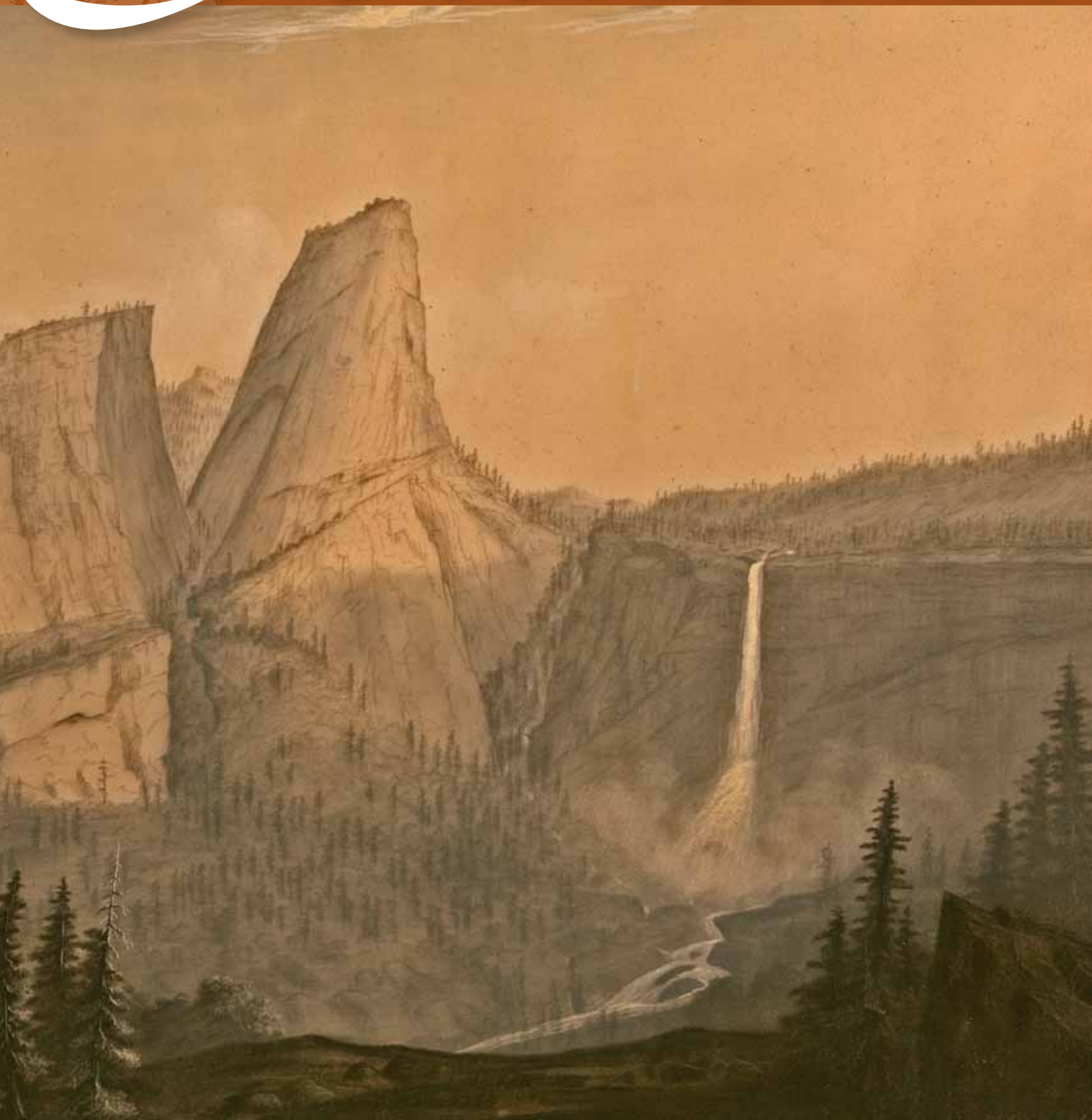
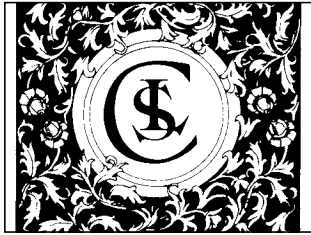


