

YOSEMITE VOICES

"Growing up in Tuolumne"

RANGER RONEY: Here we are with our second podcast here at Tuolumne Meadows.

Tuolumne is at about 8,600 feet elevation in the high sierra in Yosemite National Park. It's a very large sub-alpine meadow.

Well, as I face west, I'm watching the sun slowly set. The shadows around me are getting longer and longer.

Looking to the east, I can see the red mountains of Mount Dana, Mount Gibbs along the crest of the Sierra Nevada. Just this side of it we see the hulk of Lembert Dome rising out of the trees that line the meadow.

Most of the forest that surrounds Tuolumne Meadows are lodgepole pine.

Oh! I see a coyote running across the meadow right now. Ears perked up; it stopped. It's ears are pointing forward. It's looking at something. It's looking very carefully. It is staring. Staring. Umph! There it goes. It jumped down and it got a little mouse or something. I can't see from here.

These meadows do have meadow mice or voles, but they also have a lot of young Belding ground squirrels

that stand near their homes upright. Some people may think of them as diminutive prairie dogs as they stand there.

But this coyote got either a ground squirrel or maybe a meadow mouse or vole or something like that and it chomped it down right before my eyes and away it went down the throat. And off the coyote goes running again.

Now these are the kind of wonderful things people can experience in places like Tuolumne Meadows. And we have a staff of rangers to help you see that. The leader of those rangers is a woman named Margaret Eissler and she's going to talk about growing up here. And we'll also talk about one of her employees, another Ranger Naturalist named Karen Amstutz.

Karen has three daughters. One is four, one is six and one is 10. And for the last three years they have been growing up here in Tuolumne Meadows.

I talked to Margaret first. And one of the things I wanted to know was the first time she came to Tuolumne Meadows. And this is what she said:

RANGER EISSLER: I think when I was less than one year old.

RANGER RONEY: Tell me a little bit about what your parents did here?

RANGER EISSLER: My parents were caretakers for the

Sierra Club Campground which was a 160-acre homestead that had been originally claimed by John Baptist Lumbert in 1885 and eventually came into the hands of the Sierra Club in 1912.

And the Sierra Club set up two campgrounds, a family campground and a group campground, and my parents lived in the McCauley Cabin -- they were caretakers, so that's where the caretakers lived -- for six summers, from 1956 to '61.

And it was a very simple cabin. Had no running water. No electricity. No telephone. My parents walked up and down the hill to the river with buckets to carry -- get water to wash clothes and dishes. And we'd fill up our glass jugs with water at the ranger station to drink.

And so it was, it was just very simple but it was great.

RANGER RONEY: I grew up in Los Angeles and I didn't get much wilderness. In fact, wilderness was vacant lots really for me. That's pretty much all I got. And a big part of your childhood was living in a place with a wood stove and -- I mean, everything was really primitive and pioneer-like.

What did you find -- I mean, as a kid, we watched TV, we rode our bicycles, we went to the movies. In the summertime, I mean, what did you find yourself doing here?

RANGER EISSLER: Uhm, there is no end of playful things to do. We -- of course, I was very young and so my sister and I and our friends, other campers who would come every summer, we hop from rock to rock. I had my favorite rock horses. We'd ride and --

RANGER RONEY: Rock horses?

RANGER EISSLER: Yes. Just horse -- rocks that you could sit on, pretend you were riding.

We hiked. And we -- from the time we could walk we were walking up Lemberth Dome and going to Dog Lake and wading and swimming in the river. And we had our favorite mud hole down by the river we'd squish our toes through. And we collected lady bugs in the stage brush which were on the -- right near the cabin. And played store with our parents' supply of can goods.

I don't know, it was just unending eternal days of play. You remember how summer used to last forever? At least it seemed like a year or longer when I was little. It was just a joyful time.

RANGER RONEY: Yeah, I remember summers living in the city.

Uhm, that's just amazing. I mean, you know, we had all these things and yet you used a lot of curiosity and imagination. We did too. We did a lot of that too. But I guess what I'm getting at is today it seems like

kids need to be entertained from the exterior rather than from inside.

Do you see that today with the younger people camping here?

RANGER EISSLER: Uhm, well, I think I notice that in general, but I also see children of employees who are up here and I see different parenting techniques. That I see some that just let their children play as we did and it's just -- I just love seeing that. It's heart-warming to see them making their little forts and collecting rocks and looking closely at insects and just loving playing by the river. So, it still happens but I think it's more rare.

