



“She was an early day forest clerk and the Supervisor’s wife – the friend, advisor and counselor to every man, woman and youngster on the Sierra Forest for over a quarter of a century – the wellspring of the ‘Sierra Spirit’ that continues to this day – the never to be forgotten Mother of our Forest.”¹

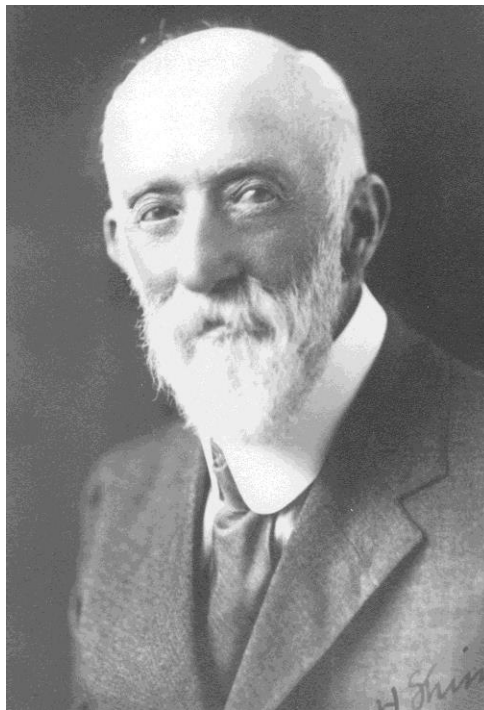
Julia Shinn – Our Sierra Mother

by Marie Mogge

Born in a coal mining town in northern California in 1868, Julia Tyler Shinn would grow into a woman who would be described as, “a valiant woman of high intelligence” that was “dedicated to the service, and often put the problems of others before her own, and came up serene even when her own world seemed to fall apart.”²

She was one of the earliest female employees of the fledgling Sierra National Forest. She guided and nurtured many of the new young rangers, played host to dignitaries such as Gifford Pinchot, and unofficially acted as Forest Supervisor during the last trying days of Charles Shinn’s tenure.

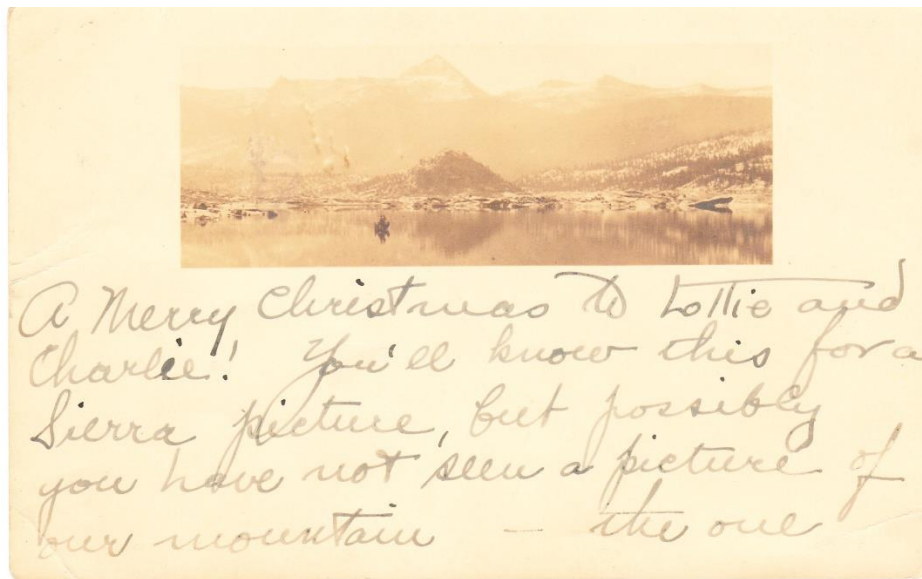
Charles and Julia first met when she was 11, and he 27. Years later, when Julia had graduated from high school, a mutual friend would re-introduce Charles, Julia, and Julia’s sister, with the hopes of Charles being taken with Julia’s sister. Instead, Charles was taken with Julia. Helping her get her first teaching job in 1886, Charles remained in contact, and when she got her next teaching job at the Merced County School in 1887, he began courting her in earnest. Every other weekend he would travel from San Francisco to Merced to take her on a Sunday picnic and buggy ride. They were married in 1888.



