

Muir's heir keeping naturalist's legacy alive

By Linda Fine Conaboy

Many who live near or play in the Sierra are familiar with John Muir, but his great-great-grandson, not so much. However, Robert Hanna is a name to know for those with an interest in the outdoors.

Hanna, who works for California's Assembly Republican Caucus, knows the woods and the mountains and the flowers and the trees. And he knows all about his great-great-granddad, although, of course, the two never met.

During a May 30 talk presented by the Friends of the Library to a full house at the South Lake Tahoe Library, Hanna gave an overview of all things Muir. Hanna offered more than what is usually presented about the famous Scottish naturalist. He painted an in-depth view of his family from Muir's birth in 1838 in Dunbar, Scotland, to the present.



Robert Hanna has become an expert on all things John Muir. Photo/Denise Haerr

"I grew up learning about John Muir in a different way, from a family perspective," he said. "I wanted to create a story of

John and his legacy in-depth. I wanted to look at family history in a way that has not been seen before.”

And that’s what he did in his slide show, consisting of more than 100 images, displaying Muir’s sundry sides and personalities and introducing the audience to a no-nonsense, seemingly tough and resilient man and the large family, who throughout the years, have always supported him and his ideals. Hanna tossed out many vignettes and lots of narrative describing a large and boisterous group that he came to know through many family reunions staged mainly at the family’s large ranch holdings in Martinez.

“A lot of people think John Muir was born old,” Hanna laughed, referring to the often stern demeanor he presented in photographs.

However, when you learn about his early life in Scotland and later, in Wisconsin, perhaps there’s a reason for his unsmiling face. Muir was raised by a stern and religious father who mandated that he memorize and repeat nearly three-quarters of the Bible by the time he was 14. He also was required to perform myriad chores on the family farm; in fact, farming was, in his father’s mind, to be young John’s lot in life.

Little did he realize that his son was not destined to become a farmer. Turns out what young John loved most of all was books and machines – especially those machines he invented himself. Like the self-settling table saw and the barometer he constructed from a water clock powered by a stream on the family farm.

Then there was the clock desk, a contraption that not only roused a student out of bed at a pre-set hour, but then automatically opened and closed various school books at designated times. He designed what he called a “loafer chair”, a device abhorred by any who might wish to slack off during

the day. It soon became apparent that Muir was fascinated by clocks and incorporated them into many of his "timely" inventions.

He created some of these at the University of Wisconsin where they were discovered by Ezra Carr and his wife, Jeanne, who became his friend and encouraged him to put his ideas into print and were to play a pivotal role in his later life. The Carrs also introduced young John to Ralph Waldo Emerson, who also became his life-long friend.

The early adventures of John Muir were always interesting and always tempered with a distracting need to make enough money to feed himself. He left the university in 1863 for a foot tour of Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois and Canada; a pivotal trek that Hanna said led to Muir's devotion to and love of nature.

The loss of sight in both eyes and the eventual regaining of his vision led him to become extremely introspective. During this episode, he made a pact with God that if his sight returned, he would dedicate himself to nature, according to Hanna. He kept his word to God.

A 1,000-mile trek to Florida gained him a renewed closeness to Mother Nature and also, unfortunately, a raging bout of malaria. His recovery found him journeying to San Francisco – followed by a walking trip to Yosemite. The rest might be colloquially termed as history.

It is Hanna's belief that time in nature can heal many ills and time spent with others in nature can bring about closeness and a bonding not to be gained elsewhere. For example, Muir cemented his relationship with Emerson during the poet's brief visit to Yosemite; he was able to convince President Theodore Roosevelt to designate Yosemite a national park in 1890 after a rewarding trip throughout Yosemite's vast wildness.

It is said that Roosevelt called his excursion with Muir, "some of the best three days in my life."

Lest he become too much a hermit in the wilds, the Carr family lured Muir out of the woods and introduced him to Louie Strentzel, whom he married. He moved to the family farm in Martinez, made its orchard extremely profitable, thereby, finally becoming a man of money, and raised his two daughters there.

He was on his way back to Martinez, via train, when he developed pneumonia and died in Los Angeles in 1914 at age 76.

One issue Muir fought hardest for was the battle to save the glacial Hetch Hetchy Valley, which lies in the northeastern part of Yosemite National Park. Muir lost his fight and the O'Shaughnessy Dam was constructed 20 years after his death, in 1934, on the Tuolumne River, flooding the entire valley. The water stored there, to this day, travels 167 miles to San Francisco and remains The City's main water source.

At the end of the fight Hetch Hetchy fight it is said that Muir weighed only 85 pounds. But in the end, he lost; however, now, his great-great-grandson is in the trenches, following his famous relative's path, doing what he can to convince powerful lobbyists and anyone else who will listen, to drain the Hetch Hetchy Valley and store the water downstream.

"It's political and it's a big fight," Hanna said. "It was wrong to destroy an icon within a national park. I'm going to keep fighting the good fight for as long as it takes."

Hanna said that besides fighting some good fights, he's happy now to be telling Muir stories and sharing Muir's legacy. He closed his presentation with one of his favorite Muir quotes, said to be uttered after the defeat of the Hetch Hetchy project: "No matter, for I've had a grand life in these divine mountains and I may yet do something for those coming after me."