RANGER RONEY: Yeah.

You're telling me that you, you would actually walk when you were -- I'm imagining like three or four -- to Dog Lake which is uphill and a little over a mile.

RANGER EISSLER: Uh-uhm.

RANGER RONEY: Plus probably the mile from your house, that two-mile walk. Boy! That's quite a bit for a kid.

RANGER EISSLER: I think kids can do a lot. I think parents often think that they can't and then limit them. But it's amazing what kids can do.

RANGER RONEY: If you were to talk to parents and they were coming up to Tuolumne Meadows, what would you have

them do with their children?

RANGER EISSLER: Uhm, I'd suggest that they go out across the meadow, on the Old Tioga Road, out to the river. And if that's as far as their children can go, then that would be a great spot to go.

Or up to Soda Springs, the area that I grew up. Uhm, or to Dog Lake which is a wonderful lake to play in. It's warmer than some. And it's a mile and a half going uphill but, you know, you take your time and you get there before you know it.

Or up to the top of Lemberg Dome where you have a fabulous view, also a mile and a half. Yeah. Or -- yeah, any of those.

RANGER RONEY: I'm sitting here looking at Lemberg Dome over your shoulder, and it's way up there. It's this big high rock standing up in the sky. And it looks really formidable from here.

Where's the trail?

RANGER EISSLER: Uhm, well, there are two trails. One just right over here to our right and then another up through the forest on the other side. But actually when I was little, we always used to go up the front keeping to the right.

RANGER RONEY: Scary.

RANGER EISSLER: Uhm, I don't remember thinking it was

scary but much later I was trying to figure out how we had done it as a family and I had a hard time figuring it out but I finally did. So it is a little -- you have to pick your way and hold onto the ledges.

RANGER RONEY: Yeah.

RANGER EISSLER: Yeah. But it's exiting. It's fun.

RANGER RONEY: It's beautiful. I'm looking up there again at the glacial polish glistening in the sun.

RANGER EISSLER: Uh-uhm.

RANGER RONEY: Did you go on naturalist programs when you were younger?

RANGER EISSLER: Yes. I clearly remember going on ranger walks with Carl Sharsmith.

I remember one particular early evening walk with Carl Sharsmith up from May Lake, up over that little ridge, just to the right of the peak, Huffman. And I remember Carl pointing out this little tiny tree. It was like a little dwarf bonsai tree growing in the crack of granite. I remember he calculated that it was 40 years old. And I remember thinking, oh, it's older than my mother! And now I think 40 years old, that's nothing. (Laughing) That's really funny how, how your sense of time changes as you grow older.

RANGER RONEY: Yeah.

RANGER EISSLER: But it seemed so old to me. It was

just a little tree, though, very tiny tree.

RANGER RONEY: Well, a little tiny tree, 40 years old.
Summer lasts a year. And now what do the summers last?

RANGER EISSLER: Oh, it's just -- flies by so quickly.
It's gone before you know it.

(Music)

RANGER RONEY: What kind of a nest is this?

LUPIN: A Junko nest. And I see the cracked eggs in
there.

RANGER RONEY: There are cracked eggs? What happened?

LUPIN: There was a big rainstorm and they cracked
from that. And now the eggs aren't going to hatch.

RANGER RONEY: They're not?

LUPIN: Want to see them?

RANGER RONEY: Yeah.

Are they under that? Oh, yeah, I see.

What do you think the parent birds did?

LUPIN: I think they flew away.

RANGER RONEY: Yeah. You think maybe they made some
more eggs somewhere else?

LUPIN: Maybe. They may be laying eggs right now.

RANGER RONEY: How old are you?

LUPIN: Four.

RANGER RONEY: Four.

So how do you like living up here?

LUPIN: Good.

RANGER RONEY: Why do you think it's good?

LUPIN: Because it's pretty here.

RANGER RONEY: That was Lupin Omstedts. She and her and two sisters, Sylvie and Eliza, live here with their parents at Tuolumne Meadows during the summer.

She and her six-year-old sister Sylvie like to watch ants.

(Music)

RANGER RONEY: Do you girls like to look at ants a lot?

LUPIN: Yeah.

SYLVIE: Yeah.

LUPIN: And under the log right there -- they're so many.

SYLVIE: -- they're so many ants. And there's a home of aunts. And there's bunch of -- and they like to bite. And I pick them up and make them bite me because it feels good.

LUPIN: Sylvie, the aunt, it bit me. But it didn't hurt at all. It just felt like, it just felt like --

RANGER RONEY: What other kinds of things do you like to look at besides ants?

