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Find Your Park Friday: For the Love of Nature

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Abstract

The Civil War Institute will be celebrating the National Park Service Centennial this spring with its brand new “Find Your Park Friday” series. Inspired by the NPS #FindYourPark campaign, the series will challenge our fellows to share their experiences exploring America’s national historical, cultural, and natural resources through trips and internships with the NPS. In our second post, Jeff Lauck discusses his passion for photography and the park that started it. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Find Your Park Friday: For the Love of Nature

April 22, 2016

By Jeff Lauck '18

The Civil War Institute will be celebrating the National Park Service Centennial this spring with its brand new “Find Your Park Friday” series. Inspired by the NPS #FindYourPark campaign, the series will challenge our fellows to share their experiences exploring America’s national historical, cultural, and natural resources through trips and internships with the NPS. In our second post, Jeff Lauck discusses his passion for photography and the park that started it.

Anyone who follows me on any social media will soon learn that I love to travel almost as much as I love taking pictures of the places I visit. From Chula Vista, California to Quoddy Head, Maine; Ramallah in the West Bank to the DMZ in Korea, I have been to many places in my less than 20 years of existence. Yet nothing has left more of an impression on me nor fueled my wanderlust as much as the natural beauty of America’s national parks. They are, indeed, “the best idea we ever had,” according to writer Wallace Stegner.



The author and his father at Glacier Point, overlooking Half Dome, during the author’s first visit to Yosemite. Photo courtesy of Doreen Lauck.

My love of national parks began at a very young age. Lauck family vacations have always entailed some cross-country trek in the family minivan, stopping in small towns off the interstate to pitch up the tent while traveling thousands of miles from home. When I tell my friends tales of these legendary road trips, they marvel at how we kept our sanity while being cooped up in a car for 14 hours a day as we racked up miles on the odometer. While these trips were, admittedly, filled with temper tantrums and wrestling matches, the destinations—landscapes of mountains, valleys, beaches, canyons, and deserts—have made these trials all the more rewarding.

Of all the national parks I've been to, Yosemite National Park is by far my favorite. In the summer of 1997 I made my first visit to Yosemite, a couple weeks after my first birthday. Too little to hike the trails, I remained perched in a backpack on my dad's shoulders, giving my one year-old eyes the perfect vantage point to soak in the beauty of the valley. The next day I splashed around in Tenaya Lake, an activity that my sensorimotor-stage toddler brain probably enjoyed a bit more.



The author and his mother at Tenaya Lake. Photo courtesy of Ken Lauck.

Sixteen years later, I returned to Yosemite, this time with a brain fully capable of comprehending the natural beauty that the granite valley holds. I had also developed a love of photography, making every viewpoint an opportunity to capture this beauty to bring home with me or share with my followers on Instagram. Ansel Adams, one of my photographic inspirations, had himself been inspired by Yosemite when he visited at the age of 14, only a few years younger than me at the time. As I wandered through the valley and captured the granite monoliths, I could not help but imagine myself as a young Ansel Adams. Perhaps I – like he – would one day look back on a trip to Yosemite as the defining moment in solidifying my love of photography.

My favorite spot is at the top of Sentinel Dome. A mile long hike is rewarded by a spectacular panoramic view of the valley, spanning from El Capitan and Cathedral Rock in the Lower Valley to Half Dome and the Upper Valley. In all my days since, I cannot think of a greater view.

Once I got down into the valley, I had the pleasure of enjoying it from my bicycle, riding up and down the valley from El Capitan to the Ahwahnee Hotel (now the Majestic Yosemite Hotel). The Ahwahnee represents the pinnacle of luxury in the wilderness, offering resort-style hotel services all while being situated in the natural, rugged setting of Yosemite Valley. As such, it is one of the defining examples of the “National Park Service Rustic” or “Parkitecture” style of building.



The Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite National Park. Photo courtesy of the author.

After travelling by bike all day, it was a marvelous treat to relax in the cool Merced River beneath El Capitan. Seeing the valley from the river level offers a unique perspective, especially after having seen the massive rock faces from above at Sentinel Dome.

Our national parks capture the hearts and imaginations of millions of Americans every year with their breathtaking landscapes. Yosemite, the crown jewel of the National Park Service, exemplifies this above all others. From the steep faces of the valley to the flowing Merced River, Yosemite leaves a distinct impression on all its visitors. Of the many National Parks I’ve visited, Yosemite is my park.

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