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Reminiscence of John Muir by Griswold, M.S.

M. S. Griswold

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Waukesha, Wis. March 30, 1917.

Prof. William Frederic Bade,
Boston, Mass.

Dear Sir:

Conforming to your courteous request made to me in yours of the 20th instant, I cheerfully submit the following as some of my recollections respecting John Muir, the late great naturalist of California.

My acquaintance with him personally was in connection with my college life at the State University, at Madison, Wisconsin.

It began about April 1, 1861, at which time I returned to my classes at Madison, having by reason of ill health been home on my father's farm during the previous year.

On my return to school at the date above mentioned I found John Muir at the University, having a room and pursuing a mixed course of study, a course selected by himself and including Latin, chemistry, geology, and something in the line of mathematics.

I soon found him out and called upon him, and was greatly surprised as well as interested by the several ingenious pieces of mechanism he had constructed and placed in his room.

Among them was a curious thermometer of his own device and also a barometer and a clock hanging up on one of the walls shaped as a scythe and snath, the snath being a rugged piece of a small sapling in about the shape of a regular snath, and at one end of it a wooden scythe along which were appended twelve wheels, they representing the months of the year, and all in exact movement and designating the months of the year as well as the more minute divisions of time. Above this scythe-clock, if I may so term it, was a large label lettered, - "The Scythe of Time."

Then there was the famous big clock of his own invention and construction so fully described in his late work, - "The Story of my Boyhood and Youth." As to this big clock and all the uses its ingenious builder made of it, I can only refer to his own story in regard to the same, so fully and artlessly told in the book referred to and where may be seen an illustration of the clock just as I remember it.

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By means of this clock and proper wire connections with his bed he would set himself on his feet any hour in the morning he might have determined on the night before. The boys at the University had the story in circulation at one time that Muir had suggested to Prof. Sterling, the head then of the faculty, that with that clock and wires sufficient he could rouse all the students from their beds at any morning hour he might designate. Possibly this was gotten up as a joke, but I have no doubt he could have done it.

He had a clock also which he brought into play in lighting his fires each morning at the schoolhouse in which he taught a country school in the Town of Westport, North of Madison.

This season of his teaching was during the winter of 1861-2, and I also taught a school the same winter. On closing my school about the last of March I of course returned to Madison and I found Muir already there and back in his room. I at once sought him out and, after exchanging congratulations and detailing to each other some of our teaching experiences, almost the first question he asked was, -"Griswold, did you make your own fires while you were out teaching?" "Of course I did" I replied. "We had no janitor and I boarded around and had to be at the school by eight every morning to get the fire started so it would be comfortable and warm when the scholars began to pour in." "Well," says he, "I did that too for the first week, but no longer. I then made my clock you see there do that job for me." "O Muir", said I, "You can make your clocks do most anything: but how did you manage it?"

He then went on and explained the process, how towards four in the afternoon of each day he would let the fire in the large box-stove die down and when school was dismissed he would thoroughly clean out the stove, put in some shavings and kindlings and on top of those the oak wood, and just at the inward edge of the stove-hearth and near the shavings he would place a teaspoonful or so of powdered sugar and chlorate of potash and then at top of the stove-door would suspend a small vial, upright of course, containing a couple drops of sulphuric acid. This vial then he would by means of a wire connect with his

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clock and so adjust it that at eight the next morning the vial, in consequence of a slight strain on the wire caused by the clock, would be inverted and would drop the acid on the chemicals below. This of course would cause an instant ignition, set afire the shavings and kindlings, and when he would come to his school a little before nine, he would invariably find the fire going finely and the schoolhouse nice and warm.

In the book I have before mentioned Muir gives me credit with having given him his first lesson in botany and which sent him to the woods and meadows to study God's plant-world. To the same fact he alluded in a letter he wrote me several years ago wherein he mentioned his grateful remembrance of that first lesson.

How I chanced to become the humble instrument of spurring his attention to that subject was something like this. During 1860, while home on the farm, I took up by myself the study of botany, and during the summer and fall of that year every new plant I would find in the woods I would eagerly pluck, stem and flower both, take it home with me, locate its name by help of the analytical tables in Wood's Botany, and put the plant in my botanical press with a label as to its name and when and where found, preparatory to putting it finally into my herbarium. I became enthusiastic in the study of plants and flowers and continued so during my future course at the University.

Hence it was the most natural thing in the world that, probably along in June, 1861, should have occurred the little incident under the locust tree, which Muir tells of in his book and my then calling his attention to the likeness of the locust flower to that of the pea, bean or vetch. But it was not until several days after this incident that he procured a work on botany. On a Saturday, I think the next Saturday after the incident spoken of, I had been out on a long ramble and collected a number of new fresh flowers. On the following Sunday morning I took them out on the Campus to analyze them and put them in my press. While I was thus engaged Muir came along and stopped to watch me. After a few minutes as I placed a plant in the press, telling

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him I had found its name, he observed it seemed wonderful to him how I so easily got at the name of a new flower. I bade him sit down by me and see how I did it. He sat down and I took up a plant with the flowers on it, remarking that it was a new one to me, but I thought I could soon locate it. I called his attention carefully to all parts of the plant, to the arrangement of its leaves and of the different organs of the flower, and then went step by step through the analytical tables, having him note every link in the process, until at length I located the name, generic and specific, and full description of the plant we had under investigation. He said, - "Why, Griswold, that is perfectly wonderful. I am going to get me a Botany at once and then we can ramble the woods together." In less than a week he had bought for himself a work on Botany, the same kind I had, and from that time until June, 1863, we went together on many a botanical excursion over the prairies, among the woods and around the lakes of Dane County. In all these rambles we had with each other Muir's enthusiasm whenever he would catch sight of a new flower seemed almost unbounded. From the first day I knew him his love of Nature in all her aspects appeared to be a prominent trait in his character.

During the spring of 1863 we both attended the lectures of Dr. Carr on advanced chemistry, geology and botany, and ^{it} was during that time that Muir got up, in his room he explained it to me, a delicate contrivance enclosed in glass by which could be made visible the daily growth of plants and the action on them of the sunlight.

All his fellow-students and his instructors thought, and very naturally, that he would distinguish himself as an inventor. Doubtless he could have done so. But soon his love of Nature overcame his every other impulse and led him in paths which caused him to become eventually the world's greatest authority on the glaciers of the Pacific Coast.

He was one of the most companionable of men I have ever met with, and his warm, genial and sympathetic nature is well attested by those who at different times have been associated with him in his explorations of the mountains of California and of the glaciers of Alaska. He was utterly free from all affectation, and gifted with the happy faculty of

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being able to express his thoughts on any subject aptly, and to put before the eye the very picture, as it were, of whatever he attempted to describe graphically, and at the same time clearly and with a beautiful simplicity of diction. This may be seen from the reading of his many contributions found in different magazines descriptive of scenes about the Yosemite Valley, the Yellowstone Park and other places, and in his story of "Stickeen", or "A Day with a Dog"- the latter a tale called by one writer the greatest dog story ever written.

I never personally met with the subject of this sketch after of my graduation in 1863. But of our associations together during the days of our student life at the University I shall always treasure the most fond and vivid recollections. The last communication I had from him was not long before his death, and in it he spoke of the work he was then engaged in writing, quite an elaborate one on Alaska. He remarked in that letter that the subject grew upon him and his hardest problem in preparing the work was to decide what to put in it and what to leave out.

Trusting that the matters I have set forth in the forgoing pages, though perhaps not new, may not be altogether without interest,

I remain Very Sincerely Yours,

M. S. Snowball.