

Exceedingly Beautiful and Appropriate:
the Library in Yosemite's LeConte Lodge

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“An unusually rainy season made the blazing fireplace welcome, and many lingered to get a better acquaintance with the Library.” (Report of the LeConte Memorial Committee, *Sierra Club Bulletin*, 1913)

The cozy scene described above evokes a traditional and sentimental image of libraries. Perusal of today’s library literature, technical literature and newspapers leads us to believe libraries are doomed because people are no longer interested in reading print books. But the library mentioned in the passage above still exists at the LeConte Memorial Lodge in Yosemite National Park. For 108 years, the tiny library has been informing and delighting visitors to the Yosemite Valley. The massive stone fireplace now has a small pellet stove installed to provide warmth in late spring when there is still snow in the valley and electricity and new light fixtures have been added, but the building remains much the same as it was when it was built in 1903.

The lodge was built as a memorial to Dr. Joseph LeConte, a respected scientist and one of the founders of the Sierra Club. LeConte died of a heart attack in the Yosemite Valley in July of 1901 while preparing for the first formal Sierra Club outing, a hike to Tuolumne Meadows. Following his death friends and colleagues raised the money to build the lodge in commemoration of his life and career. William E. Colby, who was the secretary and treasurer of the Sierra Club’s LeConte Memorial Committee, reported in the 1904/1905 *Sierra Club Bulletin* that the club “was now in the possession of an exceedingly beautiful and appropriate structure,” with a huge granite fireplace, bookcases, and window seats. Books, maps, and photographs donated by club members became the first items in the collection.

Library History

After the building was opened, it was operated in the valley by the Sierra Club primarily as an information center for visitors, and also as a headquarters and meeting place for club

members. For many decades custodians of the lodge submitted reports, published in the *Sierra Club Bulletin* each year. These reports vary greatly in content and style, reflecting the personality of each custodian. For example, Ansel Adams, custodian from 1920-1923, wrote narrative and chatty reports. He comments on the addition of the cables to Half Dome, gives opinions on club outings and notes that the park's auditorium is in poor repair.

Sierra Club reports over the years do not note if the lodge custodians are trained librarians, but their reports indicate a dedication to the book collection. Custodians Docia Patchett and Rose Wright made the first catalog of the collection in 1917, recording a total of 350 books. Reports almost always list the titles donated by members or purchased by the club, and frequently appeal for additional donations, as demonstrated by a 1924 report by custodian F. C. Holman:

“A number of books was donated to the library and acknowledgement made by the custodian. We have now a small but well-balanced selection of books in keeping with the place. Besides those which are not allowed out of the building, there is a miscellaneous class, including science, philosophy, and fiction, that can under certain restrictions be taken away from the lodge, and this privilege, seems to be appreciated among the numerous nearby campers and people at Curry's. Even if most of the books so taken out are novels, we are filling a small want, perhaps at times exerting an influence that sometimes leads to other things. There is still shelf-room. Many of us have discarded books. Why not send in a few?”

Books were not the only popular items in the library collection. There is frequent mention of the popularity of maps, collections of photographs, mounted wildflower and botanical displays, a collection of polished wood, and a display of pine cones!

In the spirit of any good library, the collections grew and changed with the times. Custodian Edward Anderson reports in 1941 that in addition to natural history lectures held in the lodge, “films are shown and recorded music is played.” The following year a record player and 42 recordings were donated to the library.

Custodians of the lodge and its collections also had many problems that modern day library directors will recognize. For a time there was no water source close to the lodge and concerns about fire are frequently mentioned in reports. During winter closures, rats and mice found their way into the lodge and to the book collections, and so rodent proof metal boxes were installed. New locks were put on the windows after a few winter break-ins, presumably by winter campers looking for a good fireplace.

After WWII formal reports by the custodian or information about the library and its collections were no longer published in the *Sierra Club Bulletin*. However in the 1970s and 1980s the lodge custodian and volunteers kept daily logs in notebooks, which are part of the archival material held in the collection. Frequent references are made about the library, such as this one from May 1980, “One [visitor] stayed for a few hours reading *Yosemite and its High Sierra*. He started it a year ago and decided to come in and finish it this year.” Alas, no journals exist for the decade of the 1990s, but the present custodian of the lodge publishes a yearly report on the web, of course!

Over the years, custodians rarely reported any materials lost or stolen. But in 1979 LeConte Chairman M.G. Hallesy noted in a journal entry that two volumes of John Muir’s writings had gone missing. Recognizing that many of the books in the library were valuable and rare, arrangements were made to move the books to a more secure location. In a journal entry dated September 2, 1979, Chairman Hallesy reported that “NPS librarian Mary Vocolka took 56

of our rarer books to the NPS rare books room. We can have them back anytime, but I suggest most stay where they are protected and that they remain here in the valley.” In 1981 a formal agreement was made between the Sierra Club and the National Park Service to transfer 75 titles to the research library housed in the Yosemite Museum on a more or less permanent loan. In addition, seven books by former LeConte custodian Ansel Adams were transferred to the Sierra Club’s Colby Library in San Francisco.

The LeConte Library in the Twenty-first Century

Open from May through September, this small library and information center draws over 16,000 visitors from all over the world. Some come in to ask who used to live in the quaint structure or to inquire, as one little girl did, “...if Sleeping Beauty lives here.” Many discover the library when they step into the lodge seeking respite from the summertime heat of the Yosemite Valley.

A popular addition is the corner of the library devoted to children’s books, puzzles and toys. The book topics range from animal ABCs to stories of the Miwok Indians, the original inhabitants of the valley. An ongoing art project in the children’s corner provides a collection of drawings made by young visitors who record their impressions and experiences in Yosemite and leave their work in a series of three ring binders for others to enjoy.

One tradition that has continued is that Sierra Club members and park visitors still donate books and materials to the library, and a few more are purchased each year with donations. Dr. Bonnie Gisel, the present curator of the lodge, estimates the current book collection at 1600 titles. This collection was expanded in 2002 and 2003 with a generous grant from a private family foundation. Copies of Joseph LeConte’s books remain, as do the writings of John Muir and Galen Clark, and books of photos by Ansel Adams. Topics of the books in the modern day

collection still reflect interests of visitors to the park, including rock climbing, wild flower identification and geology. However, topics have expanded to include global warming, recycling, and green energy.

While seemingly at odds with present day library practices, there are no computers installed in this small library, and books are informally shelved by topic. This is a studied decision by Dr. Gisel. Echoing her predecessor F. C. Holman, Gisel feels that browsing through the printed books gives visitors the opportunity for the discovery of connections between disparate ideas. “Lots of adults don’t go into a library anymore,” says Gisel. “They come here after years away and are linked to ideas of exploration and discovery. The library is a trigger to get people interested again.”

Libraries like the one in the LeConte Lodge are the carriers of our cultural heritage. Preserved here within the granite walls is part of the experience of Yosemite. It is very likely that 108 years from now visitors will find the LeConte Lodge and its little library much the same as it was in 1904, and as it is now.

For more information about the library in the LeConte Memorial Lodge, visit <http://www.sierraclub.org/education/leconte/library.asp>.