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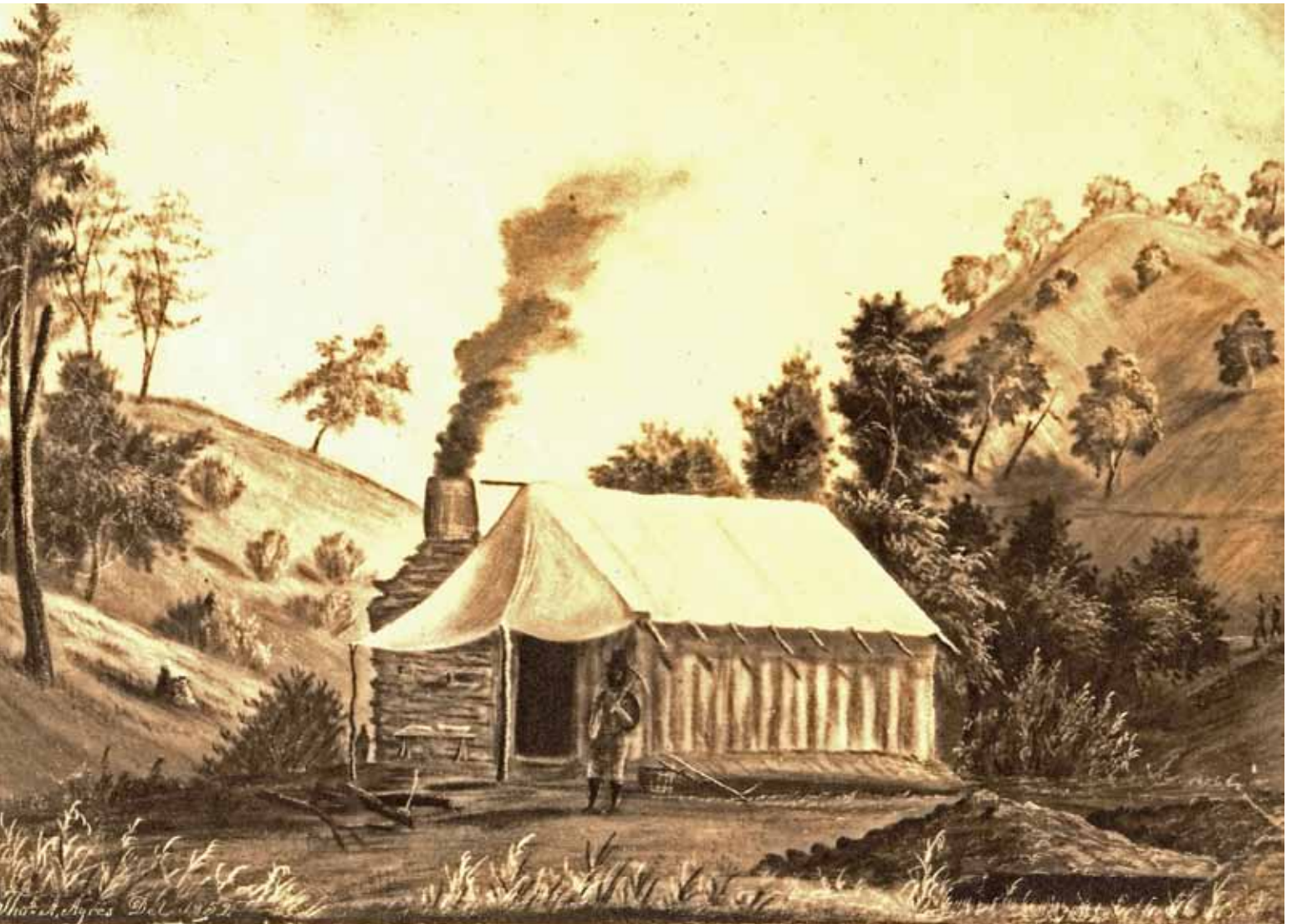
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“The beauty of the scene and the magnitude of the features far exceeded expectations.”

{ Thomas Almond Ayres, 1855
By Dennis Kruska

Original Drawing by Yosemite’s First Artist Thomas Almond Ayres Donated to the California State Library



EDITOR'S NOTE.

