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Reminiscence of John Muir by McChesney, Mrs.

Mrs. McChesney

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Reminiscences of John Muir
by
Mrs. McChesney

September 22, 1916.

We had offered John Muir a room with us, and he stayed there a whole winter (address 1364 Franklin St., Oakland.) The year, I think, was 187⁷³⁻⁷⁴~~1~~, but I cannot be certain -- at any rate it was the first winter he spent away from the Valley. In those days he became a very close friend of ours. He was full of enthusiasm, and from his letters he seemed to pity us because we lived in town. He changed very much after he married and went into business.

He was very simple in his dress, but always exquisitely neat in his dress and person. He dressed generally in what we call now negligee, i.e. he wore a blue flannel shirt, but was never without a sprig of some green plant as an ornament.

He went to restaurants for his meals. The suit you see in this picture [the one forwarded to Boston] was a great surprise to us. My daughter, Clara McChesney, is an artist in New York, and just after his last trip she wrote me as follows: "John Muir came to see me the other day, and I asked him to sit for a picture before going back to California, but he did not find this possible. His account of his trip to South America was very interesting."

His daughter Helen was of a very spirituelle and high strung temperament, and fond of nature -- a wonderful little creature, and John Muir was very much devoted to her. Mrs. Muir was very old-fashioned - she had a great fear that the children might be in some accident, and never travelled. [Mrs. McChesney was of the opinion that Mrs. Muir never visited Yosemite Valley with Muir, but I think letters of 1884 prove that she was there].

John Muir wrote constantly during the time he spent with us. He used a cheap grade of paper and wrote with enormous spaces between the lines, and then filled in as he went over his work. He was very studious and only came to the family circle when he was tired, and we often invited him to dinner. He was very loyal to his work. He never would agree to speak anywhere at a lecture or talk, but was always willing to do his part in a conversation. We introduced him to two or three rather unusual people. He would go on for hours when started on such interesting stories as "Stickeen." But he would not accept invitations to receptions.

Miss Graydon could tell you much about John Muir. She went to live there when his girls were quite small to be governess. She understood the

situation in the home. She appreciated him mightily.

Mr. Muir was very fond of children. [Miss Alice McChesney has a little French doll which he gave her when she was a tiny child.] When these French dolls were first coming in he said he wanted to get one for Alice. So he soon handed me the money with which to purchase one. The sum was absurdly small with which to purchase such a toy, but I made up the difference, and he never knew it. I made this set of clothes for the doll.

Mrs. Carr was a great friend of mine. It was through her that John Muir first came to our home, for when he decided to come to Oakland for the winter her three sons were at home, and she had no room for him. So she asked me to take him into our home. I feel very deeply on this matter of her going to Yosemite with him. While there were those who criticized very strongly these trips made alone with him, I understood the matter, for I knew how like a mother she was to him. Mrs. Carr was hard pressed with literary work and correspondence all over the world, so when she stated that Muir wished to spend the winter in Oakland, we said we would be only too happy to have him stay with us. We enjoyed having him very much, and he liked to be there after all the hardships he had undergone. He was always very fond of joking. He had no fear of animals. He had a fine oil painting of Keith's which he said was made on one of their trips together.

I visited at Mr. Muir's home only once. Muir had there a large room called a den which was also the family sitting-room. It contained an immense fireplace. Miss Graydon was then governess, and they had no servant and four other visitors. A great many would have made pilgrimages to his house if he had been at home much. There were several families, like ourselves, with whom he had lived for months at a time, and it had not occurred to them ever to have him pay anything for his room. But he was not given to entertaining. We had, on this occasion I spoke of, invited ourselves, and were not anxious to stay more than a few hours.

[Prof. Carr]

After Professor Carr had trouble in the University he went to Sacramento and there Mrs. Carr was very helpful and really did most of the work. He had been elected probably through the Grange. Then the Carrs went to Pasadena at the time when the boom was beginning. There they built a very handsome house with very large grounds containing all kinds of wonderful shrubs from all over the world. Then the boom did not continue, but she was wise enough to go to keeping a boarding house. She had never liked housekeeping. She used to say, "If women only wore

at all times and places the same sort of dress it would be such a relief not to have to follow fashions." Yet she, who had never cared for such work, had a very delightful boarding-house for tourists. The table was perfect, and all the appointments of the house very attractive. She carried it off well. She had great ability, and was kind hearted and hospitable to the extreme. Pasadena never has recognized her ability in making the town as attractive as she did by her influence.

Later her mind became affected, and she was in the old people's home in San Francisco. Then her mind failed altogether and a brother-in-law took her to his home. She was not the Mrs. Carr of old when Professor James got the letters from her. She was no more Mrs. Carr than a child would be. It was particularly reprehensible in him to take anything from her.

But to return to John Muir -- I always think of him as a natural gentleman. He was very gracious and thoughtful of old people as well as of children. My mother was a helpless invalid during the time he was with us. None of our visitors and friends were so appreciative of her fortitude in suffering as he. He was devoted to her and always expressed much sympathy and consideration.

[The matter contained herein and opinions expressed were given just as they seemed to occur to Mrs. McChesney, no questions being asked about any of the topics referred to above].