

VALLEY VIEW

Yosemite school days provided an unusual learning experience

By Kim Cooper Findling

» **The year I turned 12**, my father took a seasonal job with the National Park Service to serve as a ranger naturalist in Yosemite. The three-month sabbatical from his forestry-related college position would last the winter, and he invited me to come. I knew it would be an adventure. Until then, I had spent my whole life in a small town on the Southern Oregon Coast. I'd attended only one school, moving up with the same kids year after year. Most of all, I had never seen a true snowy winter. Now I would experience a new home, a new school and a deep winter all at once. We would leave just after the New Year, taking minimal provisions to a furnished cabin on the outskirts of the park.

During weekdays, my father would don his new flat-brimmed ranger hat and staff the visitor center information desk, while I would attend Yosemite National Park Valley School, a tiny schoolhouse with only 30 students—ages 5 to 13 that winter—that existed for the children of park employees. I had been told that this season I would be the school's only sixth-grader.

I packed a few favorite belongings and my warmest clothes, including the baby-blue ski bibs, puffy moon boots, knit hat and mittens that Dad had purchased just for this trip.

We arrived in the park on a sunny January day. The cold was a shock, but the valley was quiet and peaceful, and there was no denying the park's amazing scenery. The forest glowed deep green tinged with white. Yosemite Falls splashed and glinted in the sun amid the snowy landscape. Half Dome and El Capitan towered overhead, looking grand in their winter caps and cloaks.

I was nervous my first day of school, but I immediately felt at home. The school structure, coupled with seclusion in a stark and stunning natural environment, nurtured community and mentorship. Right away, the older kids took care of me; I took care of the younger kids; and everything felt easy.

There was something I was terribly worried about, however, and it was only a couple of days away. Every Wednesday, the school closed at lunchtime, and the entire student population was bused to Badger Pass, one of the few downhill ski areas located within the boundaries of a national park. For just \$5, students were provided with gear and a lift ticket. This was billed as an incredible opportunity, but I knew less

about skiing than I did about snow. Badger Pass rose less than 1,000 vertical feet and had fewer than a dozen runs, but to me, it might as well have been Mount Everest. At Badger Pass, high in rugged mountains so different from the sandy shore, I struggled to get from the ski-rental shop to the hill with two boards attached to my feet. With encouragement from the others, I inched my way toward the rope tow and was pulled up the bunnyest of the bunny slopes. At the top, my skis cut into the snow with a sharp crackle as I jammed my knees together and braced for disaster. Stiff as a board, I slid ever so slowly

down the hill, reaching the bottom and letting out a sigh of relief. Was it too early to hit the lodge to buy a cup of cocoa with the extra dollar Dad had tucked in my pocket?

I wish I could say that my school's ski excursions fanned the embers of a powerful personal passion, and that I went on to enjoy a lifelong love of skiing. That isn't what happened. But neither did I give up and retire to drink hot chocolate. I persisted—each Wednesday taking on a slightly more challenging hill. I became a competent skier, a skill that came in handy over the following years, even if I never did quite learn to love this challenging sport.

When I moved to a mountain town in my 20s and new friends asked if I wanted to join them skiing, I could say yes. When I visited Sun Valley, Idaho, with my future husband, I was able to enjoy the incredible views from the top of Bald Mountain with him, knowing I was perfectly able to ski myself back down.

At the end of my time in Yosemite Valley, when spring came and the pines and cedars dripped melting snow to the fragrant forest floor, one of the most valuable things I carried back home to Oregon was a new sense of confidence. During those days at Badger Pass, I gained the knowledge that I could push myself well out of my comfort zone ... and keep trying ... and succeed.

That realization has served me well my whole life, whether I've been on a sandy shore or in snowy mountains, in a small schoolroom or on a university campus of thousands, and just about anywhere in between.

Kim Cooper Findling, also the author of three books, writes from Bend, Oregon, where Mt. Bachelor offers excellent skiing.

