

The Mysterious Instructor

During a family vacation to Yosemite National Park in 1980 my family visited the beautiful waterfalls, granite cliffs, mountain meadows, and magnificent overlooks of one of the most beautiful parks in the world. We camped in a platform tent at Camp Curry among a compound of tents clustered near the Camp Curry Amphitheater and restrooms. The semi-permanent tent in which we spent the nights was mounted on a four-foot high platform to discourage foraging bears from disturbing sleeping tourists.

Camping in Camp Curry was unique, because our entire family of six, plus Jeannette's seventy-five-year-old mother, shared a single tent. Fortunately, the beds had mattresses on metal frames instead of pads on the ground. Even so, Jeannette's mom found it challenging and fearful to descend the steps in the semi-darkness at night to find the outhouse while watching for bears.

On the second day during our vacation to Yosemite, I saw an announcement on the bulletin board near the restrooms, offering free lessons in nature photography to anyone who would meet a Park Naturalist at six a.m. Saturday morning near the amphitheater. My oldest daughter, Michelle, who was twelve at the time, had recently taken to photography, and was considering making it a career. I asked her if she would like to go with me to pick up pointers on nature photography. With some slight reluctance, because of the early hour, she agreed.

We arrived at the appointed time and place the next morning to find a grizzled, older gentleman who greeted us carrying a walking stick but no camera. He explained that he was offering hints on taking early morning photographs, not taking ones himself. Michelle had brought a small point-and-shoot camera she had recently purchased that wasn't fancy, but our instructor said it would be adequate for the purposes of the morning.

We waited for about ten minutes for other early morning adventurers, but apparently, no one else felt the call for artistic expression so early in the morning. Our leader headed into the bush and took us to several locations, where Michelle could capture the sun reflected from cliffs and crevasses above the valley floor.

The summer sky was clear of clouds, so there was little opportunity for photographs with complex interactions of colors, shadows, and shapes.

Our mysterious instructor helped position Michelle for the best camera angles and offered advice on composition. But, his opportunity for serious assistance was hampered by the light conditions and Michelle's simple camera. He did offer one photographer's trick that both Michelle and I have used to advantage many times since.

After the sun rose about ten degrees above the canyon walls, he taught us how to photograph trees, branches, and rocks toward the sun. Normally one tries to avoid shooting into the sun, but he showed us how to align an object between the photographer and the sun, such as a tree or branch, so that much of the direct light was blocked. Highly unusual photographs of light rays, shadows, and diffuse colors could then be captured.

After about ninety minutes of gently offering comments on how to approach a subject and photographing how it feels, not how it looks, he said goodbye and walked off through the woods. He never told us his name or much about himself. He walked quietly among the trees and along the valley floor, almost as if he were saying goodbye to the Canyon around him.

Michelle continued to develop her photographic skills after that brief encounter, bought progressively better cameras, and even took pictures for college yearbooks and weddings. Today she continues to take pictures and has a flare for balance and composition.

Twenty-five years after meeting that mysterious nature photographer in Yosemite, I ran across an article about Ansel Adams, the world-famous black and white nature photographer. By that time, I had become strongly attracted to his art, displayed prominently in galleries and museums all over the world. I loved his crisp images of mountains, trees, and nature scenes. Two of his most famous images were "Moon and Half Dome" and "The Tetons and the Snake River."

The article I read about him, talked about the photo gallery he maintained in Yosemite Valley to display and sell his works. Many, if not most, of his

photographs were of scenes in Yosemite. I realized he spent a lot of time there, but was unaware that he had a shop, even after visiting Yosemite many times.

But, the part of the article that intrigued me most was the segment that told of his short, morning trips to teach people how to photograph the Valley early in the morning. I suddenly wondered, "Is it possible that Ansel Adams had been the mysterious instructor on photography to Michelle and me in 1980?"

A year or so later, I was leading a tour group in Yosemite Valley for the Institute for Creation Research, and had the opportunity to locate Adam's photo gallery that was still open and selling his art. I approached one of the older staff members and inquired if Ansel Adams had ever taken campers for early morning hikes to teach photography. He confirmed, yes, that it was his custom to recruit campers from Camp Curry and show them the techniques of nature photography anonymously. He had done it for years, with few ever knowing who he was.

Just to be sure I wasn't accidentally spinning a yarn about him, I checked to see when he was actively conducting his anonymous tours. I found that he had practiced teaching a few students at a time in Yosemite until his death in 1984, four years after we met him.

I was impressed by Ansel Adam's quiet demeanor, his humble spirit, and his ability to hike through the mountains and valleys at eighty years of age. I don't know what his religious beliefs or philosophy of life were, but I sensed a common thread of peace in his spirit, like others I've known who were influenced by contact with the Yosemite Valley.

There is something about the sweetness of the Valley, the gurgling of the river, and the majesty of the mountains that impress peace and tranquility on those who have spent much time there. I've only been in Yosemite a total of, maybe, thirty days, but I've also been affected by it. I don't worship Yosemite Valley, but I worship the One who created it, and give Him credit for the effect it has on people.