Charles Shinn.

Charles and Julia remained devoted to each other until his death 36 years later in 1924. Charles would often read to Julia by the fireside on cold winter evenings, bring her coffee in bed every morning, and breakfast in bed on Sundays. Julia would follow Charles first from Oakland to San Francisco, to various other places throughout California, and then eventually to an obscure location called Northfork, where he became the supervisor of the Sierra Forest Reserve. There

she would endure many hardships, but would, to the end of her days, refer to her husband as, "My Charlie." Mary Tyler, Julia's sister-in-law would recount years later, "I have never known a more beautiful relation between husband and wife than there was between the Shinns."³



recently named for my Charlie. Is it
it a lovely pyramid?
I love to use the picture
on my Christmas
card, and feel as if
Charlie and I were
once more sending
greetings together.
May you be spared
long to each other!
I hope Christmas will
bring some of your
children to you.
Much love
Julia

A Christmas postcard from Julia - she was proud of the mountain named for her Charlie.

In order to get the assignment as Forest Supervisor on the then Sierra Forest Reserve, as Julia Shinn remembers, Charles “pulled every possible string, and in time won an appointment as ‘Head Ranger’ of the Sierra Reserve, on a salary of \$900 a year - with the privilege of furnishing his own horses and finding his own quarters.”⁴

Coming in to Northfork in 1902, the Shinns were able to purchase the homestead of Frank Malum, consisting of 160 acres and a small cabin. Julia dubbed the structure “Peace Cabin”, because it seemed so peaceful after life in Oakland, and she described it eloquently as, “three rooms in all, but one had only boards for a roof, and rain came in through streams”⁵ with “a pig on the back porch, a calf at the front door. No water at first, then a barrel from the spring.”⁶



Peace Cabin.

Getting the old run down cabin in shape was a daunting job, one that Julia, in her usual manner, did not shy away from. Recounts Ranger Gene Tully:

Not being discouraged with the mess, that city bred pair, congratulated themselves, and cheerfully, with bucket, soap, hoe, shovel and a lot of water, combined with American determination went to work, after several days of tiresome, back aching labor, the place began to look and smell quite “campable”. Within a short time, with saw, hammer, nails and boards, combined with ingenuity, tables, bedsteads, vanity bench, and looking glass and typewriter desk, began to adorn the place. A stove was secured, along with many contributions from the friendly North Fork community, that cabin was changed to a mansion, with a queen to command.⁷

In addition to being a residence, Peace Cabin became the legendary first office of the Sierra National Forest. The two liveable rooms in the building, out of necessity, became the “living room-bedroom- office and a kitchen-dining room-laundry.”⁸ Here, Charles would guide the Shinn dream, Julia would type reports and letters, and young men would come who set the standard for generations of rangers that came after them.



A quiet moment for Julia Shinn inside Peace Cabin.

The Shinn dream was rooted in the dogma of Gifford Pinchot. Being swept up in the era of Theodore Roosevelt, Pinchot and the new concept of “conservation”, Charles was determined to spread the ideas of conservation in California. By the time they arrived in Northfork, both Shinns had become disciples of Pinchot. Julia encouraged Charles in his campaign to use the forest and its resources wisely, and agreed with him that the indiscriminate waste of natural resources was a danger that the California economy, and the nation, could not afford.

The assignment to Northfork fit the Shinns perfectly. While Charles was the idealist and dreamer, Julia was organized and practical. She was confident and self-assured. She could combine tact and kindness. She had a nurturing, can-do attitude that in the years to come, would make her one of the most beloved persons on the Sierra National Forest.