SYLVIE: The birds and the deer.

RANGER RONEY: The older daughter Eliza told me about a new tradition she'd made up.

ELIZA: Now we just figured out a tradition, that we should hike our age every year. I turned 10 in May, and Lief who's staying next to us, Lief just turn 10 I think a few days ago. Then he was ten, so we're both 10 so the day before yesterday we hiked from here to Teneya Lake and that was about 10 miles. So we hiked our age this year.

RANGER RONEY: Wow! That's a long way.

ELIZA: Uh-uhm.

(Music)

RANGER AMSTUTZ: I love living here. I love that my kids get a chance to be here and experience a simpler life and notice the little things in the mountains.

RANGER RONEY: Their house is a two-room tent with wood floors situated in a place called Ranger Camp.

When I first began working here in Yosemite in 1968, many of the seasonal rangers throughout the park lived in these tent cabins. Most are gone now but here in Tuolumne Meadows they continue to provide shelter for a

few of the seasonals. But most who live in them wouldn't trade for the world.

Eliza gave me a tour of our tent cabin.

ELIZA: Well, so what should I show you?

RANGER RONEY: I don't know. This is your house.

RANGER AMSTUTZ: Tell him about it.

ELIZA: Well, the kitchen is here. And, well, that's a bear box where we keep everything.

RANGER RONEY: That big steel box on the ground there?

ELIZA: Yep.

RANGER RONEY: Uh-uhm.

ELIZA: And also this is the sink.

RANGER RONEY: And that stove there is a two-burner, looks like a hotplate plugged into an electrical socket.

ELIZA: Uh-hum, because it's sort of frustrating to always cook things on the fire.

RANGER RONEY: Really? The fire, where's that?

ELIZA: It's over here. And sometimes we can put pellets in here.

RANGER RONEY: Show me how that works?

ELIZA: Wood pellets. And you lift -- there's a little door and see there's pellets in there and you put them in and you can start the fire with them and the fire sticks and so then you can have a fire. But there's also a little oven that we sometimes bake things in but --

because you have to get it really hot.

MR. AMSTUTZ: What about those pellets, Eliza, what are they made out of?

ELIZA: They're made out of little pieces of wood.

And this is our little stereo thing but it doesn't work very much, so we usually use the computer to play music.

RANGER RONEY: This is really interesting to see how a house with an old wood stove and a wood floor and canvas top and a picnic table here in the kitchen and big steel boxes to keep your food in so the bears don't get it, and then you have a computer.

ELIZA: Yeah.

RANGER RONEY: Seems a little odd; doesn't it?

ELIZA: Yeah. I don't like having a computer very much?

MR. AMSTUTZ: Why not?

RANGER RONEY: You don't?

ELIZA: Because it seems too modern. I wish it was still like the olden days.

RANGER RONEY: You like the olden days?

ELIZA: Yeah. Because everybody had horses.

RANGER RONEY: And that gets us back to your liking horses a lot.

ELIZA: Yeah.

Well, we have a refrigerator locks I think because them bears might get in. So.

RANGER RONEY: Bears get in your refrigerator so you have to lock it. That's pretty amazing.

Are you worried about bears?

ELIZA: No.

RANGER RONEY: Why not?

ELIZA: Because they're cute.

RANGER RONEY: Because bears are cute?

ELIZA: Yes.

RANGER RONEY: Have they ever come in the cabin?

ELIZA: Well, they came in our house in El Portal once.

RANGER RONEY: Really?

ELIZA: Yeah.

RANGER RONEY: Can you tell me about that?

ELIZA: Sure.

Well, it was eating cat food. And my mom was just sitting there and it came in. And me and Sylvie and Lupin were asleep, we were asleep. So my mom felt really protective of us. And it was so funny that she just opened the door and kicked the bear out. And my dad said she made a sound that didn't sound like a human.

RANGER RONEY: Have you ever heard your mother make that sound any other time?

ELIZA: No.

RANGER RONEY: Wow! That's pretty amazing, a lock on the refrigerator to keep the bears out.

Oh, and I see climbing ropes up there on the shelf.

ELIZA: We go climbing a lot.

RANGER RONEY: What do you do?

ELIZA: Well, yesterday we just went boldering but we did some pretty hard boldering, and I am still sort of sore from that. But usually we go to, like, Puppy Dome and we do chop ropes and climb up.

RANGER RONEY: How high is Puppy Dome?

