

Photo: Geoffrey Dunn Collection

VINTAGE VIEWS

The 19th-century images of California photographer Carleton Watkins

By Geoffrey Dunn

Of all the great Western landscape photographers in the aftermath of the California Gold Rush — including Thomas Houseworth, Isaiah West Taber and Eadweard Muybridge — none was as accomplished and universally heralded during their respective careers as the San Francisco-based Carleton Watkins.

Watkins' spectacular images of Yosemite — thirty of which were taken with "mammoth plate" negatives — had a significant influence on the United States Congress passing early legislation that protected the Yosemite Valley from environmental destruction. In 1867, Watkins won a gold medal for landscape photography at the Paris International Exposition, an honor that highlighted his creative and technical ascendancy in both California and throughout the world.

Today, some art critics consider Watkins "the first great all-American artist."

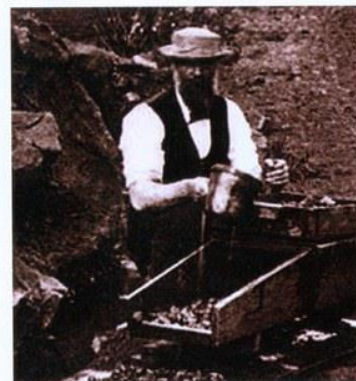


Photo: Collection of the Society of California Pioneers

(Top) Coast View from Cliff Drive, Santa Cruz, Cal. (1882) (Bottom) Primitive Mining (self-portrait), The Rocker, Calaveras County, Cal. (1883)



Camp Capitola, Santa Cruz, Cal. (1882)

Born in Oneonta, New York, in 1829, Watkins followed the lure of gold to California in 1851, but like many would-be prospectors, he soon found himself working in various mercantile operations, including a photo gallery in the burgeoning downtown business district of San Francisco.

By 1858, Watkins had struck out on his own and began taking golden-hued photographs throughout California — of San Francisco and the greater Bay Area, New

Almaden and the Santa Clara Valley, Yosemite, Mendocino and Mount Shasta, and the mining regions of the Sierra Nevada — often with cameras that he had designed and crafted. He opened a successful gallery in San Francisco, but during the economic downturn of 1875, he lost everything, including all of his prints and negatives.

Shortly afterward, he bounced back, and some time in the late 1870s or early 1880s, he journeyed to Santa Cruz County,

where he began taking a series of important images of the region. While there are no newspaper accounts of his travels here — nor any formal documents referencing his Santa Cruz sojourn in his various archives — the photographic record he left (largely in the form of some 68 stereoviews and a handful of boudoir and cabinet photographs) speaks for itself.

Watkins' images record a moment in regional history that would otherwise have

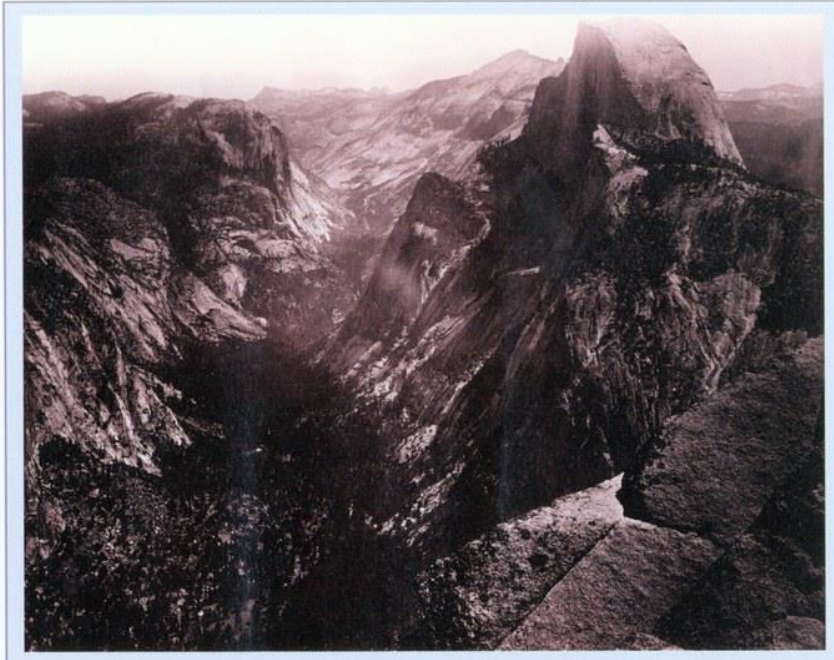


Photo: Library of Congress

Tasayac, or the Half Dome, from Glacier Point, Yosemite Valley, Mariposa County, Cal. (1865)



Photo: Geoffrey Dunn Collection

The San Lorenzo from the R.R. crossing. Big Tree Station, Felton, Santa Cruz, Cal (1880s)

