

YOSEMITE'S LA CASA NEVADA (THE SNOW HOUSE)

On June 30, 1864, President Abraham Lincoln signed into law a historic bill known as the Yosemite Grant, which ceded Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of Big Trees to the state of California as America's first scenic preserve, "inalienable for all time." The act specified that the reserved area be managed by a nine-member board of commissioners, serving without pay, who would be appointed by and include the governor of California.

During the first dozen years of state administration, the California legislature, which was going through a period of severe budget-cutting at the time, consistently failed to provide sufficient appropriations for the commissioners to carry on their work. As a consequence, when it became imperative to improve the roads, trails, and hotels in and around Yosemite Valley, the board awarded the rights to independent contractors who were willing to finance the projects under a fee arrangement. The leases stipulated that the state could purchase the improvements whenever funds became available.

Under this procedure, Mr. F. Albert Snow was granted permission in late 1869 to construct and operate a rustic hotel on the rocky flat north of the Merced River at the base of Nevada Fall. The lease included the right to build a toll trail from the end of the existing Vernal Fall Trail to the site.

F. Albert Snow (1825-1891) and wife Emily Topple Snow (1823-1889) were native Vermonters, born and reared near Lake Champlain. The date of their arrival in California is uncertain, but Albert was the owner of the Washington Hotel in Garrote (later Groveland) for a time in the 1860s. The Snows had one daughter, Maria, who married Colwell Owens Drew, a prominent Groveland-area rancher and a silent partner in the hotel project. During their Yosemite years, Albert and Emily wintered in Groveland near their daughter's family.

Early in the spring of 1870, Snow packed in enough material to erect a one-story, barn-like building somewhat grandiosely called the "Alpine House." The structure stood in full view of spectacular Nevada Fall, and so close to the roaring cataract that "in some winds half the piazza is drenched with spray." Entries in the three-volume guest register now in the Yosemite Museum indicate that Snow's unpretentious hotel, elevation 5,360 feet, received its first guests on April 28, 1870. It soon became a favored lunch stop for Yosemite visitors who rode or hiked up from the valley to see Nevada Fall. Hardier

travelers stayed overnight while journeying to or from Little Yosemite Valley and other outlying destinations.

Hostess Emily Snow was an excellent cook. Her doughnuts, bread, and elderberry pie drew special praise, as did her ability to "cook all the popular dishes." One early patron reported that she was "delighted and considerably astonished at the excellence of the abundant meal. We felt as deeply humiliated as Sunday School children at the end of a tea-fight when we were compelled to hurt the feelings of the highly conversational landlady by the assurance that we really were unable to do further justice to her apple pies, hominy cakes, turnovers, and concluding trifles."

Emily possessed a dry wit and a small stock of jokes of her own making that she delivered in a distinct New England twang while waiting table. "Well, you folks would hardly think it," she often said, "but there is eleven feet of snow here all summer." When asked how that was possible, she replied, "My husband is near six feet tall and I'm a little over five. Ain't that eleven?"

In the fall of 1871, Snow added an extension to his existing Alpine House, thereby doubling the size of the original structure. His efforts went for naught, however, after a great earthquake, centered in the Owens Valley east of Yosemite, caused extensive shaking in and around the valley on March 26, 1872. Rock slides and avalanches were common, and a prominent peak in back of Hutchings'



Snow's original "Alpine House" was a barebones structure with little charm.



By the fall of 1875, the expanded La Casa Nevada could accommodate forty guests.



Emily Snow's prim looks belied her mischievous wit and character.

hotel fell with a terrible crash. Snow's Alpine House moved two inches to the east, and the new addition was so badly wrecked it had to be torn down and rebuilt.

"The most remarkable results of the quake occurred at Snow's," Galen Clark reported in his "Guardian's Report." "Mr. Snow, on hearing the terrible rumbling noise preceding the shake, rushed out of his house somewhat alarmed. The night was very light and he being in plain view of Nevada Fall, distinctly saw that the water ceased to flow over the fall for at least half a minute. A large mass of rocks, which would weigh thousands of tons, fell from the west side of the 'Cap of Liberty' about a thousand feet above its base. When this mass of rocks struck the earth, Mr. Snow says that he was instantaneously thrown prostrate to the ground. . . The earth around Snow's place is still completely covered with dust from the pulverized rocks. I think the prostration of Mr. Snow and perhaps the moving of the main house and the wrenching apart of the timbers of the addition was probably more the result of the concussion of the atmosphere when the rocks fell than the effects of the earthquake."