To a Sugar Pine

Thou royal princess of the upper land
That spreads a white snow carpet for thy feet
And gives thee yellow pines and cedars sweet
To be thy waiting women, in thy hand
Are blessings for thy people, - shelter, food
And safety for thy little folk in furs
And for the birds whose winged music stirs
Even thy great heart to its happy mood.
But for us, climbing to thy granite gate
In annual pilgrimage, are gifts more great
And glorious: courage, hope and strength to do
The work that's ours; a joyous confidence
That work is surely worth the doing, too,
And the serenity that is work's recompense.

Julia Shinn came to love the Sierra, and often expressed her feelings in prose.

Not becoming an official employee until 1908 when, under the direction of District Forester F.E.Olmstead, she was hired as a forest clerk for \$1,000.00 per year, Julia, like most of the early Forest Service wives, mothers and sisters, was one of the many unsung heroes of the new agency.

These women routinely worked side by side with their men. They were an unofficial work force that provided a myriad of unpaid behind-the-scene duties. They assisted in fence post sales. They kept weather reports and copied ranger reports. They established Sunday schools and community improvement societies. They were teachers for their children and their neighbor's children. They were nurses for their children and the rangers. It was a busy time for all.

Before and after her official employment, Julia set an example for these women, and showed that she was ready for whatever needed to be done.

She was well known for helping the rangers, as well as Supervisor Shinn, with their reports and recommendations. At first, sitting at a small table tucked into a corner of Peace Cabin, in between meals, with her typewriter brought from Oakland, Julia spent many hours on correspondence with Washington. Some of this correspondence was answered, some wasn't, but she undauntingly kept typing the letters on behalf of the Forest.

Later, when she became a forest clerk, rangers would bring her their notes and she would help them compose and write their reports.

After she retired, the men tried bringing their notes to her replacement for similar help. The new forest clerk refused to write their reports, claiming that it wasn't part of her job, leading one man to exclaim to Julia, "Mrs. Shinn, the office used to be like home; now its like hell!"⁹ Julia claimed that this was, "the finest compliment I ever had."¹⁰

In addition to assisting the men in their reports, Julia helped estimate fire damages and grazing costs. She helped plan better ways to fight fire. She even offered advice on how to pack, cook and eat on fires:

In the first place, the quality of the food must be such that it can be quickly prepared, easily digested by tired men and not salty enough to aggravate the fire-fighter thirst [sic]. In the second place, one must buy the sort of food supplies that can be stowed in the kyaks for an indefinite time without deterioration. For instance, a cut piece of bacon or cheese will mildew; potatoes will wilt and sprout; lemons will get as hard as rocks. In the third place, the things must be packed well -- coffee in a screw-top can lest it lose all its aroma; flour in a sack big enough to tie up without loss. Sugar also should be in a screw-top or spring-top can for it will leak out of a cloth sack; but rice, rolled oats and dried fruits can be put into cloth sacks.

The supply list for this early day fire pack, according to Julia's advice, should be:

Coffee,	1 pound (40¢ quality goes twice as far as 25¢)
Carnation milk	6 half-size cans
Sugar,	2 pounds
Chocolate (ground)	1 pound
Pilot bread	4 pounds
Jam	2 jars
Roast beef	2 cans
Rice	1 pound
Crescent sardines,	2 cans
Erbswurst,	1 half-pound
Rolled oats,	2 pounds
Dried apricots	2 “
Dried figs	2 “
Tomatoes	1 can
Syrup	1 quart
Pepper	1 smallest can
Salt	4-ounce can (sack would waste)

Flour, 2 qts. into which have been sifted 1 tablespoonful of baking powder and one teaspoonful of salt. This should be tied into a sack.