Dennis Kruska is a noted authority on the Yosemite Valley. In 2009 the Book Club of California published his magisterial *James Mason Hutchings of Yo Semite: A Biography and Bibliography*. He is the co-author with Lloyd W. Currey of *Bibliography of Yosemite, the Central and the Southern High Sierra, and the Big Trees 1839–1900* (1992). In addition, Mr. Kruska is an intrepid Sierra mountaineer and photographer.

Miner's Cabin at Tuttletown, April 1852. Photograph of the original watercolor.

The California State Library (CSL) recently received a spectacular anonymous gift of an original charcoal drawing of Nevada Fall by the Argonaut artist Thomas Almond Ayres entitled “Upper Falls of the Middle Fork, 1856.” Ayres in 1855 became the first sketcher to capture the beauty and sublimity of Yosemite Valley and made this drawing on his second trip to the great valley in 1856.

Scant biographical information is known about Ayres’s early life. Thomas Ayres was born in 1818 in Woodbridge, New Jersey, one of ten children, to parents John and Mary Ayres. The Ayres’s relatives started moving out west to Wisconsin in the 1830s, and John, Mary, and the family joined the westward family migration. Following his education in local schools, Thomas, as a young man, worked as a draughtsman with an engineering firm in St. Paul, Minnesota. He spent much of his spare time learning to paint landscapes in oils and watercolors.

Meanwhile on the western slope of America, in January 1848, James Marshall made a discovery that was to shake the world—gold! By May 1848 the *Californian* newspaper commented: “The whole country from San Francisco to Los Angeles, and from the sea shore to the base of the Sierra Nevadas, resounds with the sordid cry of gold, GOLD, GOLD! while the field is left half-planted, the house half built, and everything neglected but the manufacture of shovels and pickaxes.” The *Californian* also announced suspension of publication because of staff leaving for the diggings.

The siren call of gold reached the East, and Thomas Ayres hearkening to the temptation bid farewell to his family and headed to New York on his way to California. Ayres boarded the Pacific mail steamship *Panama* under the command of Lieutenants D. D. Porter and David Dixon. The steamship sailed off from New York in fine style on February 17, 1849 heading to San Francisco.

On June 4, 1849, the *Panama* arrived in

San Francisco Bay, and the seasick passengers fanned out through the city, each on their way to find the golden dream. There were already about 200 deserted ships in the harbor because the crews had abandoned them to hunt for their fortune.

Ayres spent a few weeks in San Francisco and then followed the hordes of Argonauts to the northern goldfields. Several luckless months among the diggings cooled his gold fever. He then resumed practice of his artistic career. He sketched his way through the mining camps from 1850 to 1854.

By tracing surviving drawings, we know that in his early travels Ayres visited Camp Lonely in Calaveras County and Tuttle-town on Mormon Creek in Tuolumne County. The surviving Ayres sketch shown here depicts a solitary miner standing in front of a lone cabin in Tuttle-town.

In 1854, he settled back in San Francisco with a reputation of a talented landscape artist.

That year in San Francisco D. L. Gunn’s Art Store presented a panorama consisting of forty-six paintings by an obscure local artist, Thomas A. Smith, who painted a 5,000 square foot canvas based on Ayres’s sketches.¹ Smith’s views were shown later at the Musical Hall in San Francisco where Dr. Gunn, late editor of the *Sonora Herald* narrated the pictures.²

The summer of 1855 brought a fortuitous meeting of fellow Argonaut, publisher, and entrepreneur James Mason Hutchings and Thomas Ayres that led to the publication of the celebrated lithograph that introduced Yosemite to the public—an event that would secure Hutchings’s legacy in the publishing world and Ayres’s artistic legend.³

In his diary, Hutchings noted that he “spent the evening in pleasant conversation with Mr. Ayres, on pictures, artists, and drawings. He has some beautiful views.”⁴ During that month, Hutchings and Ayres took several walking excursions together

