp the entire significance of their determination to not charge victims for rescues. Indeed, the decision represented far more than an altruistic effort to save lives, cut costs, protect the NPS from tort claims, and avoid sluggish bureaucratic procedures; free search and rescue also enabled the Park Service to manage vast undeveloped portions of the parks for wilderness recreation. Only if the NPS continued to grant individual SAR units flexibility and independence in their decision making capabilities could Yosemite and other iconic parks remain free to limit conspicuous tourism development and yet still provide reasonably safe conditions for the types of recreation preferred by park users in an age of heightened ecological awareness. While no NPS policy decisions could ever be entirely free from commercial influence, YOSAR’s wilderness handrails offered a pragmatic reconciliation of the illusory preservation/use dichotomy that had long divided environmentalists, park administrators, politicians, and nature lovers in the twentieth century movement to preserve nature in Yosemite and the national parks.

CONCLUSION

To limit analysis of the national parks to a question of whether or not the National Park Service advanced an appropriately ecological standard of preservation in the parks, as environmental historians have traditionally done, is to gloss over the complex political, cultural, and administrative imperatives shaping far more interesting debates over the meaning of nature in post-industrial American society. The history of search and rescue in Yosemite, as an administrative response to new ways of reconciling nature, technology, and tourism in the age of environmentalism, provides a link to these often misunderstood stories. The evolution of SAR, from a loosely defined, heroic duty of park rangers in the early twentieth century to a technologically sophisticated, professional responsibility of a specialized rescue force by the 1970s, also moves historical analysis of the national parks beyond the much traveled terrain of automobiles and wilderness in the modern national parks movement. The administrative decisions leading to the creation of YOSAR in the late 1960s and early 1970s revealed the complicated ways in which consumers of wilderness recreation reconciled nature, technology, and tourism once they left their cars behind. Visitor protection became the most tangible administrative tool by which the National Park Service could build positive relationships with an influential minority of rock climbers and other wilderness users without compromising its long-standing obligation to maintain the parks as democratic spaces set aside for the enjoyment of a
diverse constituency of nature lovers, even those unfamiliar with the potential dangers of risk-oriented, self-reliant wilderness recreation.

The professionalization of search and rescue in Yosemite reflected the changing recreational preferences of touring Americans in the twentieth century. Beginning in 1916, Steven Mather and Horace Albright, the first directors of the National Park Service, began working to transform the great parks of the American West from distant symbols of monumental nature to sought-after tourist sites accessible to a broad demographic of increasingly mobile middle class Americans. As more and more visitors vied for access to the scenic qualities of the parks, a growing number of ambitious nature enthusiasts began venturing out beyond the roads and other urban facilities that the NPS had constructed to accommodate surging visitation. In Yosemite through the interwar years, members of the Sierra Club began experimenting with rock climbing, backcountry camping, ski-mountaineering, and other wilderness-oriented activities that emphasized physical interaction with vast stretches of undeveloped terrain and a sensation of isolation from the increasingly congested, urban atmosphere of the Valley. As these potentially dangerous forms of wilderness recreation became more popular through the 1930s and especially in the postwar years, the Park Service was forced to pay closer attention to its stipulated responsibility to provide for the safety of visitors. The gradual implementation of a formal search and rescue apparatus became the most pragmatic means for the NPS to accommodate these new recreational demands while balancing them against auto-touring and other more traditional park uses.

The decades following World War II brought unprecedented changes to American society and to the culture of tourism in the national parks. As millions of newly affluent

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middle class Americans moved westward to the sprawling urban centers of California, the Sunbelt, and the Pacific Northwest, Yosemite and the great parks of the American West became more accessible to more people than at any time in their history. With the galvanization of the environmental movement following the Sierra Club’s fight to save Dinosaur National Monument in the mid 1950s and the passing of the Wilderness Act in 1964, national park visitors brought with them an increasingly heightened, though often inconsistent, awareness of ecology and the social values of wilderness preservation. This new emphasis did not lessen the commercial appeal of the parks but only engendered more diverse and sophisticated recreational preferences among touring Americans. Specialty outdoor retailers including Patagonia, Recreational Equipment Incorporated, Ski Hut, North Face, Eddie Bauer, and countless others sprouted up across the nation to meet the needs of this growing number of wilderness lovers seeking access to the vast undeveloped portions of their public lands. As iconic nature preserves, Yosemite and the wilderness parks of the West attracted unprecedented legions of hikers, backpackers, rock climbers, cross-country skiers, fishermen, rafters, and other consumers of strenuous outdoor sports. Seeking solitude, self-reliance, and risk through immersion in wild nature, the millions of neophyte wilderness enthusiasts flocking to the parks in this period instilled the National Park Service with an urgent awareness of the need to develop a capable, professional visitor protection infrastructure.

