Sierra Prelude:
Muir and LeConte in the South

MARY JANE BROCK

THOUGH founded in California, the Sierra Club also has roots in the Deep South. The journey that eventually would take John Muir to his beloved Yosemite began on September 2, 1867, when he crossed the Ohio River with the intention of traveling “in a general southward direction by the wildest, leafiest, and least trodden way” he could find toward the Gulf Coast of Florida. In the journal of this trip, A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf, we sense for the first time the man whose celebration of wilderness would later move a nation.

In the course of this trip, Muir would pass within a few miles of Woodmanston Plantation near Savannah, the family home of a man who would soon become a lifelong friend and associate, but whom he would not meet for another three years, and then, not in Georgia, but a continent away at the foot of Yosemite Falls. This was Joseph LeConte, the first professor of geology at the University of California, a charter member of the Sierra Club and, with Muir, an indefatigable explorer of the High Sierra.

Muir set forth on his journey south burdened only with one small bag containing the barest necessities, a flower press, a blank notebook and three books—the New Testament, Milton’s Paradise Lost and a volume of poems by his fellow Scotsman, Robert Burns. From Louisville, Kentucky, he headed south, mostly along river bottoms, exulting that he had “escaped from the dust and turmoil of my garret bedroom to the glorious forest.” Enroute to Mammoth Cave, which he especially wanted to see, Muir met a rustic who told him the famous cave was not worth the trouble. “He was one of the useful, practical men,” wrote Muir in his journal, “too wise to waste precious time with weeds, caves, fossils or anything else that he could not eat.” In later years, much of Muir’s time would be spent doing political battle with people of like minds.

Arriving at Mammoth Cave, he “was surprised to find it in so complete naturalness” despite the resort hotel nearby. “I never before saw Nature’s grandeur in so abrupt contrast with paltry artificial gardens,” Muir wrote; “The fashionable hotel grounds are in exact parlor taste, with many a beautiful plant cultivated to deformity, and arranged in strict geometrical beds, the whole pretty affair a laborious failure side by side with Divine beauty.”

A few days later, he began his ascent of Tennessee’s Cumberland Mountains, “the first real mountains that my foot ever touched or eyes beheld . . . the most sublime and comprehensive picture that ever entered my eyes.” While in the Cumberlands, Muir stayed one night with a blacksmith who reproached him for wandering about the country “picking up blossoms” when there was “man’s work” to be done in the aftermath of the Civil War. Muir replied with a question: “Do you not remember that Christ told his disciples to ‘consider the lilies how they grow’ . . . ? Now, whose advice am I to take, yours or Christ’s?”

Muir continued south, crossing the Appalachian backbone into Georgia. With each step the vistas seemed to be grander, and Muir could barely contain his excitement. His prose becomes increasingly rapturous as it strains to equal his wonder. “The scenery is far grander than any I ever before beheld,” he writes from a mountaintop on the Georgia border. “Such an ocean of wooded, waving, swelling mountain beauty and grandeur is not to be described. . . Oh, these forest gardens of our Father! What perfection, what divinity, in their architecture! What simplicity and mysterious complexity of detail!”

Most of the country he traversed, especially Georgia, still bore the scars of the Civil War, only three years past. Bands of marauders were a constant threat. No wonder Muir found the inhabitants suspicious of strangers and fearful of any knock on the door. He was depressed by the evidence of battle “not only on the broken fields, burnt fences, mills, and woods ruthlessly slaughtered, but also on the countenances of the people.”

From the Tennessee border, Muir headed southeast through Gainesville and Athens, picking up the Savannah River near Augusta and following it
to the sea. On October 8, he arrived in Savannah virtually penniless. The money he had expected his brother to forward to him not having arrived, and with only a dollar and a half in his pocket, he was forced to camp in the Bonaventure Cemetery outside of town. But even here among the tombs, Muir found time to glory in nature: “I gazed awe-stricken as one new-arrived from another world. Bonaventure is called a graveyard, a town of the dead, but the few graves are powerless in such a depth of life.”

When his money finally arrived, Muir booked passage on a boat bound for north Florida, and from the town of Fernandina he tramped westward to Cedar Keys on the Gulf of Mexico, where he contracted malaria. He had planned to continue south through the gulf to South America and eventually the Amazon Basin but he got no farther than Cuba. Shaken by his illness, he decided instead to head for California, shipping north to New York and from there to San Francisco. On March 28, 1868, 147 days after crossing the Ohio River, Muir arrived in California, and only a few days after that he entered Yosemite Valley for the first time.

**Joseph LeConte**

JOSEPH LECONTE was born in 1823 at Woodmanston, the family home, a few miles south of Savannah, Georgia. During that fall of 1867, when Muir was making his way south, LeConte was contemplating his future in the aftermath of the war. Both he and his brother John were scientists, their interest apparently inherited from their father Louis, a plantation owner trained in medicine and known far and wide as an amateur chemist and botanist. Both Joseph and John graduated from the University of Georgia. Joseph also took a medical degree from the College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York, but after a brief period of practice, he decided to study science with Louis Agassiz, the distinguished professor of geology and zoology at Harvard.

After teaching science at the University of Georgia for several years, the LeConte brothers moved to South Carolina College in Columbia, where John became professor of physics, and Joseph, professor of chemistry and geology. In the ensuing years, they both acquired notable reputations in their fields. When the Civil War forced the college to close, the LeContes accepted positions with the Confederate government.

