

STEPHEN LYMAN'S YOSEMITE

BY WARREN CEDERBORG

In light of the recent death of Yosemite Association president Steve Medley, it seems appropriate to remember another Steve: wilderness artist Steve Lyman. The two Steves shared much more than a name. Medley and the late artist from Sandpoint, Idaho shared a friendship, a passion for Yosemite, and a vision of a pristine national park. Both, sadly, would become tragic figures in the history of the park.

A WINTER WONDERLAND

Like Medley, Lyman admired all of Yosemite's seasons. An ugly turn in the weather to Lyman was more cause for exhilaration than concern. "Some of his finest moments came in getting caught alone in the snow and seeing the world afresh when the storm passed and the day broke," said former National Park Service historian Jim Snyder. One day, climbing out of Yosemite Valley with a 75-pound pack on his back, he got his wish—the trail vanished under snow as he reached the rim.

"No matter, I enjoy losing myself in Yosemite. Much to my delight, a grand storm was indeed moving in. I pitched my tent and waited for the snow to fly. By nightfall, thick flakes were falling on the roof. Silently, the tent ceiling inched closer and closer to my nose as it bore the weight of the accumulating snowfall," he wrote in his 1992 book *Firelight Chapbook*.

A day and a half later, Lyman dug out from thigh-deep powder to find himself on top of the world: "I felt as if I were wading through the clouds. In fact, there were clouds filling Yosemite Valley below me. They swirled around the valley's cliffs all day, before slowly dispersing to reveal a peak at Half Dome."

Lyman was prone to visiting Snyder at the Yosemite Research Library following his park adventures. "'You weren't worried about me, were you?' he'd ask with an impish grin, cocking his head slightly to the side. Particular, often nameless places caught his fancy and drew him like a magnet for repeated visits and photographs to catch changing moods, light, and color. Miles of climbing and slogging through snow to get there only made his grin the wider," Snyder wrote in a 2006 article on Lyman in the YA Journal.

YOSEMITE ALPENGLOW

Where Medley used words to foster understanding of the park, Lyman, inspiring acrylic paintings injected Yosemite wilderness into the lives of others. On one foul-weather trek above the rim, Lyman found the inspiration for *Yosemite Alpenglow*, a winterscape of the valley as seen from Eagle Peak.

Lyman and the Yosemite Association began their relationship when the association got the opportunity to market a poster of *Yosemite Alpenglow*. Snyder was asked to ensure that all the names on what appeared to be a large photograph were correct before it was stocked in the visitor center. "On looking at the print more carefully, we realized it was not a photograph at all, but a wonderfully detailed painting. Nor was it a photographic painting, for some of the peaks had been realigned, played up or down to balance the view in the artist's mind. Most striking was Yosemite Valley, in which there were no buildings, roads, or cars... In his painting the valley was wilderness once more," Snyder wrote.

Yosemite Alpenglow was the first of what would be Lyman's many major depictions of the park.

GRIZZLIES AND PEREGRINES

After *Yosemite Alpenglow*, Lyman became one of the YA's best friends. "Things really started happening when he got signed up with [fine art publisher] The Greenwich Workshop. He developed posters of a grizzly bear and a peregrine falcon and donated a whole slew of those," Medley said.

Lyman used the two posters to take stock of the state of the planet's wildlife: we could move toward extinction as with the California grizzly (*Uzumati—the Great Bear of Yosemite*) or toward recovery as in the case of the peregrine falcon (*Return of the Falcon*).

Along with the posters, Lyman and his publisher gave YA a generous supply of his signed open-edition print *Colors of Twilight*.

THE COMPLETE PACKAGE

Lyman's dedication to the park went well beyond the Yosemite Association. Medley believed that the artist was always looking for ways to make a contribution to the source of his inspiration. "Unlike many who use the earth merely as a basis for their livelihoods, Stephen Lyman actively strives to give back what he has harvested. At Yosemite, this has given direct support for a variety of resource-related projects, such as the reintroduction of California bighorn sheep and the augmentation of the peregrine falcon population," Medley said.

Although diligent in supporting organizations like YA, Lyman believed his lasting impact as an environmentalist would be through his depictions of the park. "If they are moved by it, or it brings up feelings of sitting by a campfire, or seeing a rainbow, I hope in a roundabout way it leads them to appreciate the wilderness and to help, so it won't disappear," he told a reporter in 1991.



“Cathedral Snow” by Stephen Lyman

LISTENING TO THE WILD

Venturing into the field was one of Lyman’s passions. “At night, after my campfire has subsided to glowing coals, I climb up on a rock to listen to the earth, moon and stars. I listen, not expecting to hear anything, but in awe of creation, becoming part of the sacred silence. This feeling carries over into my art,” he wrote.

Lyman combined this awe with more practical knowledge. “I don’t paint anything that I haven’t seen or experienced,” he said. “You have to experience it to make it look and feel like it really is.”

Medley too appreciated the authenticity of Lyman’s paintings. “When Lyman chooses a new wildlife subject for a painting, he immerses himself in all aspects of the animal’s life—reading whatever he can get his hands on and then venturing into the field to photograph and observe.”

Precise habitats became Lyman’s standard. When *U.S. ART* magazine added him to its Hall of Fame in 1998, they noted that while Lyman had first gained a reputation as a wildlife artist, his animals were “often dwarfed by the arenas he created for them.”

“A PLACE OF RENEWAL”

More often than not, those arenas were situated in Yosemite. Lyman found in the park a place that would never disappoint, but could often overwhelm. In July of 1983, he took a 10-day backpacking trip from White Wolf to Hetch Hetchy, around to the Cathedral Range. Lyman found the park to be

One grand playground... a place of renewal, revival, refreshment—fountains of life. The sheer delight of discovering beauty along the way is part of the adventure—knowing and expecting to meet God, but not knowing how or when or even in what form. I discover that which is beauty within as well as without. I no longer need solitude to discover who I am, but to remind me of who I know I am. The joy wells up and flowers into love, spilling out to everything and everyone.

A Light in the Wilderness

Lyman combined Muir’s philosophy that one had to work hard for beauty with an uncanny sense of how to reach the most inaccessible perches. “He had the ability to look at a place and figure out how to get there” said Yosemite Research Librarian Linda Eade.

Lyman would return time and again to embrace Yosemite. He wrote in 1991, at the end of another park trip, “I leave this cradle in the Sierra, but I’ll be back. I always am drawn back. I have some connections here, some destiny to exact, paintings to paint, writings to write, inspirations to awaken. Yosemite brings out a lot from people and gives them unceasingly; a special spot on Mother Earth where she hugs Her children, close to Her heart.”

A FINAL HOMECOMING

Just weeks after delivering a multimedia presentation at the 1996 Spring Forum, Lyman died while climbing in the park he loved so much. Climbing in the Cathedral Rocks during a storm in search of Three Brothers and Horsetail Fall views for new paintings, he developed hypothermia, fell, and died.

Andrea Lyman wrote in *A Light in the Wilderness* that her husband left this world in the place he loved best, “cradled one last time and for always in the arms that never ceased to welcome him, this time to his final homecoming. He had come home to himself, his beloved Yosemite and ultimately back home to his Creator.”

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“Yosemite Alpenglow” by Stephen Lyman

