

THE KAWEAH CO-OPERATIVE COLONY:  
A GEOGRAPHICAL APPRAISAL OF NINETEENTH  
CENTURY SOCIALISM IN THE MOUNTAINS

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Most studies of utopian ventures are political histories and rarely deal with the geographical aspects of the settlements. This is a geographical appraisal of the Kaweah Co-operative, a socialist colony which was located 40 miles east of Visalia, California, in what is now Sequoia National Park.<sup>1</sup> The Kaweah Colony was founded in 1885 by a group of San Francisco radicals led by Burnette Haskell in an attempt to demonstrate the superiority of socialist co-operation over capitalism. They settled the remote area along the Kaweah River, near the Giant Forest (Figure 1) for its lumbering potential. Their plan was to undersell their capitalist lumbering competition and equally distribute profits among members.

The major accomplishment of the Colony, in the six years of its existence, was the building of a road from the Kaweah River to the edge of the Giant Forest, a distance of 18 miles over steep mountainous terrain. Little actual lumbering was done. The Kaweah Colony was never self-sufficient; it relied heavily on the financial support of non-resident members. The demise of the Kaweah Co-operative Colony came in 1891 with the formation of Sequoia National Park and the rejection of their prior claims to the land.

This analysis deals with the socialist background of the Kaweah Colony, land utilization in the Colony, the Colonists' perception of nature, and the failure of the

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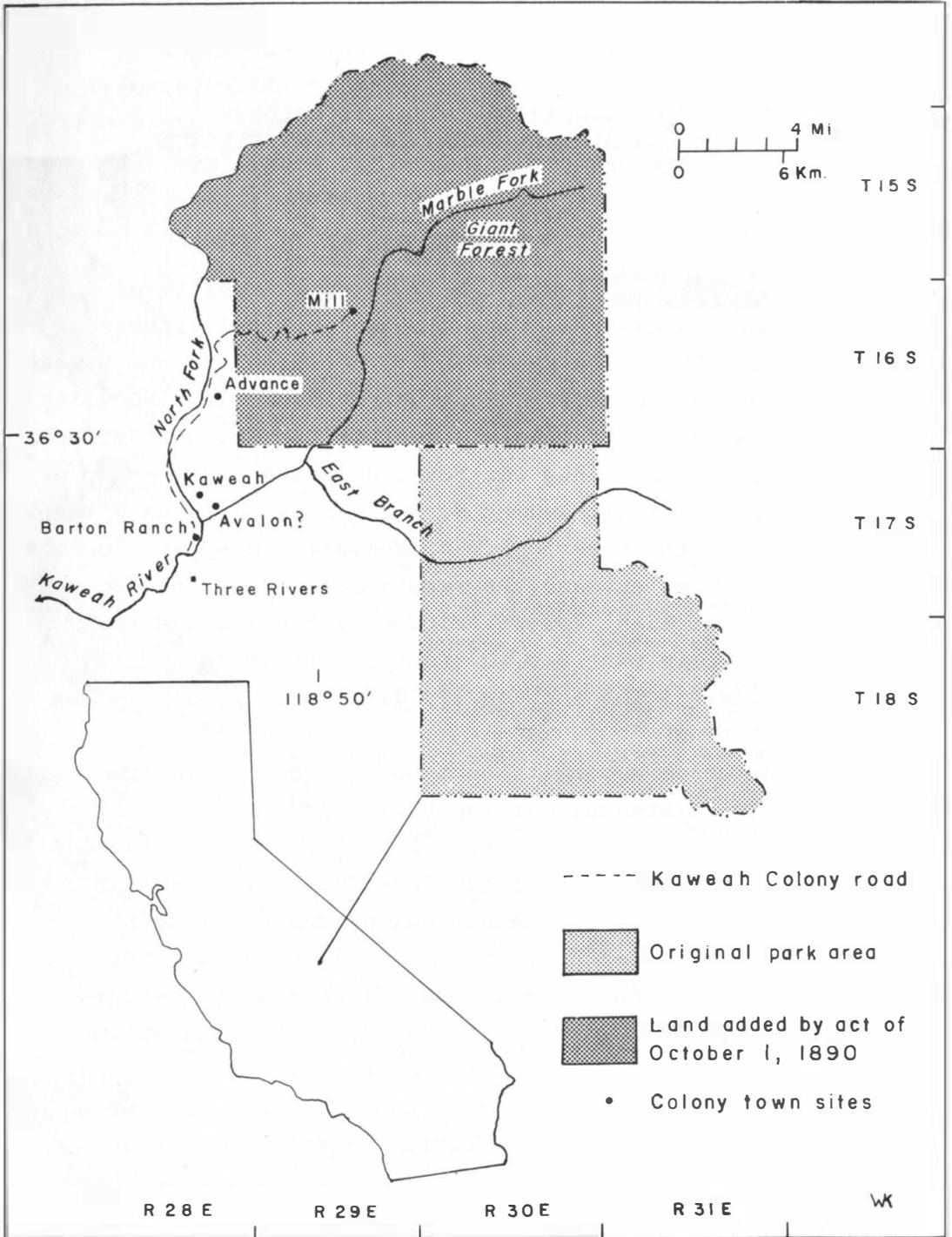


Figure 1. Sequoia National Park boundaries, 1890 (after Berland and U.S.G.S., 1915), and Kaweah Colony town sites. The Colony claimed the Giant Forest as well as townships along the road.