The administrative decisions leading to the creation of YOSAR in the late 1960s and early 1970s reflected this need to ensure visitor safety; yet the process also underscored the complex cultural, legal, and political imperatives the NPS faced in determining how nature would be preserved in Yosemite and who would be permitted to experience it. In
an era in which ecology began to inform land management philosophies, and popular environmental culture increasingly valued experiencing “nature for its own sake,” the NPS understandably prioritized recreational activities that required a landscape free from obvious signs of human agency. To avoid the very real possibility that increased numbers of backpackers, rock climbers, and other park users would “love the wilderness to death,” the Park Service implemented a backcountry permit process while also promoting the often repeated mantras of “going light,” or “walking softly in the wilderness,” and later, “leave no trace.” Such policies encouraged visitors to engage with nature in the park without changing it, an ethic that further increased the importance of the outdoor recreation industry and the technologies it provided to park goers. The culture of wilderness recreation evolved contingent to these innovations in technology and other developments in the commercial marketplace.

As Joseph Sax pointed out, wilderness activities also carried a stigma of elitism. Many park supporters viewed backpacking, ski mountaineering, and rock climbing in particular as accessible only to the most physically fit, self-reliant, and ideologically inclined park users. As an institution founded on democratic principles and the notion that the wilderness experience in the nation’s parks should be accessible to a broad demographic, the National Park Service had neither the will nor the capability to limit participation in wilderness recreation based on the relative physical fitness or experience level of individual visitors. At the same time, intense political pressure, represented most clearly by the passing of the Wilderness Act in 1964 and the changing preferences of the park-going public in the age of environmentalism, had precluded the modern NPS from pursuing Mission 66-style expansions to its long-standing automobile-based tourist
infrastructure. For administrators in Yosemite, democratizing wilderness recreation hinged most concretely on the active maintenance of safety standards. Yet proactive safety measures including additional roads, backcountry huts, conspicuous warning signs, and metal railings at remote overlooks could also compromise the sensation of self-reliance and individualized risk that wilderness enthusiasts considered integral to the national park experience. The NPS’s institutionalization of a technologically proficient, and predominantly reactive, search and rescue service provided free of charge by the federal government remained critical to managing Yosemite as a wilderness park without alienating less experienced constituencies.

Though the presence of a free rescue service in Yosemite rendered the wilderness experience accessible to a broader constituency, participants in wilderness-oriented activities remained independently responsible for practicing good judgment, as exemplified by the tragic death of three climbers on El Capitan in May of 1978. By assuming the financial burden of rescue and establishing discretionary limits on its visitor protection capabilities, the National Park Service could protect itself from tort claims filed by accident victims. Despite the very real risk of bodily harm or violent death an adventure into the vertical landscapes of Yosemite held, the NPS established few restrictions limiting the autonomy of rock climbers, backpackers, hikers, fishermen, skiers, and other user groups to push the boundaries of risk in their respective wilderness encounters. The psychic assurance that YOSAR inspired, even with no guarantees, gave even the most ill-prepared visitors the confidence to imagine that they could engage with nature in Yosemite on its own terms. Administrators’ decision to provide free SAR rather than restrict dangerous activities or expand development projects to accommodate
automobile-based tourism blurred the lines between preservation and use in national park policy and empowered the generation of wilderness enthusiasts converging on Yosemite beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Both the NPS and the majority of visitors embraced the wilderness experience this SAR infrastructure facilitated not as a transcendent escape from modernity, but as a recreational supplement to a postmodern lifestyle of leisure. Rock climbing, backpacking, and other wilderness activities became desirable additions to the changing scope of leisure in American culture. As a product of rising affluence and the emergence of quality of life environmentalism in the early 1970s, the much sought-after wilderness experience satisfied a popular impulse to come in contact with a simulacrum of wild nature through recreation. Yet, as in nearly every aspect of middle class environmental culture at this time, consumers of wilderness recreation desired the effect of the wilderness experience without the negative consequences the experience could bring. Search and rescue enabled this new generation of outdoor enthusiasts to not only have their cake and eat it too; or in this case, to preserve their wilderness and experience it too; but also to be rescued from it in the event of an accident.