Undaunted, Snow rebuilt his damaged Alpine House in 1872. During the next three seasons he continued to improve his facilities even though every item on the premises from nails to beds had to be packed in on the backs of mules. By the fall of 1875, Snow's establishment consisted of the original building and addition, which now contained twelve rooms; an attractive, well-furnished new chalet (completed that summer) with ten bedrooms and a parlor; a woodshed; ice house; log cabin; and stable. All told, La Casa Nevada (the Snow House), as the expanded hotel was called, could accommodate about forty overnight guests.

In his 1886 book *In the Heart of the Sierras*, James Hutchings wrote that "Snow's La Casa Nevada has become deservedly famous all over the world, not only for its excellent lunches and general good cheer, but from the quiet, unassuming attentions of mine host, and the piquant pleasantries of Mrs. Snow. I do not think that another pair, anywhere, could be found that would more fittingly fill this position; and, although they do not know whether the number to lunch will be five or fifty-five, they almost always seem to have an abundance of everything relishable. On one occasion—and this will illustrate Mrs. Snow's natural readiness with an answer—a lady, seeing so great a variety on the table, with eager interest inquired, 'Why, Mrs. Snow, where on earth do you get all these things?' 'Oh, we raise them!' 'Why! where can you possibly do so, as I see nothing but rocks around here?' 'Oh! madam, we raise them—on the backs of mules.'"

With her high white collars, pulled-back hairdo, and floor-length dresses, quaint, eccentric Emily Snow seemed every inch the prim, sedate New England lady. In her leisure time she gathered lichen and pretty ferns for scrap books that she sold to tourists. Nonetheless, she was (according to old friend Pinkie Ross) "always stewed to the eyebrows." Certainly there was a generous supply of spirits available at the hotel as the rubble of broken bottles on the rocky flat attests today. One guest signed the hotel register with this comment: "No person here is obliged to commit burglary to obtain drinks."

"Emily thought her husband Albert a perfect Apollo and was very jealous of him," Pinkie Ross said, "although there was no question that she was the boss. Albert was a large, loose-jointed, good-natured man with all his



This attractive chalet was completed in 1875. It contained ten bedrooms and a parlor. Albert Snow appears at left with Emily Snow (center) and daughter Maria (right).



A party of tourists eats lunch beside the decaying ruins of La Casa Nevada about 1898.

upper teeth out. I never heard of anyone wanting to run away with him.”

After twenty years as Yosemite innkeepers, Albert and Emily Snow were forced by advancing age and failing health to relinquish the operation of their unique back-country stopping place in the fall of 1889. Following a brief illness, Emily died in Groveland on November 15, 1889, just nine days shy of her sixty-sixth birthday. Less than two years later, on October 13, 1891, Albert joined his longtime marital partner in death.

On June 28, 1890, the commissioners granted one D. F. Baxter, about whom little is known, a lease on La Casa Nevada for the remainder of the year. A token rent of one dollar was established because of the lateness of the season, with the specification that the customary rent of one hundred dollars would apply in the future. Baxter was required to make all repairs to the property and deal with Snow on the furnishings. According to the commissioners’ minutes, Baxter ran the hotel during 1890 and 1891, after which he gave up his lease.

La Casa Nevada never formally reopened, although a party of nine tourists and their guide wrote the following message above their signatures in the hotel register on March 28, 1892: “The season of 1892 is opened at this hotel by the undersigned. . .Ground, trails, and trees covered with snow six to twelve inches but the cascades and vertical rocks remain as before.” A few other entries follow in May and early June, the last dated June 2, 1892. Perhaps the historic old register was saved for posterity at that time by Guardian Galen Clark.

Accounts by passers-by during the next seven years tell the story of the hotel’s gradual demise. A visitor in August, 1893, wrote that “Snow’s Hotel has been deserted

with everything left in it, even to the table being set with all the dishes, and the beds having mattresses and pillows. One of the boys climbed through a window and unlocked a door, and we went all through it. We might have taken a lot of things away, but they will never be taken away, as it would cost more to do so than they are worth. The roof is already broken in several places by snow.”

Three years later a traveler reported the “building’s still standing, but in dilapidated condition with most of the doors and windows gone—a sad relic of earlier days.” Marjorie Cook, a granddaughter of J. J. Cook, who managed three different early hotels in Yosemite Valley between 1882 and his death in 1904, described the premises in 1899: “We stopped at the ruins of Snow’s Hotel on the flat below Nevada Fall. The sagging doors, broken windows, and swaybacked roof intrigued me. There was even some sorry furniture and crockery and a sleepy owl in the wrecked interior. The winter after my visit, Snow’s Hotel was flat. The last vestige of the place served as fuel under the coffee pot of some trail party.”

D. J. Foley’s *Yosemite Souvenir and Guide* for 1901 verifies Marjorie Cook’s account: “La Casa Nevada was accidentally destroyed by fire during the season of last year. It had not been used as a hotel for nearly ten years. Those who have visited Nevada Fall before will note the hotel’s absence with many regrets.”

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