Colony upon the formation of Sequoia National Park.<sup>2</sup>

The Colony was an outgrowth of the International Workingmen's Association (IWA), organized by Burnette Haskell in the early 1880's in San Francisco. Haskell and other members quickly tired of violent confrontational Marxism and turned toward utopian socialism.<sup>3</sup>

The evolutionary approach to change expressed itself in the IWA's intention to form a series of co-operative industrial settlements from the Mexican to the Canadian borders, based on the exploitation of abundant natural resources.<sup>4</sup> A member informed Haskell that magnificent forest land, 40 miles east of Visalia, was open for land claims. Further inspection of the site confirmed the possibility of lumber development, and the IWA decided to concentrate its efforts on the Kaweah site.<sup>5</sup>

In early October, 1885, members of the IWA entered the Visalia Land Office and filed individually for adjacent quarter sections of land in the Giant Forest and Kaweah Canyon, under the Timberlands Act of 1878.<sup>6</sup> Local land officers had been ordered to report any suspicious land claims to Washington in order to prevent lumbering interests from acquiring large tracts of public land. In response to this order, the Visalia Land Office reported the 55 claims made in the Kaweah-Giant Forest area, fearing that the claimants were lumbering industry proxies. The Commissioner of the General Land Office then blocked the colonists' timber filings.<sup>7</sup>

This action, however, did not dismay the colonists. They believed it would allow them time to raise enough money to purchase the land under the Timberlands Act. Moreover, the suspicion that they were proxies for the lumber industry would be dispelled by their efforts to improve the land.<sup>8</sup> Members decided to squat on the land and never did have legal title to the land they claimed.

The Colony originally intended to build a railroad to the Giant Forest and ship the lumber to San Francisco, where

it would be shipped to international markets. They also planned to establish their own international trade network to compete with the capitalist system.<sup>9</sup>

Limited financial resources forced the Colony to base its economy on agriculture, as well as lumbering. Instead of a railroad, the colonists decided to build a wagon road and transport the lumber to the San Joaquin Valley. They intended to undersell the current lumber market there by half the existing price.<sup>10</sup> They assumed that the lumber demand in the San Joaquin Valley would assure the survival of the Colony.

The Colony's official newspaper, The Commonwealth, painted a bright picture of the agricultural potential of the Colony land:

The soil is capable of producing in the utmost perfection, olives, oranges, grapes, apples, peaches, pears, plums, cherries, nuts, and every kind of fruit, vegetable or grain indigenous to the temperate and semi-tropic zones.<sup>11</sup>

In a later article the newspaper quoted the Russian geographer, Peter Kropotkin, about the unlimited agricultural potential of the soil surrounding Paris, France. By some strange logic, this indicated to the newspaper that the soil around the Kaweah Colony also had unlimited agricultural potential.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, little of the Kaweah Colony land was suited for agriculture. The land is rugged mountainous terrain ranging in elevation from 2,000 to 8,000 feet. Soils that could support such crops are only developed along the Kaweah River and its branches in alluvial fans and terraces. Orchards can only survive at lower elevations near Barton Ranch, Kaweah and Avalon (Figure 1) where the number of frost-free days would allow such cultivation.<sup>13</sup> The climate of the area is the typical California variation of the Mediterranean climate, summer dry and winter wet. There is, however, a significant variation in precipitation between the higher and lower elevations because of the orographic effect. Any agricultural venture would necessarily depend on irrigation during summer.

Indeed, one agricultural scheme involved the diversion of water from the Kaweah River to their orchards. The medicinal nature of olive oil was described in the Commonwealth when the Colony decided to grow olive trees.<sup>14</sup> Later, olive growing regions of France and Italy were compared physically and climatically to the Colony lands.<sup>15</sup> Non-resident members sent Kaweah peaches, figs, strawberries, date palms, apricots, loquats, and raisin grapes, as well as olives, for the orchards.<sup>16</sup>

The Colony claimed to have cleared 300 acres for wheat and barley, and there is written evidence of the introduction of rye grass from Germany. Members supposedly pastured cattle. There is even a roundup mentioned in the newspaper.<sup>17</sup>