Rescue specialist Kenneth Andrasko, in his editorial introduction to Tim Setnicka’s *Wilderness Search and Rescue*, described the basic assumption by which visitor protection services in the national parks framed their operational imperatives: “Salvation from death is a mainstay of the American Dream of the good life and perpetual youth,” he wrote. “Since the mountains are no longer miserable or frightening but instead a place for relaxing and a source of spiritual and physical rejuvenation, the possibility of rescue from them is pretty much taken for granted. The Wilderness is considered a place for
recreation, not trial.” In Andrasko’s pragmatic framework, search and rescue performed a vital function in facilitating the wilderness experience in national parks. Though a few extraordinarily dedicated individuals still desired to “perform superhuman feats of will” in places where “travelers perish when they make mistakes,” Andrasko acknowledged what many romantic wilderness celebrants were loathe to admit yet most visitors knew intuitively: that the presence of a professional search and rescue service was in most cases a pre-ordained requirement of a safe, enjoyable wilderness experience. “Rescue is a strong affirmation of the bonds of society,” Andrasko stated in his unwaveringly frank analysis of the postmodern wilderness experience, “it just takes the form of something that needs to be done.”

As a professional rescuer, Andrasko understood that the idea of wilderness derived directly from the culture of tourism that many preservationists sought to reject. The ambivalence that Andrasko took as a given pervaded the preservationist tradition in the national parks movement. Even the most stridently anti-populist advocates of the wilderness ideal ultimately communicated their messages in recreational terms through the familiar channels of consumer capitalism. In his 1968 bestseller Desert Solitaire, Edward Abbey went so far as to demand that the National Park Service encourage visitors to “get lost, sunburnt, stranded, drowned, eaten by bears, [and] buried alive under avalanches,” since as he argued, “that is the right and privilege of any free American.” Perhaps unintentionally, but not surprisingly, Abbey’s compelling polemic against “industrial tourism” struck a sympathetic chord with a new generation of wilderness


318 Ibid., iv.
enthusiasts who rushed to encounter the parks first hand. Embracing Abbey’s distaste for
the “indolent millions born on wheels and suckled on gasoline,” the growing number of
rucksack-toting wilderness lovers making their way to the parks in the 1970s sought what
Abbey called a “self propelled” wilderness experience either on foot, on skis, by mule, by
paddle, or hand-over-hand tied-in to climbing ropes. This influential user group did not
support a truly punitive wilderness ideal in which humans and their technologies were
excluded from preserved nature, but instead sought to assert a recreational hierarchy and
a freedom to risk life and limb in nature that seemed threatened by the Park Service’s
traditional mission to accommodate mass-tourism.319

In Yosemite, rock climbers, more so than any other user group, embodied this
ambivalent tension between consumerism and wilderness in the modern national parks
movement. The cohort of “climbing bums” carving a simple existence out of the dust,
pines, and boulders of Camp 4 through the 1960s and early 1970s simultaneously
facilitated and resisted the transformation of their sport into a mainstream recreational
pursuit. The environmental ethic of “clean climbing” that Yvon Chouinard embraced as
the foundation of his business philosophy in the 1972 Chouinard Equipment Catalogue
had a dual effect on the culture of wilderness recreation. In one sense the catalogue, with
its dramatic photos of wild mountains and message of environmental sensitivity, tapped
into the romance of the wilderness experience that had captivated American tourists since
the late nineteenth century. Yet clean climbing also carried a set of elitist environmental

standards that Chouinard hoped would limit an influx of neophytes, who he referred to as “average Joes,” into the rock climbing brotherhood.320

While administrators in Yosemite embraced the environmental message of clean climbing, the contention that climbing could not be democratic seemed to counteract the NPS’s mandate to provide for the enjoyment of the parks. To communicate the environmental and technological imperatives of Yosemite climbing to inexperienced visitors, administrators promoted the park as a world class climbing destination, opening a mountaineering school in the Valley in 1969 and highlighting the park’s vast climbing opportunities in promotional materials. While many elite climbers resented the NPS’s endorsement of their sport, such programs had the effect of indoctrinating new climbers into the philosophies that Chouinard and others had been promoting through their own connections to the commercial marketplace. In this way, administrators negotiated a fragile consensus with climbers over the transformation of their sport into a legitimate wilderness experience in the nation’s premier park.