Along with plenty of water, plates, cups, and eating utensils, these ingredients packed ahead of time in kayaks in preparation for a fire emergency, would provide the following three meals for five men:

For supper

Coffee
Pilot bread
Berry jam
Canned roast beef
Canned tomatoes
Boiled rice

For midnight lunch

Coffee & Chocolate
Pilot bread
Berry jam
“Crescent” sardines
Dried figs
Erbswurst soup

For breakfast

Coffee & Choc.
Rice flap-jacks
Stewed apricots
Rolled oats mush
Syrup¹¹

This type of practical advice was appreciated by the early rangers, many of which were not used to spending so much time on the trail, or having to pack for emergencies such as a forest fire. Out of her tireless advice and care for the men, Julia earned many tributes and much respect from the rangers, such as this from Gene Tully, “Bless her, she was the backbone of the Forest Service, the forgotten mother of the Sierra.”¹²

In times of fire emergency, Julia and the other women lept into action. While the men hurried to the fire, the women would load the kayaks on the pack horses, saddle their riding horses and deliver the supplies and bedrolls to the men on the fire line. Then they would ride across the district to find additional men to help with the fires. They supplied the firefighters with cooked meals, and canteens of hot coffee. At times, Julia and the other women would fight fire side by side with the men. Recalls Julia, “Then indeed we knew we were of use.”¹³

The bond and camaraderie shared by the men and women of the early Forest Service years was unique to its time. They worked together for a common purpose. They shared their lives, joys and sorrows. They faced many hardships, but they faced them together. Julia wrote a song that reflected what these early rangers felt for the Sierra. It came to be known as the Ranger’s Song, and many evenings were spent sitting around a campfire singing its verses.

There’s a range of lofty mountains from Spokane to Mexico
On whose slopes the great pine forests link the foothills with the snow
And these forests great are gathered into many a fine reserve –
Here’s to ours, The North Sierra, She’s the Queen we rangers serve!

North Sierra, she’s our pride
In her service we abide,
For her pines and oaks and cedars many a rocky mile we ride.
Fighting fires by night is play:
As for mixing sheep, it’s gay,
Since it’s for our North Sierra that we love more every day.

Oh, the sugar pines hold up our sky and keep our stars in place
Joe Crane’s ramrod is the tree that Mars depends on for a base.
Great Sequoias in the Nelder Grove to Dinkey seem to say:
Dinkey, pass the work to Converse, “Don’t you drop the Milky Way!”

North Sierra, she’s our pride
In her service we abide,
For her pines and oaks and cedars many a rocky mile we ride.
Fighting fires by night is play:
As for mixing sheep, it’s gay,
Since it’s for our North Sierra that we love more every day.

You should look into our office on a stormy winter day
See our cattle ranger tackle all the figures in his way
See the Forest’s best Assistant making maps to beat the band,
Hear the Boss dictating letters, with Jack Noddin close at hand.

North Sierra, she's our pride
In her service we abide,
For her pines and oaks and cedars many a rocky mile we ride.
Fighting fires by night is play:
As for mixing sheep, it's gay,
Since it's for our North Sierra that we love more every day.

Here's a welcome, warmly offered, from the rangers to the Bride!
May she learn to love the Service, and to leave fresh fruit for dried.
May she like long rides, and days alone, and sweet fresh air, and cans,
And we'll love her for her own sake soon, as well as for her man's.

North Sierra, she's our pride
In her service we abide,
For her pines and oaks and cedars many a rocky mile we ride.
Fighting fires by night is play:
As for mixing sheep, it's gay,
Since it's for our North Sierra that we love more every day.

My! but we are glad to see him back, our Grazing Ranger, Gene;
No more welcome man from Washington has ever here been seen.
But if he should feel superior and try to be too fly,
We'll duck him in the Northfork, sure – and hang him up to dry!

One version of the Ranger's Song written by Julia Shinn - eventually it had more than 10 verses.

For want of feed for the stock and cooler air than could be found in Northfork, summers were spent in the higher elevations of Ellis Meadow. Located at about 6,000', the meadow was surrounded by a virgin stand of towering pines. On the perimeter of the meadow stood several abandoned buildings left over from early speculators. The Sierra National Forest established its summer headquarters here each year.

