


Film

Struggle, Gold Digging, and Cannibalism: The Story of California State Parks

By Alexis Coe Tue., Sep. 4 2012 at 10:48 AM
Categories: [Film](#), [Get Out of Town](#), [History](#)

Write Comment 



1



4



Submit



+1

0



Have you ever wondered why Yosemite is a national park? Arguably the most glorious -- and indisputably the most visited -- in California, Yosemite was once under the state's dominion. It seems bad management has plagued this great state from the beginning, and even John Muir and the Sierra club could not stop the overgrazing of meadows and logging of Giant Sequoia. When Muir could take no more, he invited President Theodore Roosevelt to camp near Glacier Point, and by the third day, it was a done deal: Roosevelt took Yosemite from California and declared it a national park. This month an ambitious PBS two-part documentary *California Forever* will tell the story of the state parks, including the Yosemite debacle. In *Part 1: The History of California State Parks*, Oscar-nominated filmmakers David Vassar and Sally Kaplan invite viewers on a breathtaking tour of the park system, focusing on the contributions of early preservationists.

The documentary is as awe inspiring as it is heartbreaking, and perhaps nothing captures this duality more than the opening scene, when Augustus T. Dowd discovers giant sequoias in 1852. A year later, it took five men only 22 days to fell that very tree, believed to be 1300 years old. "They wanted to prove to the world that something was that big," Kaplan explained, "without being conscious of what they were losing by proving that." Sections were sent all over the world, and the stump was promptly used as a dance floor.



A historic actor in a blacksmith shop, Empire Mine State Park.

Not to despair, there are triumphs as well, including important victories that led to Point Lobos and Ano Nuevo. "None of these parks would exist if the landscape didn't inspire someone to struggle," Vassar pointed out, hoping to see such activism continue in the future.

Historic reenactments, as well as the parks' exceptional interpretive staff, recreate a sense of time and place. Fortune seekers are seen hunched over, knee-deep in rivers

during the Gold Rush, as well as covered wagons carrying the ill-fated Donner party. As always, too little time is given to Native Americans and their loss of ancestral land, but the filmmakers do an excellent job of highlighting their early contributions to resource management, focusing on the Miwok of Sierra Nevada and the Yurok Tribe on the West Coast.



Part 2: Parks of the Future presents the very real challenges we face in the present, as well as the future. It quickly becomes clear that the active lifestyle Californians pride themselves on can be as harmful to the environment as it is healthful for the mind and body. Kite surfers begrudge the elephant seal, once believed to be extinct, for taking their beaches. Revving engines and reckless behavior at Ocotillo Wells State Vehicular Park threaten the solitude and sensitive wildlife of Anza-Borrego Desert Park.

Both Vassar and Kaplan reside in Los Angeles, where the seemingly unending sprawl often results in a mutually exclusive dichotomy: The population is kept in, and nature is kept out. And yet, Los Angeles serves as the site of some of the most exciting innovations in the parks system. "If the parks are going to survive, we need to build a constituency in urban areas," asserted Vassar. That story is told through the rewilding of the Los Angeles River and the many at-risk youth cultivating urban gardens.

The documentary was made before the current budget cuts which closed so many parks, but it was always meant to inspire Californians to fight, for the struggle exists in good times and bad. Of course, the sheer number of park enthusiasts poses one of the greatest challenges to the parks themselves. Six months before the start of summer, nearly all the campgrounds and choice park housing is completely booked. Does that mean that impromptu day trips will become a thing of that past? "Soon you'll have to make a reservation to take a walk in a park," bemoaned Vassar.



McWay Falls at Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park on the Big Sur Coast.

Historic sites serve as an example of the good that has been done by contemporary activists. Angel Island Immigration Station, where newly arrived Chinese paper sisters and brothers carved poetry into the walls, is now operated by the Parks Department and is frequented by school groups and history buffs alike. Less known and visited, the filmmakers do Colonel Allensworth State Historic Park justice, quickly highlighting the town where freed slaves with a utopian vision attempted to start a self-sustaining agrarian society.

Despite the myriad of challenges facing the parks -- global warming, budget deficits, and the encroachment of private industries -- the filmmakers are confident that we, as a diverse community inhabiting an even more diverse ecosystem, will prevail. They have 160 years of evidence to rely on.

California Forever is scheduled to air nationally on Oct. 12 (check local listings) and locally on September 12 through KQED Public Television. Visit the website for more screening information.



California Forever: The Story of California State Parks Preview from Backcountry Pictures on Vimeo.