After the war, the college reopened, but LeConte found conditions under the Carpetbaggers intolerable, and because of his activities on behalf of the Confederacy, most academic doors were closed to him. The LeConte brothers seriously considered joining one of the colonies planning to emigrate to Mexico or Brazil, but they ended up in California instead. Professor Agassiz wrote to Joseph and told him that a new university was being established in California, and he urged the brothers to apply immediately, promising strong recommendations from himself and other colleagues. Having been assured that their wartime activities would not prejudice their chances, the LeContes sent off their applications. In 1869, John LeConte became professor of physics and first president of the University of California; Joseph became the first professor of geology. The family name still adorns a street, an elementary school and a university hall in the city of Berkeley.

And so it was that during the summer of 1870, Joseph Le Conte, with a group of students, made his first trip to Yosemite, which he was to visit frequently for the rest of his life. There, on August 5, he met John Muir, who was working in the valley. Muir joined the LeConte expedition to Mono Lake, and during long nights around the campfire, the amateur geologist Muir told the professional LeConte about his theory that Yosemite Valley was the product of glacial action rather than massive subsidence, the theory then popular. LeConte had his doubts, but by the trip’s end he agreed with Muir in the main, and he would continue to support Muir in later years when the glacial theory was still dismissed by other professional geologists. Time, of course, has vindicated Muir’s theory and LeConte’s support. Their friendship and collaboration continued until LeConte’s death thirty-one years later. They fought to save their beloved Yosemite and later worked together in the Sierra Club.

Although LeConte was in Europe when the Sierra Club was incorporated, he was nevertheless one of its charter members and an early vice president and member of the board of directors. In 1898, he gave up his seat on the board, but was succeeded by his son, Joseph N. LeConte, who served on the board for the next forty-two years.

In the summer of 1901, LeConte, in spite of poor health, was determined to join the Sierra Club trip to Yosemite, his eleventh visit. There, after several delightful days, he suffered a fatal heart attack on July 6th. In 1903, the Sierra Club erected the LeConte Memorial Lodge, which still stands in Yosemite Valley, a tribute to the California professor with the southern accent whom students and friends knew affectionately as “Dr. Joe.”

Mary Jane Brock is, at present, Chairman of the International Organization Committee of the Sierra Club Council.
The Botanical Garden of Woodmanston

MARY P. STEPHENSON

IN GEORGIA'S low country, little remains today of the famous Botanical Garden of Woodmanston Plantation, boyhood home of Joseph Le Conte, yet many hope to see it live again. Near Midway, Georgia, Woodmanston was once acclaimed for the camellias of its botanical garden. In the early 1800s, the carriages of noted botanists turned off the Barrington Road onto a mile-long, shaded drive to pull up before two tall palms that marked the borders of the garden. On an acre of his low-country rice plantation, Louis Le Conte had established an experimental garden for the culture of bulbs and Camellia japonica. He took special pride in his largest specimen, a double-white (Alba Plena, 1792), fifteen feet tall, bearing a thousand blossoms at a time.

Far from town and trade, Woodmanston was a working plantation as well as an experimental garden. Everything was made on the plantation, even the children's toys. The house and garden were carefully situated on a knoll that was above high water at all times; the dams and dikes of the LeContes, still standing, were built to regulate the flow of swamp water on and off the productive rice fields.

After Louis Le Conte's death, the gardens and homeplace were abandoned as the property was divided. Fennel and broomgrass sprang up among the camellias, and even before the Civil War the comfortable, raised-cottage plantation house had become derelict. His sons Joseph and John returned to Woodmanston and other Le Conte plantations on several occasions, perhaps to recall their boyhood dugout canoe explorations of Bulltown Swamp.

What of Woodmanston today? No visible trace endures of the plantation's homestead, but plantings of the garden persist in a few volunteer seedlings, a camellia, pecans, crepe myrtle, all struggling to survive in the wild undergrowth. The two cabbage palms still stand tall; one is living. A lone red camellia seedling survives to recall the glory of its ancestors in the myriad of ruby buds upon its branches. A youngster's toe can nudge up a half-buried garden brick, and a troop of Boy Scouts has cleared walking trails along the top of the dikes leading into the recesses of Bulltown Swamp, where fishermen still come to lift pansized warmouth from the black water.

But the plantation's acres are leased for commercial pine growing. A bulldozer moves across the land, its blade slashing closer and closer to the garden's remains. Half a row of volunteer crepe myrtles, offspring of those that lined a garden path, have fallen in its wake. Rather than sacrifice this historic property to pulp production, a group of people in Georgia's low country hope to retain enough acres of the old plantation to carefully survey and inventory the garden plantings. These volunteers, supported by the interest of the Sierra Club, work and plan to bring the gardens back to life again with lovingly nurtured camellia cuttings and descendants of the Le Conte trees that were shared with Liberty County neighbors. They want to restore the gardens as Joseph Le Conte knew them, so that Woodmanston Plantation can once again become a showplace of national interest and local pride.

Once a thriving plantation, by 1897 Woodmanston was being worked by tenant farmers. The two palms mark the boundaries of the old botanical garden.

Mary Stephenson is a member of the club's Joseph Le Conte Chapter.