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Reminiscence of John Muir by Fletcher, Alice Cotton, "Along the Way I Met John Muir"

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ALONG THE WAY I MET JOHN MUIR

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In January 1906 my father and mother and I were returning East from an extended trip and stopped to spend a few days at Adamana, Arizona in order to visit the Petrified Forest. Adamana consisted of a small nondescript station, a coal bunker and water tower. Back from the tracks sprawled a large ranch style house which included living quarters for the family and staff plus a spacious dining room, that would accommodate a hundred or more people, needed because most of the guests were tourists who stopped off just for the day while on personally conducted tours and only had their dinner there.

My Father had arranged for us to stay several days so we could really take our time exploring all we could find of interest. We found there was a charming living room and several comfortable bedrooms - enough to care for possibly a dozen people - all of which opened onto the long veranda that extended the whole length of the building.

At our first meal there were no tourists. Those assembled included the family and guides, plus two manly looking young men, whom the Manager told us were "Hoboes" just passing through. I was astonished to learn that "Hoboes" were men riding the freights on a long journey going West to new adventure, usually without funds. The Woman Manager said she was very glad to feed them because they were always willing to do some work. She certainly rewarded them with a delicious and hearty meal. Later, they would take another freight out as the trains of the Santa Fe always stopped here for water and coal.

Also at the table was a very pleasing person, the pretty, courageous local school teacher. She explained that she was tired of city schools and had written the Government in Washington asking if she could be placed in a small school in the west run perhaps by the Government itself. She suggested possibly a school on the Indian Reservations but they had told her that this was the only Post available at the time. It was surprising to me to learn that the Government supplied a teacher if there were 12 pupils in a small locality. Here the Station Master had eleven children and the telegraph operator one so these youngsters were entitled to a teacher.

Seated beside us was an elderly man and his daughter. He was tall, thin and rugged appearing in his late sixties, and wore a long gray shaggy beard. His serious and scholarly countenance was lightened by a gay twinkle in his eyes whenever he smiled. I tried desperately to place him, suddenly, without a doubt, I knew it was the famous naturalist John Muir. That first meeting a lively conversation was built around the delectable baked potatoes which were grown by the Manager. My father, a connoisseur from Waterville, Maine exclaimed reluctantly that he had never eaten anything at all like them. And when he amplified the compliment further by saying that in our travels through Idaho - he had not been at all impressed by that state's "prize spuds"! That was really something!

We soon learned that this remarkable man was indeed John Muir and that his daughter was living in a tent near the ranch while recovering from Tuberculosis.

Mr. Muir told us that he had been asked to make a study of the Petrified Forest for the Cosmopolitan Magazine and write up his findings for a series of articles for that publication. He found

a fascinated and attentive audience in us, and his daughter enjoyed driving us skillfully about in a buckboard with a stunning pair of swift horses. The vast plains over which we drove had a shallow, dirty unpredictable stream which meandered all about among the mesas, here today and gone to-morrow, leaving behind dangerous quicksands which only the most experienced driver could detect. If you entered the quicksands by some miscalculation, the driver must make a fast decision whether to whip up the horses and try to galop to solid ground or to turn back abruptly where you were sure of safe footing. Mr. Muir accompanied us and as the whole area was covered with Indian relics, broken pottery, unusual rock formations, etc., it was a memorable experience!

Mr. Muir described with much ire how when he first arrived at Adamana he had found an enormous stone crusher set up along with a railroad siding especially built by some enterprising business man, who was planning to crush the petrified wood to make a new abrasive. Needless to say this patriarch of Nature's forests was enraged by such wanton destruction of one of the World's vast wonders! He had tried to persuade this man to give up the idea without success so had then made a special trip to Washington, D.C. where he worked untiringly until he obtained the necessary papers to show conclusively that the Petrified Forest of Arizona was to be made into a National Park. Armed with these papers he hurried back to Arizona and had the authority to close down the crusher. While he was away another man had started a similar project only in a different way. This man had unloaded a stout cart and a couple of heavy work horses and was planning to haul the granite like logs on the cart

to the railroad and hence to a mill to be ground. The logs and pieces of petrified wood are of tremendous weight for their size and the cart soon collapsed as though it had been put under a stone crusher itself ! There it still laid about 100 yards from the tracks. The man and horses gone in disgust. John Muir was delighted that Nature herself had taken a hand in ridding the area of this menace.

He never tired telling us of his discoveries, and explaining with loving care each trophy. He gave us many samples to help us understand as he described enthusiastically and realistically each process or specimen. I, being artistically inclined, was particularly enthralled when he gave me samples of pottery and then explained that the early Indians lined their baskets with clay to hold water and as the baskets wore out they realized that the clay held together without the basket weave. This accounted for the earliest samples of pottery having a rough exterior showing the markings of the baskets. The next phase was the plain molded pottery and then the use of figures and designs in red and black. Finally, the pottery itself came in colors and was polished. All of these types had washed down from the sides of the mesas along with the petrified logs which were all buried about ten or fifteen feet from the summit.