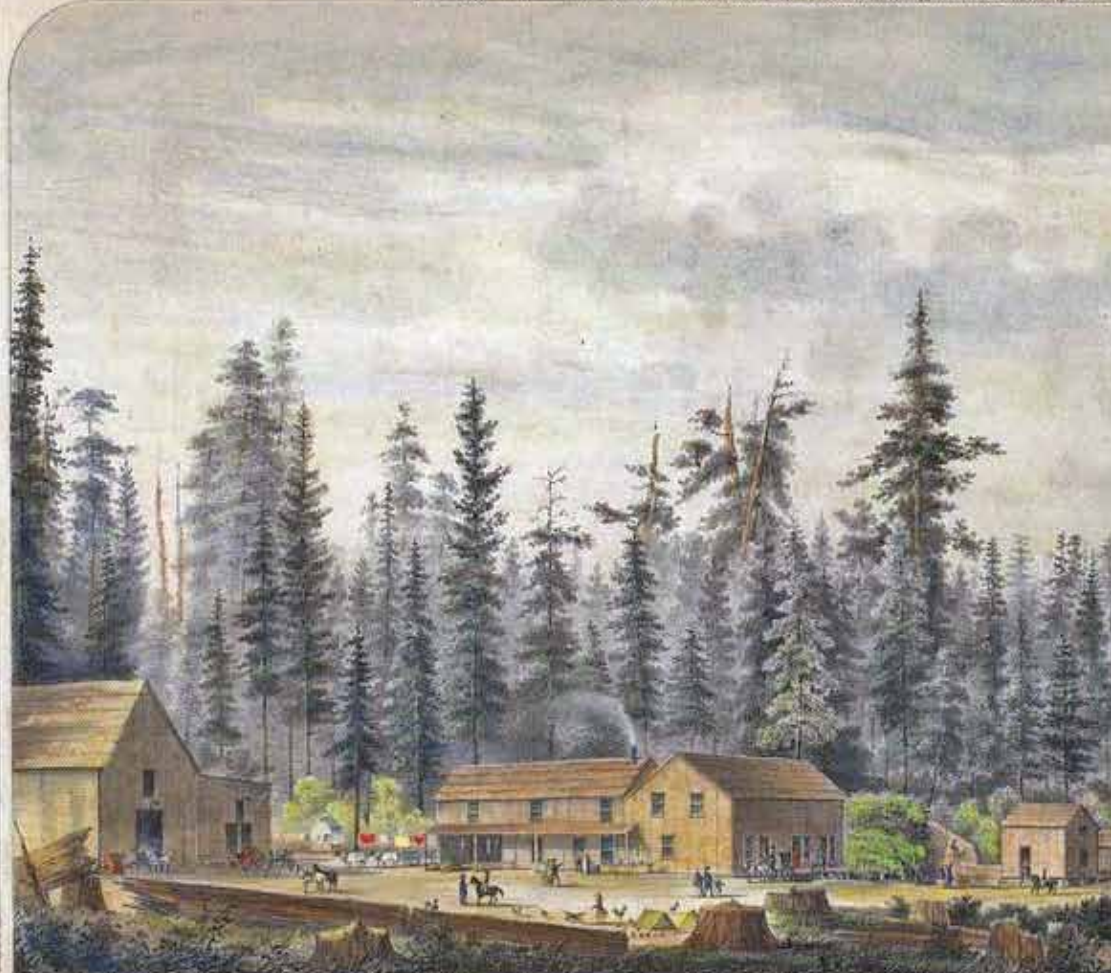
The siren call of gold reached the East, and Thomas Ayres hearkening to the temptation bid farewell to his family and headed to New York on his way to California.



The Mother of the Forest 90 feet in Cir. 321 feet high. Bark taken off 1720



The Father of the Forest. 112 feet in circumference. estimated height when standing 352



General View of the Hotel & surrounding Forest



The Big Tree 48 feet in Circumference. 100 feet high. Was cut down by 1823 employed 5 men 25 days in boring and sawing it off