Yet the generation of wilderness enthusiasts converging on Yosemite in this period could not be expected to fully educate themselves to the strict standards of safety and responsibility in equipment use that elite climbers had honed after years of practice. Not surprisingly, climbing accidents increased at an alarming rate through the 1970s and 1980s, comprising anywhere from twelve to twenty five percent of the park’s approximately 150 annual SAR missions. The park’s ranger force struggled to keep pace with the sophisticated, and often dangerous, rescue techniques that rock climbing

mishaps required. In order to avoid dealing with an inordinate number of serious injuries and violent deaths on Yosemite’s cliffs, park officials cultivated a working relationship with the highly skilled contingent of climbing bums residing in Camp 4 through this period. The creation of the rescue site in 1971 incorporated climbers into the park’s maturing rescue apparatus and contributed to the formation of a distinct SAR culture in Yosemite. For this select group of Camp 4 climbing bums, rock climbing and rescue transformed from recreation to a professional responsibility. The creation of an internal SAR force not only reflected the specialization of the NPS in this period, it also linked the perennially antagonistic counterculture of Yosemite rock climbing to the pragmatic administrative responsibilities of the Park Service.

The professionalization of SAR in Yosemite in the 1970s and 1980s, in addition to underscoring the administrative challenges facing the modern NPS, also illuminated a long-standing debate within environmental culture over the role of technology in mediating the human relationship to nature. As the manufacturer of the best climbing gear in the world and a leader in the development of environmental ethics in business, Yvon Chouinard described this sliding scale as a “technological gradient” in which some technologies “enslaved...post-industrial man” while others “set him free” by providing opportunities to come in closer contact with wild nature. Delineating appropriate “style” in the application of technology informed not only the culture of rock climbing and other wilderness-oriented activities, but also guided the technological imperative in effective SAR. “We must control technology, not be enslaved to it,” warned Tim Setnicka in Wilderness Search and Rescue. “We should not let the helicopter separate us

321 Yvon Chouinard, Climbing Ice (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1978), 185-188.
from the basic technique of movement in the wilderness: climbing, staying physically fit, [and] preparing to survive the unanticipated bivouac.” Emphasizing Chouinard’s technological gradient as the determining factor in professional SAR, Setnicka continued: “The burden of style and ethics is always with us. Often the manner in which goals and objectives are reached is the distinction between a professional performer or organization and an ineffective one.”

As the wilderness ideal continues to inform environmental culture and politics into the twenty-first century, the manner in which these intersections between technology, commercialism, and the human relationship to nature are negotiated in environmental discourse persists as an ongoing struggle for rescuers, consumers of outdoor recreation, environmentalists, the National Park Service, and other interest groups. The boundaries dictating the appropriate role of technology in mediating this relationship to nature remain elusive and highly contingent to the ever-changing cultural preferences of outdoor enthusiasts, as indicated by environmental historian John Heron’s recent analysis of the role of cell phones and handheld Global Positioning Systems (GPS devices) in facilitating wilderness travel. “For every voice touting the safety advantages of hiking with cell phones,” Heron finds, “there is another that shouts cellular technology poses a danger to the health and sanctity of western nature.” This discussion of safety as an indicator of a particular technology’s suitability to the wilderness experience underscores the vital significance of SAR to understanding the meaning of nature and the value of the national parks in American culture. As the wilderness handrails of Yosemite, the rangers, rock

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climbers, medical technicians, law enforcement officials, and military personnel comprising the human element of YOSAR have played central roles in locating Leo Marx's "middle landscape" in the evolving reconciliation of nature, technology, and tourism in the national parks movement.
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