

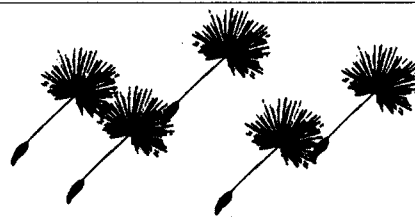
Sierra Club centennial bicycle tours

In September 1867, John Muir quit his factory job in Indianapolis to embark on a "grand sabbath day three years long." Departing Louisville, Kentucky, on foot, the 29-year-old naturalist-to-be headed south on a trip that would be a turning point in his life—and in American conservation history.

By tracing all or part of his thousand-mile walk, late twentieth-century adventurers can celebrate the centennial of the Sierra Club that Muir later founded. Four consecutive week-long bicycle trips (September

20-October 17), led by experienced Sierra Club tour leaders, will follow the route that Muir took—from Louisville to Mammoth Cave, into the Cumberland Mountains and across Tennessee, through Georgian plantation and Civil War country to Savannah, and then across Florida from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico.

Each trip will consist of 6-7 days of cycling for about 250 miles. Participants will camp each night, help with cooking duties on one day, and eat in the quantities and style



typical of Sierra Club bicycle tours. Opportunities for learning about natural and cultural history along the route, as well as contemporary environmental issues, will be plentiful.

For more information, contact the Sierra Club Outing Department, 730 Polk Street, San Francisco, CA 94109 (415) 923-5522.

Earl's Pearls

Naming the Sierra Club

by Earl Higgins

How did The Sierra Club get its name? That's easy, you say, John Muir named it after the spectacular mountain range in eastern California. Well, yes. But surely there must be more. In inquiring why Muir chose "Sierra" as the focal word, we could also ask why he did not choose "Sequoia," the immense, thousands-of-years-old trees that grow only on the western slopes of the Sierra.

Or why not "The Yosemite Club," after the most magnificent valley on the whole continent. The point here is that the most powerful aspect of language is the power to name something. Muir exercised that power when he named the club.

For 100 years the Sierra Club has stuck with the name Muir gave to it at birth. The name is so strongly identified with the organization that hardly anyone recognizes the oxymoron in the name of our chapter. Say "Delta Sierra" and no one but a pedantic wordsmith would think in the paradoxical image of an alluvial landform on a mountain range.

Consider the Audubon Society. This highly respected and influential environmental organization began as a club for bird watchers. John James Audubon, for whom it is named, should be a terrible embarrassment to these bird lovers, but he apparently is not. In case we've forgotten, J.J. Audubon painted all those wonderful pictures after slaughtering thousands of birds, stuffing them, mounting

them. Nevertheless, his name is now synonymous with bird protection and conservation.

On the other hand, sometimes the name-giver picks a word or phrase to name something in order to obscure some nasty truth. The one that comes to mind immediately is "life insurance." What insurers are selling is really death insurance: they don't pay unless you die.

But who wants to be a death insurance salesman? The same is true for "health" insurance; if you stay healthy, they don't pay. You get paid only if you're sick or hurt. But go ask Blue Cross if they'll sell you some "Disease Insurance" or "Medical Bills Insurance" and see what they tell you.

If you're an opera fan (I'm talking about grand opera, not Grand Ol' Opry or Oprah Winfrey), then you are probably familiar with Richard Wagner's magnificent "The Flying Dutchman." Would this story be as romantic and would Wagner's music be as artistically powerful had it been named "The Flying Bulgarian"?

Fortunately, a few years ago someone came up with a good name to help in the cause of protecting aquatic ecological systems: "Wetlands" is brilliant in its simplicity and scope. An environmental activist testifying before Congress or trying to raise money would have credibility problems if she or he said that they were "trying to protect the swamp muck."

"The People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals" (PETA) has a

dignified and morally upright ring to it that would not carry nearly as much political weight if it were the "Lizard Lovers League" or "Buddies of the Newts."

But we've gotten away from John Muir. Although Muir named the Sierra Club, he did not name the mountains he loved so much. We don't know what, if any, name the aboriginal Californians gave to the Sierra, but the Spanish were the first Europeans to gaze upon them, hence their name, "Sierra Nevada." The adjective "Nevada" means "snowy," but "Sierra" means "saw" in its basic Spanish meaning. I guess the first Spanish explorers thought the mountains looked like an upturned wood saw from a distance.

It's a good thing the Spanish named the mountains before Muir. Among English speakers today the word "sierra" has the suggestion of beauty and outdoor recreation. Ford Motor Company named a pickup truck "Sierra." The word "sierra" is used for "S" in the International phonetic alphabet.

If Muir, a taciturn Scot, had named the mountains first or had translated the Spanish name literally, how influential would his organization be after 100 years? Would you join a group whose name was the "Mountain-Range-That-Looks-Like-A-Saw Club"? If you did, then you could affiliate, here in the Delta Country, with the "Fourth-Letter-Of-The-Greek-Alphabet Chapter." Δ