

Remembering John Muir 100 years after his death

William Tweed 5:26 p.m. PST December 19, 2014

(Photo: Getty Images/iStockphoto)

15 CONNECT [1 LINKEDIN](#) [EMAIL](#) [MORE](#)

We humans love "round numbers," and few figures resonate as well with us as an even century. A centennial, it seems, is always a good time to look back at something or someone.

This coming week, on Christmas Eve, we arrive at such a date. On Dec. 24, 1914, the man who may well be the most famous historical figure in California history died at the age of 76 years. I speak of John Muir.

I base the claim for fame on the long-acknowledged fact that more California things and places are named for Muir than any other figure. I've explored this turf before in other columns, but suffice it to say here that Muir's name can be found on everything from schools, hospitals, and city parks to grand features like 14,000-foot Mt. Muir in the Sierra Nevada and the John Muir Trail.

For the last third of his life, Muir made his home on a large fruit ranch near Martinez, which he co-owned with his wife, Louie. But that is not where he died. Surprisingly, the famous naturalist passed away in Los Angeles.

By 1914, Muir was living alone in the big family house at Martinez. His wife had died in 1905, and both his daughters were now grown women living far from home.

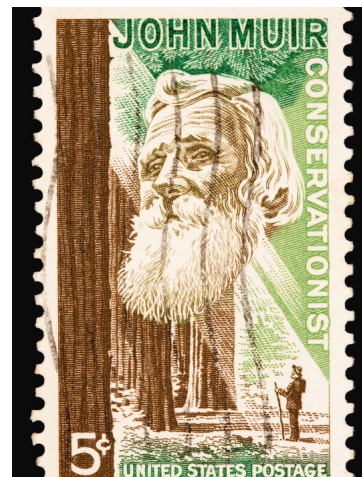
Louie Strenzel Muir had died of pneumonia and, like her father, daughter Helen Muir also suffered from what were then called "weak lungs." Two years after his wife's death, Muir settled his younger daughter in the desert town of Daggett a few miles east of Barstow. There she prospered in the dry air.

Muir was close to both his daughters, and he visited Helen often at her desert home. This was easy to do because both Martinez and Daggett were stations on the transcontinental main line of the Santa Fe Railway. Muir actually had a railroad station on his ranch — called "Muir," of course — and he could board the trains there, just a short stroll from his home.

In December 1914, Muir made the journey to Daggett for what would turn out to be the last time. He had been working hard on the book that would be published after his death as *Travels in Alaska*, and on December 21st, he boarded the southbound train that he hoped would take him to desert sunshine and Christmas with his daughter.

Arriving in Daggett the following morning, Muir received a warm welcome from his daughter but not from the desert itself. A cold, northern storm had swept eastern California several days earlier and left the region under the sway of a frigid air mass. On the morning of Dec. 22, dawn temperatures on the northern fringe of the Mojave Desert fell to almost zero.

Anxious to get out of doors, Muir nevertheless took a walk the next day with his daughter, but by evening it was apparent that the cold wind had reactivated a lung infection that had been plaguing him for some time. The local doctor came to Helen's house, listened to Muir's lungs, and pronounced that the naturalist had double pneumonia.



That evening, Muir was carried to another Santa Fe train, this one running to Los Angeles, and later that night he was admitted as a patient at the California Hospital in downtown Los Angeles. And there, within twenty-four hours, he died.

The next morning — Christmas Day — the Los Angeles Times announced that: "All living things have lost a friend... John Muir, apostle of the Wild, is dead."

Muir's death generated obituaries in newspapers across the nation, and now, a century later, the centennial of his passing is stirring up a fresh wave of comment. Such moments provide an opportunity for voicing contrary opinions, and UCLA historian Jon Christensen has gone so far as to dismiss Muir as hopelessly out of date with modern, multi-cultural California.

So is Muir now "irrelevant?" Hardly.

Muir may have failed to anticipate many of the environmental and social problems of the twenty-first century, but that is not the point. He spoke eloquently to the issues of his time, and all of us enjoy still the beautiful places he worked so hard to preserve for us.

More than any other Californian — indeed more than any other American of his time — Muir defined how we still see and appreciate the natural world around us. In that regard, we are all his children.

Join me this holiday in toasting his memory.

Three Rivers resident William Tweed writes about the natural world of Tulare County. His column, copyrighted and printed by permission, appears every other week in Paths to Peaks.

15 CONNECT [1 LINKEDIN](#)EMAILMORE