The colonists intended to mine limestone, marble, gypsum, gold, silver, and iron ore. The presence of these minerals was shown by reprinting excerpts of geological reports on the whole Sierra Nevada. It was assumed, without investigation, that all these minerals would be present on their land.<sup>18</sup>

The population of the Colony varied between 75 and 300 people in its brief history.<sup>19</sup> There were five town sites in 1890, Barton Ranch, Kaweah, Advance, Avalon, and Mill Site (Figure 1). Each town had a specialized function and was no more than a day's travelling time from another. Advance was the site of the administrative center, the general store, post office, and school.<sup>20</sup>

Despite meager attempts at agriculture, the Kaweah colonists were always dependent on outside support for their survival. The situation was plain in 1890, when Haskell wrote, "... even now we hope our friends upon the outside will not forget that their monthly dues are what we are presently depending upon...."<sup>21</sup> The Visalia Delta later reported that "no meat, milk, butter, or eggs was supplied to the Colony for weeks or even months at a time."<sup>22</sup> Tents and cabins were the main form of housing.

The lasting accomplishment of the Kaweah Co-operative Colony is the 18-mile road, built by members from the Kaweah River to the edge of the Giant Forest (Figure 1). "Persons accustomed to mountain road building had deemed it next to impossible to construct a suitable road" through that stretch of rugged country.<sup>23</sup> It was accomplished, according to the colonists, because of "socialist co-operation." It is ironic that the road the Kaweah colonists built for lumbering was the only road to the Giant Forest until the 1930's. It still can be travelled on foot today, with the permission of the National Park Service.

The Kaweah Co-operative Colony attempted to compete with the outside world on capitalist terms. They viewed the mountains and their timber in economic terms. Other groups, at this same time, believed that the Kaweah River-Giant Forest region was worthy of preservation for future generations. These differing views of the potential value of the same region are good examples of the idea that resources are, in fact, cultural appraisals.

Individual members of the Colony were not oblivious to the beauty surrounding them. The site was often described in rapturous terms, where "lofty giant trees whose tops seem to touch the sky is a sight to be seen nowhere else ... [and] is worthy of a special journey around the world to witness."<sup>24</sup> One woman wrote "that every bird of the air and fish of Kaweah River is more than a bird or fish, in fact is sacred...."<sup>25</sup>

Despite individual attitudes expressing appreciation of nature, the Colony's primary purpose was lumbering. The description of the timber on their land in the Commonwealth left little doubt as to their intentions.

This wonderful belt of timber, the most valuable portions of which are already in the possession of the Colony, has a reputation of being the finest body of timber in California. Here the crop of a thousand years, which by actual measurement and cold Blooded calculation amounts to several millions of dollars in value awaits the application of industry.<sup>26</sup>

The newspaper claimed that there "is enough timber in the Giant Forest to last over a hundred years without touching the mammoth growths."<sup>27</sup> Contrary to what most histories of the Colony say, it is clear that they did not intend to lumber the Sequoia gigantea of the Giant Forest. They said it "would be nothing short of vandalism to indiscriminately destroy these sentinels of past centuries...."<sup>28</sup> The colonists, however, were ignorant of the potential ecological damage they would cause by logging in the vicinity of the Giant Forest.

By 1890, there was considerable agitation for a national park in the Kaweah region. John Muir had named the Giant Forest in 1875 and lumbering had taken place at an even earlier date.<sup>29</sup> There had been proposals for park reservations in the Kaweah area since 1880. Local conservationists succeeded in having four sections surrounding the General Grant Grove north of the Giant Forest withdrawn from public sale in 1890.<sup>30</sup> Agitation for a national park in the area was ignored by the Colony newspaper.

The sale of several townships in the Kaweah River area, to the south of the Colony, to what was believed to be big lumbering interests precipitated the formation of Sequoia National Park on September 25, 1890.

The colonists were relieved to learn that the land they claimed, including the Giant Forest, was not included in this original bill (Figure 1). Haskell welcomed the establishment of the park because he thought it would benefit the Colony.

... its tourists, its hunters will have to buy their food and supplies from us. The location of this National Park is one of the greatest boons that could have been conferred upon us....<sup>31</sup>

Much to their surprise, Sequoia National Park was expanded to more than double its original size by the same bill which created Yosemite National Park. This new bill was signed into law on October 1, 1890, six days after the original.<sup>32</sup> The new parkland included not only the Giant Forest, but all of the townships around it (Figure 1).

The Kaweah colonists' initial reaction was guarded optimism. Haskell wrote that the "bill properly excluded all claims, settlements, and entries previously taken up, thus protecting our already acquired lands."<sup>33</sup> However, Haskell did a disservice to the other members by assuring them "These townships have been for nearly four years legally and absolutely ours...."<sup>34</sup>

The Kaweah Colony disintegrated in much bitterness soon after the Secretary of the Interior ruled that their land claims were not truly bona fide. The Federal Government did not even reimburse the colonists for their road, which was appropriated along with their lands.

