

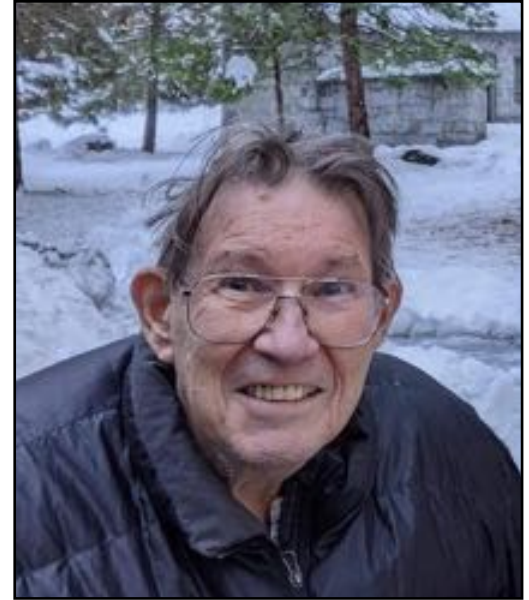
**In Memorium: George Pettit
Dec 1937 - May 28, 2022**

by Harold Wood
June, 2022

My friend George Pettit was one of the most talented, dedicated, and inspirational people I know. He was a talented exhibit designer and artist, dedicated to preserving both history and our natural environment.

I worked closely with George as a fellow volunteer on the Sierra Club LeConte Memorial Lodge Committee beginning in 1988. This newly created committee was created by the Club's board of directors to provide a national presence for the Club's historic memorial lodge in Yosemite Valley (recently re-named the Yosemite Conservation Heritage Center), which had been designed by architect John White, and completed in 1904. For some years, local chapters and regional club entities tried to manage / operate the site, but they could not provide the attention that it deserved as part of the National Park System. George was appointed at the outset at the recommendation of Dr. Edgar Wayburn because of his expertise as an exhibit designer. I was appointed chair of the committee, and that is how I first met George, beginning decades of admiration on my part.

At numerous meetings of the committee, George would reveal drawings he had made of various designs and proposals. He even built a 3-D table-top model of the building to show how the exhibits might be designed. His sense of humor, his dedication to the cause of environmental protection, and his very active involvement in our project made him a "leading light" of our committee.



George Pettit, December 2021



When a consulting company pointed out to us that the building itself was the primary exhibit, we decided move the proposed display exhibits from traditional tall vertical ones to low horizontal ones which people could read and actually touch. George addressed this problem by creating a series of exhibit cases, which working together we conceived us as telling the stories related to Yosemite National Park and this building. This began in 2001, with a display for Joseph LeConte and the early founding of the Sierra Club. Another, installed in 2002, focused on the Club's inspirational first President, John Muir, and featured the early history of the Sierra Club in Yosemite, including John Muir, the battle for Hetch Hetchy, early exploration and trail-building, launch of the Club's outings program, and John Muir's legacy of National Parks.



The third display, installed in 2003, told of the contributions of the Sierra Club to America's national parks movement and the environmental movement of the 20th century. Display items includes the building of the LeConte Memorial Lodge (several years before Yosemite Valley



became a part of Yosemite National Park,) and the early development of mountaineering in the Sierra Club. Early Sierra Club leaders and mountaineers are pictured, including Marion Randall Parsons, Ansel Adams, and David Brower. The display continued with the story of the 1955 *This is the American Earth* exhibit in LeConte Memorial that represented the best work of Ansel Adams and other photographers, and the first Sierra Club *Exhibit Format Series* book, which remain, alongside Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, as a major inspiration for the modern environmental movement.

A fourth display area originally served as temporary, rotating exhibits. In 2009, George designed a permanent fourth interactive display addressing climate change, after the Club made that issue a priority in 2005. Visitors could turn a “time machine” wheel to view the changes in climate from 1750 through a period of years to the future of 2050. Another hands-on feature involved “mountain climbing” where visitors learn how population and CO2 have grown enormously over these time periods.



In truth, each of the four exhibits had some kind of “hands-on” component that engages visitors to learn more about each topic. All the exhibits, especially the one on climate change, gave visitors a host of ideas for positive solutions that they can apply in their own lives.

Visitors were so intrigued by the design of the exhibits themselves, they often comment on the design, not just the content, making these displays a memorable experience for them.

The national Sierra Club awarded George a special Volunteer Achievement Award in 1993, an award for which I nominated him. He should have received additional awards, since his contributions did not stop there, but increased steadily over the years. For example, in 1998, he oversaw renovations of the building’s interior lighting system. Antiquated lighting installed in the 1930s was replaced with Craftsman-style chandeliers and box lighting in keeping with the original architectural style. He further created a special logo, posters, and much else to celebrate the Centennial of the building in 2004. Throughout his time, every season he designed highly creative attention-getting display posters to promote the building’s weekend evening programs. As a sketch artist, he regularly executed creative artwork, even illustrating summaries of his own travels. In 1990 he created a small poster at my request promoting Earth Day and John Muir Day as joint enterprises to launch the “The Dawn of the Environmental Decade” (wishful thinking). He even painted a special whimsical outdoor-themed bed headboard for the curator, helping to make even camping a special experience!





In addition to the 4 major exhibit cases, George Pettit also undertook a series of other communication channels for the interior and exterior of LeConte Memorial Lodge that promoted the Sierra Club's many efforts promoting environmental protection. These include an exhibit display case for a wildflower exhibit; a historic Yosemite and Joseph LeConte photography display; a fern-inspired "Poly-Podium" for program presenters, children's library tables and chairs with Sierra Club logo imprinted; and an unique four-sided bulletin board that is used to feature news and events of interest to LeConte visitors, capped with a very special "Muir, Earth, and Turtles All the Way Down" piece of decorative art by George Pettit. He worked on an outdoor kiosk that could inform visitors about the building, its history, and contemporary programs even when the building was not open.

Throughout these years, George also participated in all the administrative details of the LeConte Memorial Lodge program, including working with the NPS on its memorandum of understanding, hiring a series of curators and helping with housing them, working on budget woes and visioning plans, and much more. He assuredly put in far more time than any of the other volunteers - combined!

George was also a big fan of naturalist writer John Muir and a supporter of restoring Hetch Hetchy. In fact, he designed the first logo used by the advocacy group Restore Hetch Hetchy.

In 1993, the Sierra Club Mineral King Group commissioned George to make a special traveling display about "John Muir Day" to promote Muir's inspirational environmental message in combination with the Sierra Club's efforts to protect wilderness, national parks, and natural areas. The display featured its own table and a self-contained lighting combined with a cardboard design that evoked the Craftsman style design of the early 20th century when Muir was alive. It was taken by volunteers around to conventions, Earth Day programs, Sierra Club presentations, and other events promoting environmental education. The original exhibit proved a bit cumbersome to transport and set up at events, so George later created a more simple version that could be simply set upon an ordinary table. The original display was donated to the John Muir National Historic Site, where it is now still on display up in the attic of the house that John Muir lived in and wrote so many of his books and articles advocating the protection of wilderness areas.

Health problems reduced George's contributions over the last few years, but those of us who knew him, his talents, dedication, is engaging personality, and his caring for the environment will remember him forever.



- Harold Wood
June 2022