Many of the mesas had cliffs at the base which seem to have been split by some cataclysm of nature. The open surface was black in contrast to the gray outside and the Indians had utilized this black smooth portion upon which to carve their hieroglyphics. Mr. Muir had been very busy making a study of the symbols and kept us entranced with his explanations of how each figure meant a person, man, woman, or child; how others, meant horses and other animals; still others illustrated the sun, moon, planets and natural wonders and told stories of events according to their grouping. They were sharply

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imprinted, clear, and expertly done but Mr. Muir had not yet arrived at the date of execution.

He led us excitedly to the top of one mesa which was the only one that could be ascended. There he had already done a great deal of excavating and had unearthed a large tribal or community house the top of which was flush with the ground of the mesa. It had a wierd checkerboard effect, constructed with partitions of stone. As he was working alone he had only dug down to the depth of four to five feet. Of course he had used utmost care in order not to do any damage to any relics he might unearth in the few divisions he had excavated.

He decided that it was not a burial place as he had not found any bones up to that time. We all picked up pieces of pottery and corn cobs and ears of corn also petrified which was an intiguing discovery as it made us consider whether the Indians had left before the trees and other items became solidified and the thought had so many ramifications and we knew so little it was awe inspiring!

In his study of the Forest so called he had at that time come to the conclusion that the trees were tropical palms. We had thought because of their great girth and length that they must have been a coniferous species of fir or pine, floated down from the north and buried in the sands of the desert. We never saw any roots or branches showing that they did not grow there. Their position was in sharp contrast to the Petrified Forest in Yellowstone where the trees stand upright, but have their tops broken off.

This petrification had been taking place for many ages as the trees were buried under tons of dirt. Gradually the clay and sand was being washed away and these immense treasures were being

exposed for the future generations . Mr. Muir felt that certain chemicals made the bluish - white quartz consistency and others gave the brilliant reds, yellows and browns. Chips of carnelian, onyx, agate and jasper were strewn all over the area in exotic and intricate patterns like a kaleidoscope fashioned by God's hand!

Although John Muir had been sent to Arizona to study the Petrified Forest , I soon discovered that the true John Muir stood apart from all others and showed his exact nature here as he had all his life. He was interested in everything and was soon engrossed in Indian lore and all Nature's secrets that were unfolding before him. He led us to various large ant hills where the ants only used bright red stones or " Arizona Rubies " as they were called so wherever we would glimpse a red mound on the mesa , on closer inspection , we would find it an ant hill. The stones were beautiful and sparkled brilliantly in the sunlight.

I have often wondered if he ever wrote up his work in Arizona because I have never been able to locate such a book. In one of our long evenings at the ranch , he told me of his great disappointment in his meeting with Ralph Waldo Emerson, years before in the Yosemite Valley. Emerson in his essays seemed to express so beautifully and effectively all the truths that John Muir felt in his heart and he longed to share the glories of his world in the west with Emerson so that Emerson would be able to phrase magnificently a tribute to this wondrous world he loved so deeply. When John Muir learned that Emerson was coming and they had arranged to meet. Mr. Muir made all the plans for a camping trip in the Sierras with this wonderful man. Muir had always carried Emerson's essays in a treasured small volume on most of his travels and he looked

forward with great anticipation to being host to the author and showing him all the wonders that God had wrought.

However, he met Mr. Emerson on the Sunset Trail and surrounded by a party that sort only to protect him from any thing tiring or fatiguing on the journey. Muir said sadly that he was shocked to learn that Emerson had never slept under the stars or tramped alone in the woods even in his youth. The visit left him with a feeling of frustration and loneliness so he quickly returned to his friends of the forests and mountains and built himself a cheerful fire. Here, he soon regained his perspective and was himself again amidst his beloved trees, birds, animals, and flowers.

We hated to leave this man with his loving appreciation of Nature in the rough, his skill and tenderness in handling all treasures, combined with a remarkable power of description. I will miss his vibrant ability to entrance me with the unique facts as he presented them - and the delight of sharing with him these few experiences and the amazing meanings deduced from them.

All too soon the dreaded day arrived, and as we were leaving Mr. Muir had just finished showing us another of his boxes of Indian curios which he had rescued. Selecting a particularly fine ancient pottery water pitcher of a sandy gray color with a definite brown pattern of symmetrical rectangular designs, tepees, and sunburst drawings tied together by long garlands of brown, in a very good state of preservation, he handed it to me gently and said, "You may have this if you would like it." I was thrilled and all but speechless but managed to stammer a few, I hope, appropos words of thanks. However, our train was due and no time to wrap my treasure properly so I just took off my scarf and wrapped it around my beauti -

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ful pitcher, far from securely , and boarded the train.

All the way to Boston and home , in hotel stops , on the Pullmans, in the dining cars and in hacks I carried my gift like a baby . I held it tightly , slept with it , and even ate with it . It was never checked , never out of my sight , and caused many a laugh and curious glance wherever I went. Noone could even guess what I had wrapped so flimsily in my scarf!

My care through the years has been truly rewarding as John Muir's wonderful gift is still in the family and ever our most prized possession !

Respectfully submitted,

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