An old barn was converted to living quarters, where, "A wide veranda under the roof, or a three sided room -- whichever you please -- is edged by a tiny bubbling stream. From it rises a stair to a Juliet balcony."¹⁴ A grand fireplace was installed inside by one of the rangers, but mostly the living was done outdoors, as well as the cooking since, "The kitchen is entirely detached, and has no roof, although thus the mistress is likely to acquire pollen and fir needles in her coffee, she also sweetens labour with a sight of green trees, blue sky and yellow sunlight."¹⁵

Here at Ellis Meadow, Julia watched the misadventures of the first civil service exam, cooked for, offered advice, and tended to the ranger's needs, spent wonderful evenings under the open sky in the company of her Forest Service family, and entertained visitors such as Gifford Pinchot.



One of Julia Shinn's mansions - a converted barn at Ellis Meadow which served as the Forest's summer headquarters.

In 1905, the first Civil Service exam on the Forest was held at Ellis Meadow. The exam had to be passed in order to be hired permanently as a ranger. The test included a show of practical efficiency in horseback riding, packing, shooting, and felling of trees. These exams could sometimes be comical – cowboys could ride but had trouble felling trees, timber men couldn't ride, and many of the men got so nervous during shooting practice that they failed to hit the large bullseye targets set up for them.

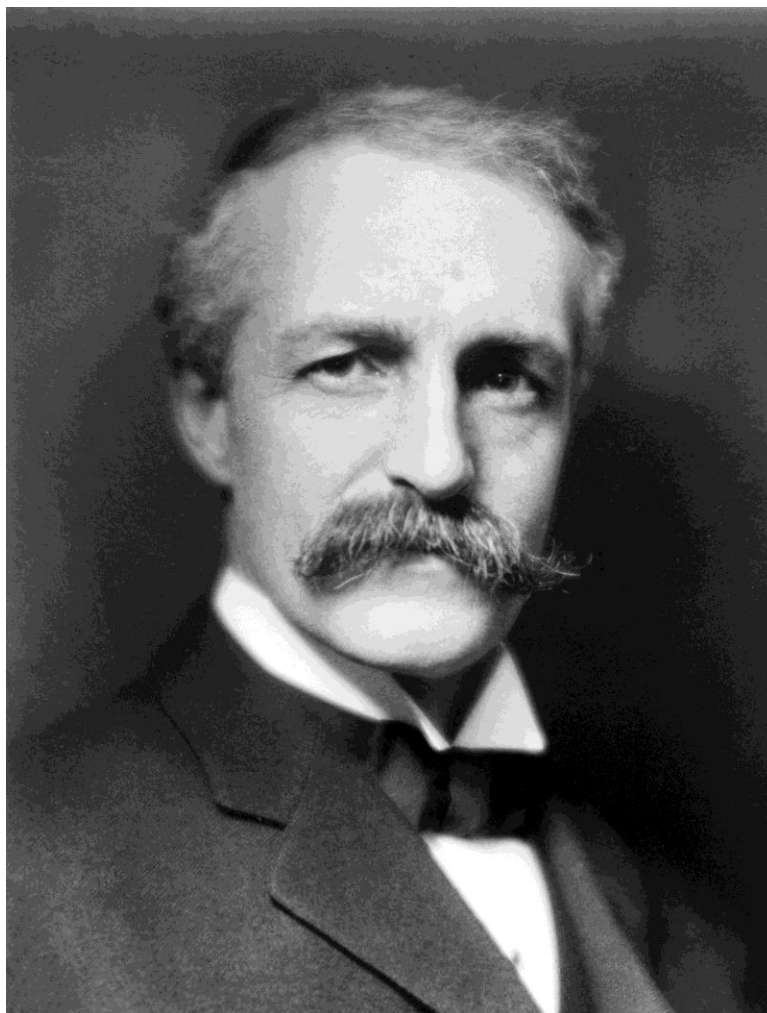
One man that Julia knew of had little acumen for any of these things. John, a bank clerk who loved the mountains and wanted to become a forest ranger, was ill prepared for the test. Julia worked with him for hours the night before the exam, setting up a sawhorse with a mock saddle, towels for blankets, and kayaks made out of paper bags. She spent time showing John how to throw a diamond hitch, a talent that Julia had learned in her two years spent on the Forest. By the end of the evening, Julia thought John was ready.