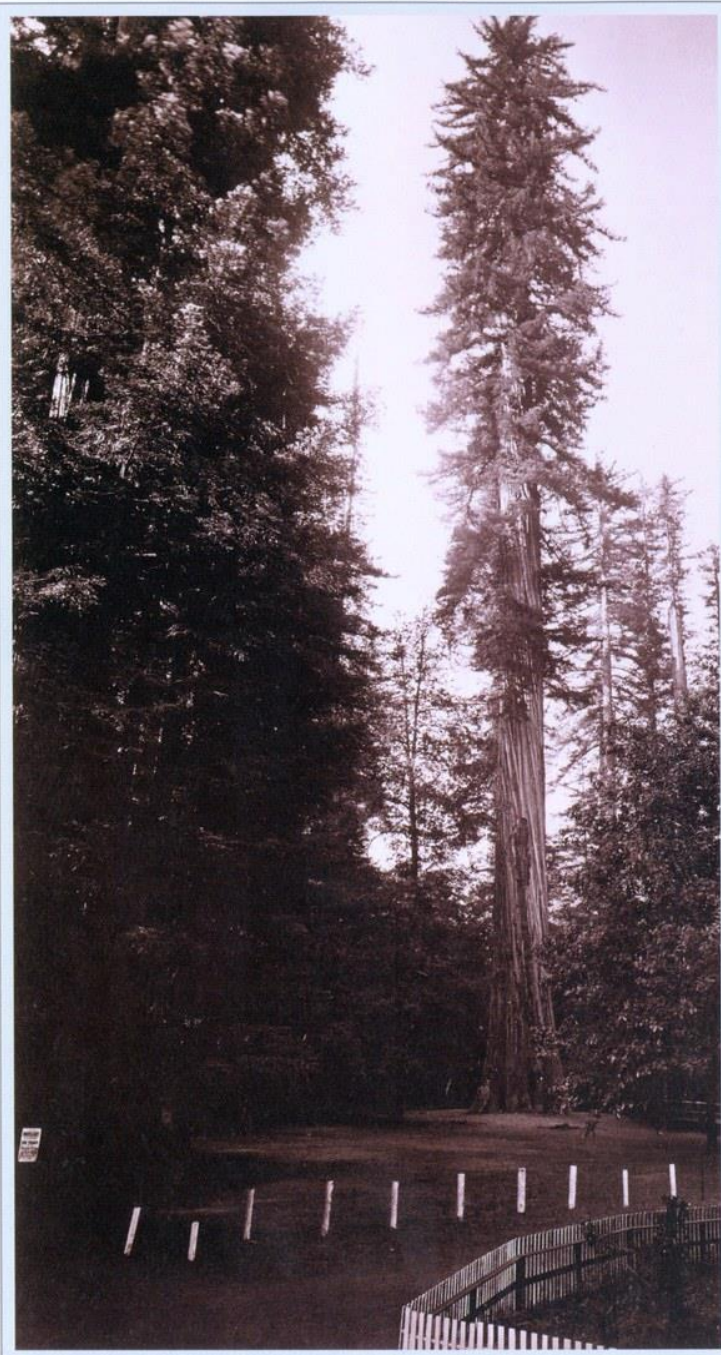


Photo: Geoffrey Dunn Collection

Giant Redwood, Santa Cruz. (1880s) The sign posted on the tree at the left advertises a "Moonlight Party in the Big Trees."

been lost to posterity: the Big Tree train station in Felton; the California Powder Works along the San Lorenzo River; the Glenwood Magnetic Springs in the Santa Cruz Mountains; West Cliff Drive and the Santa Cruz waterfront; the "natural bridges" at what was then Moore's Beach; the Wilder Dairy Ranch; and early scenes at "Camp Capitola," among them a rare shot of visitors seated outside a cabin.

Collected in what is known as his "5000 Series," Watkins' crystalline photographs provide an astonishing archive of regional imagery.

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Watkins' artistic talent, however, was not enough to sustain him. By the mid-1890s, his eyesight and business acumen were both failing. A decade later — just before Stanford University was set to purchase his archive — the great 1906 Earthquake and Fire destroyed his studio and all of his negatives. His life's work was lost. He deteriorated into dementia and in 1910 was sent to the Napa State Hospital for the Insane, where he died six years later, at the age of eighty-seven. ■

A QUICK LOOK AT CARELTON WATKINS

Born: Oneonta, Oswego County, New York, November 11, 1829

Died: Napa, California, June 23, 1916

Arrived in California: 1851

Camera: Mammoth plate camera, which used 18 x 22 inch glass plate negatives.

Studio destroyed: San Francisco earthquake, 1906

Online Collections:

www.carletonwatkins.org

Bancroft Library Collection:

www.oac.cdlib.org

California State Library:

www.library.ca.gov