Why were the boundaries of Sequoia National Park extended to include the colonists' land after only six days? Osker Berland, in an outstanding piece of historical scholarship, points the finger at one of the greatest landscape modifiers in California, the Southern Pacific Railroad. Southern Pacific's reasons for wanting an extension of the park boundaries are actually logical. Parks built around natural curiosities like the Giant Forest attracted tourists and stimulated passenger traffic. The Southern Pacific was also concerned with watershed protection for its vast tracts of land in the Central Valley. Furthermore, the railroad held an important position in the lumbering industry, and felt threatened by any sort of competition, especially socialist.

It is ironic that the Southern Pacific Railroad was involved in the reservation of the Giant Forest, an act which the Visalia Delta and local officials opposed. The conspiratorial view of the role played by the Southern Pacific should not be overemphasized, however. The Kaweah colonists' claims could easily have been ruled invalid and the Giant Forest preserved at a later time.

The Kaweah Co-operative Colony was an outgrowth of nineteenth century socialism in San Francisco. Members of the Colony were imbued with the belief in unlimited material

progress, an idea, however, which was not peculiar to socialism. This belief in progress contributed to the Colony's failure to deal rationally with geographic reality. The Colony, therefore, had unreal expectations concerning their viability in the future.

The conflict between economic exploitation of the resources of a given region, whether "capitalist" or "socialist," and the efforts of conservationists to preserve the aesthetic, as well as economic resources, is even more important at the present time, with the advent of widespread application of technological methods of exploitation of these resources. The story of the Kaweah Colony, with its many ironies, is an early and significant chapter in this ongoing conflict.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Histories of the Kaweah Colony can be found in Robert Hine, *California's Utopian Colonies* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1966); Ruth R. Lewis, "Kaweah: An Experiment in Co-operative Colonization," *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 17 (November 1948), 429-41; and Paul Kagan, *New World Utopias: A Photographic Search for Community* (New York: Penguin, 1975).

<sup>2</sup>One major problem encountered in this geographical study of the Kaweah Colony is that there never was a permanent record or original map showing the exact location of the Colony.

<sup>3</sup>*Commonwealth*, San Francisco, November 24, 1888. This was the official newspaper of the Kaweah Co-operative Colony. It was published in San Francisco from 1885 to 1890, whereupon it moved to Kaweah and became the *Kaweah Commonwealth*.

<sup>4</sup>Dane Kennedy, *The Kaweah Colony* (unpublished MS, Bancroft Library, 1973), p. 12.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>6</sup>Hine, p. 79.

<sup>7</sup>Oscar Berland, "Giant Forest's Reservation: The Legend and the Mystery," *Sierra Club Bulletin*, Vol. 47, No. 9 (December 1962), p. 71.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

- <sup>9</sup>Hine, p. 83.
- <sup>10</sup>*Commonwealth*, April 24, 1889.
- <sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>12</sup>*Commonwealth*, August 1, 1889.
- <sup>13</sup>U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Soils Survey: Visalia Area, California*. Series 1935, No. 16 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1940).
- <sup>14</sup>*Commonwealth*, April 3, 1888.
- <sup>15</sup>*Commonwealth*, April 31, 1888.
- <sup>16</sup>*Kaweah Commonwealth*, February 22, 1890.
- <sup>17</sup>*Kaweah Commonwealth*, January 28, 1890.
- <sup>18</sup>*Commonwealth*, April, 1889.
- <sup>19</sup>*Visalia Delta*, December 10, 1891.
- <sup>20</sup>*Kaweah Commonwealth*, September 13, 1890.
- <sup>21</sup>*Kaweah Commonwealth*, July 5, 1890.
- <sup>22</sup>*Visalia Delta*, November 19, 1891.
- <sup>23</sup>*Visalia Delta*, December 17, 1891.
- <sup>24</sup>*Commonwealth*, April 24, 1889.
- <sup>25</sup>*Kaweah Commonwealth*, January 18, 1890.
- <sup>26</sup>*Commonwealth*, April 24, 1889.
- <sup>27</sup>*Commonwealth*, April 10, 1889.
- <sup>28</sup>*Commonwealth*, April 24, 1889.
- <sup>29</sup>Francis P. Farquhar, *Exploration of the Sierra Nevada* (San Francisco: California Historical Society, 1925), p. 15. See also Douglas Strong, "The History of Sequoia National Park, 1876-1926, Part I: The Move to Establish a Park," *Southern California Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (June 1966).
- <sup>30</sup>Berland, p. 72.
- <sup>31</sup>*Kaweah Commonwealth*, September 6, 1890.
- <sup>32</sup>Berland, p. 74.
- <sup>33</sup>*Kaweah Commonwealth*, November 1, 1890.
- <sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*