Unfortunately, whether from nerves or the jeering of the watching crowd, John's efforts proved especially comical, and the crowd roared with laughter. Julia nearly cried with sympathy. She recalled many years later that his wife did cry.

Most men, even those like John, eventually passed the test, but the sound of laughter from those witnessing their efforts often filled the woods first.

Surely, one of the most memorable experiences for Julia Shinn, was the visit of the Chief Forester, Gifford Pinchot. An ex-ranger once commented to Julia, “You Forest Service people! All that is necessary is for Gifford Pinchot to appear, and you fall on your faces!”¹⁶ Julia acknowledged that that was “pretty nearly true,”¹⁷ and “that for us out in those great pine forests, forestry meant Gifford Pinchot!”¹⁷

It was 1907 when Gifford Pinchot arrived on the forest. Young and confident, Julia thought him “kindly and sweet,”¹⁸ yet there was a touch of sadness about the Chief Forester as evidenced by the black crepe armband that he wore constantly, in memory of his one true love. The stitching was coming undone, and he quietly asked Julia if she could fix it for him. As she repaired the stitches, she must have thought about the young woman Pinchot had pledged to marry, who died from tuberculosis in 1894, just prior to their marriage. Julia wiped away tears as she attended to the mending.



Gifford Pinchot, the Chief Forester, was revered by many, but Julia saw his pain and comforted him.

Evenings at Ellis Meadow were often spent around the campfire where there was singing and talking of forestry. Gifford Pinchot's visit was no different. On Sunday evening, Julia brought out her folding organ that her mother had sent her, to accompany the singing. Pinchot asked if she would sing the hymn, *Lead, Kindly Light*. Recognizing the sorrow that the song represented for the Forester, she sang clear and strong, yet felt some of the words choke in her throat, particularly, "And with the morn those angel faces smile, Which I have loved long since, and lost awhile."

Lead, Kindly Light

Lead, Kindly Light, amidst th'encircling gloom,
Lead Thou me on!
The night is dark, and I am far from home,
Lead Thou me on!
Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see
The distant scene; one step enough for me.
I was not ever thus, nor prayed that Thou
Shouldst lead me on;
I loved to choose and see my path; but now
Lead Thou me on!
I loved the garish day, and, spite of fears,
Pride ruled my will. Remember not past years!
So long Thy power hath blest me, sure it still
Will lead me on.
O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent, till
The night is gone,
And with the morn those angel faces smile,
Which I have loved long since, and lost awhile!
Meantime, along the narrow rugged path,
Thyself hast trod,
Lead, Saviour, lead me home in childlike faith,
Home to my God.
To rest forever after earthly strife
In the calm light of everlasting life.

Julia sang this hymn for the Chief Forester in the quiet of Ellis Meadow.

After 21 years of dedicated service to the nation, in which she only missed one day of work due to a heavy snowstorm, Julia left the Forest Service and her beloved Sierra in order to take her ailing husband back to family in Ukiah, and to care for him in his last days. She had worked for three Forest Supervisors, Charles Shinn, Paul Redington, and Maurice Benedict. They all held her in high regard. She never forgot the Sierra and the rangers she came to love. Even in her grief for her husbands passing, she found the will to pen a letter to thank and console her Forest Service family with their loss:

December 7, 1924.

Dear people on the Sierra;

Of all the world of flowers that came to this house last Thursday in honor of our beloved dead, none touched my heart like the mass of great bronze chrysanthomums with the card of sympathy from his own forest. I wish you could have seen them. But more than that did your wire give the hand-clasp that I needed, the knowledge that whatever came, there were real friends standing by.