The Pioneer Cabin 33 feet in diameter 150 feet high. Top being broken off

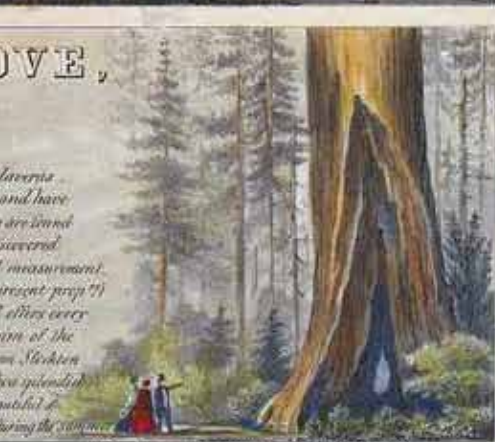
THE MAMMOTH TREE GROVE
CALAVERAS COUNTY CALIFORNIA.
LAPHAM & HAYNES Prop^{rs}

These Gigantic Trees are found in a Valley at the source of one of the tributaries of the Co. 15 miles above Murphy's. According to Botanists they belong to the Family of Taxoideae, & have been justly named Washingtonia Gigantea. Within an area of 50 acres 22 trees of this species standing & are beyond doubt the most stupendous vegetable products on earth. They were discovered by hunters whose accounts were considered fabulous until confirmed by actual observation. The Valley contains 160 acres of land & was located & settled by W^m W. Lapham one of the first in July 1833. The Grove is at present conducted by A. S. Haynes (owner of the property) and accommodation to parties visitors or boarders. The charges are reasonable, it being the purpose to make the Grove a fashionable & popular place of resort. A daily line of Stages from Sacramento City & Sonora, arrive at Murphy's where Animals & Carriages can be procured, thence proceed through a magnificent open forest. The Grove is situated in Shavers Fork. The scenery is the result of volcanic action from the elevation of the valley 4000 feet above the sea level. The vegetation is rich & green & Game abundant. Trout are also found in the vicinity.

PRINTED BY BRITTON & REY.

Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1855, by T. A. Ayres, in the Clerk's Office of the U.S. District Court for the Western District of California.

A lithograph, shown here, *The Mammoth Tree Grove, Calaveras County California. Lapham & Haynes prop.rs* Sketched from nature by T. A. Ayres, 1855, printed by Britton & Rey resulted from Ayres and Hutchings's visit to the grove.



The Mirra Cabin 40 Feet in Cir. 200 Feet High

Calaveras and have seen and measured the same in every part of the State. It is a specimen of the most splendid and beautiful of the California

Painted by G. A. S. F.



The Three Graces. One of the Three 90 Feet - 360 Feet High



The Horseshoe Hole. Distance through 25 Feet, 40 feet in the clear

DRAWN ON STONE BY KUCHEL & DRESEL 176 CLAY ST. S.F.

through San Francisco, including a trip to the Presidio. Thus began a fruitful friendship between the promoter and the artist.

In the newspapers of the day Hutchings read about a little valley where a waterfall had been seen and estimated to be 1,000 feet high. He recalled later, "That was all they had to say about Yo Semite." The newspaper blurb ignited Hutchings's imagination. He was determined to visit and sketch the rumored falls. His serendipitous meeting with the artist Ayres worked well into his plan.

So, in June 1855 in San Francisco, James Hutchings met with Walter Millard, his cabinmate on the *Gertrude* during their 1848 passage from England to the United States, and artist Thomas Ayres to discuss his plans for a visit to the valley.

The threesome agreed to pursue the adventure, and on July 5th, Hutchings and his two friends sailed from San Francisco to Sacramento on the ship *Martin White*. First they would visit the Big Trees of Calaveras Grove to explore and for Ayres to sketch.

Then the Hutchings party continued through the gold country and rode a stage to the end of the line at Coulterville, California, arriving on July 22. There they met Alexander Stair, who likewise had heard rumors of the mysterious valley. He joined their exploratory party heading to Mariposa.

Hutchings later wrote that their journey to Yosemite "patronized a very popular conveyance known as 'the foot and walker line.' We had two horses—one for our blankets and supplies—and the other for riding—should any accident befall us."⁵ In his search for someone who knew how to get to the mysterious Valley, Hutchings hired two Indian guides, Kos-sum and So-pin, at Mr. Hunt's store on the Fresno River, located near today's Oakhurst. He recounted that with his Indian guides, the party was "Ho! For the mountains."⁶

The roads near the settlements left behind, there was scarcely the outline of an Indian trail visible; unused as they had been, all were now overgrown, or covered