Some of you will remember how he used to say that a ranger should be buried in his uniform with his badge on. As I laid him out in his old uniform I could not keep the tears back as I thought that there was no badge. But Mr. Redington thought: He wired from Los Angeles to the San Francisco office to be sure there was a badge. So the badge was brought up and pinned to the old coat.

In an untouched corner of the cemetery here, under fir trees, with young oaks and manzanitas to make it seem like the hills of home, we buried the out-worn body, with never a thought that it was Charlie Shinn we were putting there. His free glad spirit never did care about its abiding place, yet I think he would have chosen just such a place, a quiet little bit of woodland in which to lay away what he no longer needed.

Love to you all,

Julia T. Shinn

An open letter to the Sierra - obviously she loved her Forest Service family, and they loved her.

Julia Shinn lived for another 32 years after leaving the Sierra. Passing away in 1956 at the age of 88, many commented in the days that followed on her contributions to the Forest and the rangers she loved and cared for.

Ranger Richard Bigelow, who went on to become Supervisor of the Inyo National Forest, and then the Tahoe National Forest, said that everything he learned of value came from Julia.¹⁹

Rangers Maurice Benedict and Frank Sweeley said of her, "All who worked on the Sierra during the first 25 years of this century experienced the influence of Mrs. Shinn and were the better for it."²⁰

And especially this from Ranger Gene Tully, who remembered Julia as, “One of the finest ladies I’ve ever known. A personality that could grace a cabin or a mansion. I think I am about the only one alive that can tell the true story of what she meant to a handful of ragged, half-clad struggling rangers. That cheerful, loving smile always shining through a tired face. A motherly pat on the shoulder and a hug meant new life to us.”²¹



“The days when the Forest Service was young and feeble, but strong in spirit have gone. But the service forever will be indebted to Julia T. Shinn, whose strength of character, courage, wisdom, and just pure goodness left such a deep and lasting impression on all who knew her...”²²

In reflecting on the trials that she and the other men and women of the Forest Service endured during those early pioneering days on the Sierra National Forest, Julia said, “those of us who lived those years, really lived.”²³

Nothing could be more true.

Notes:

- ¹ Rose, Gene. *Sierra Centennial*. Clovis: Sierra National Forest, 1993, pg. 44.
- ² Rose: 44
- ³ Tyler, Mary Y., "Some Memories of Charles Howard Shinn," notes written by Julia Shinn's sister-in-law.
- ⁴ Shinn, Julia, notes written by Mrs. Julia Shinn for Mr. Pinchot at his request, 10 October 1937.
- ⁵ Shinn: 1937.
- ⁶ "Forgotton Mother of the Sierra," letters of Julia Tyler Shinn, California Historical Society Quarterly June 1959: 157-163 and September 1959: 219-228.
- ⁷ Gene Tully Collection, Bass Lake Ranger District Historic Document and Information Database, HD00038, on file: Sierra National Forest, Bass Lake Ranger District.
- ⁸ Shinn: 1937.
- ⁹ Shinn: 1937.
- ¹⁰ Shinn: 1937.
- ¹¹ Shinn, Julia, "Grub For The Fire Kayaks," *Sierra Ranger*, Volume 3, Number 2 (June 1913): 11-12.
- ¹² California Historical Society Quarterly.
- ¹³ Shinn, Julia, "The Ranger's Boss," *American Forest and Forest Life*, July 1930.
- ¹⁴ White, Stewart Edward, *The Cabin*, Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., New York: 1929.
- ¹⁵ White.
- ¹⁶ California Historical Society Quarterly.
- ¹⁷ California Historical Society Quarterly.
- ¹⁸ Shinn: 1937.
- ¹⁹ Rose: 44.
- ²⁰ Rose: 44.
- ²¹ Gene Tully Collection: HD00053.
- ²² Rose: 44.
- ²³ Shinn: 1937.

References:

"Forgotton Mother of the Sierra." Letters of Julia Tyler Shinn. California Historical Society Quarterly. June 1959: 157-163 and September 1959: 219-228.

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