ELIZA: Probably, like, 200 feet.

RANGER RONEY: Well, show me the rest of the cabin.

ELIZA: Well, uhm, one of my favorite things about being back here is because when it's raining, you can lie on the bed and just look up and then the rain pores down and you can look at it on the roof and sometimes it helps -- and it sounds really pretty. And also sometimes you see, like, little lizards. Like right now I see a bug on the roof, just like a little silhouette of it.

RANGER RONEY: Oh, yeah.

ELIZA: And also sometimes we see birds perching on the roof. And, uhm --

RANGER RONEY: So you like living in -- going inside

of a cabin that doesn't have a real roof, it has canvas on the roof.

ELIZA: Yeah.

RANGER RONEY: And the light comes right through?

ELIZA: Uh-uhm. So we don't usually need the light except for at night.

RANGER RONEY: Yeah.

What's up with you, Lupin?

MR. AMSTUTZ: You want to say something?

LUPIN: We built a fort made out of sticks outside. I can go in.

RANGER RONEY: That you can go in?

ELIZA: It's big enough that we can go in it --

RANGER RONEY: Really?

ELIZA: -- like, five of us.

RANGER RONEY: Can you show me?

LUPIN: Uh-uhm.

MR. AMSTUTZ: Can you bring him to that fort?

ELIZA: Yeah.

RANGER RONEY: We're now going outside and down the wooden steps.

ELIZA: And we even built a stables and a fort.

RANGER RONEY: What a fort that was, room for five where they would go in and pretend they were living a primitive life in the woods. Imagine that.

The children named it Little Villa Coola after the place where Pippi Longstocking lived. They told me they would spend hours and hours in there. And then Eliza wanted to show me a place called Fairy House Village.

ELIZA: Here's a little fairy house that I just made yesterday.

RANGER RONEY: Oh. That's cool.

ELIZA: But the problem is it's in a little creek bed.

RANGER RONEY: Well, I guess like the Junko's nest, whoever lives in that fairy house may have a hard time when it rains.

ELIZA: Uh-uhm.

Okay. And so this right here, it's supposed to be a little fairy stable, a little fairy corral. See. And so this is the little riding arena. And the horses live in there but if they want to like --

RANGER RONEY: Is that a horse right there?

ELIZA: No. That's an ant.

RANGER RONEY: That's an ant. Oh. I'm sorry.

ELIZA: And if they want to, they can, like, have horse lessons. And they have horse lessons in here. This is a place where they ride.

This is the one I think I might have worked the hardest on because, like, there's a piece of wood here and I made it with a rock and two sticks. A flat rock I made

a little picnic table.

RANGER AMSTUTZ: You know, there's such a trend towards having kids have less experiences in this country, less experience outdoors and less contact with it. And seeing our kids noticing the seasons, even though we're not in Tuolumne, their fairy houses are affected by winter.

And they -- we come up here early in the season which it's still spring here when we come up, you know, early spring, there's snow on the ground when we first come up and they get to see the plants are just starting to come to life.

They notice which flowers bloom first and start to die making way for the next wave of flowers blooming and the birds hatching. And they get to see that close-up and they're out playing in it, they're not just looking at it on TV.

And, you know, to really feel this place that way, it makes me so thankful that they get to have that. And we can just let them go play here and not worry about that they're out of our sight or that they're going -- I mean, if they get hurt, they're going to learn a lesson, you know, about what to do and what not to do. And they get hurt sometimes.

You can't see -- their knees are all scraped up

and they have cuts and mosquito bites. I mean, we all have scrapes and bruises. I also have cuts too. But that's just because we're out having contact with the earth and sometimes the earth here is a little sharp and rough like the granite that we sit on when we go swimming and climb up when we're climbing.

MR. AMSTUTZ: I feel like they have a realistic sense of risk because they take lots of little risks in their fairy fort building, in running around the cabin and all that occasionally guided by the parents -- put your shoes on. Slow down a bit. That's a heavy rock. Be careful. But the vast majority of time they're on their own figuring out themselves which I think is very healthy.

RANGER AMSTUTZ: It's really -- it's a beautiful thing for us. We don't want them to go out and get hurt, I'll say that, you know.

MR. AMSTUTZ: Yeah, yeah.

RANGER RONEY: Well, no parent really does.

RANGER AMSTUTZ: No parent wants their kid to get hurt but we don't think it's a tragedy if they skin their knees, in other words.

But I have love the confidence that leaves them with when they have these experience. They do skin their knee and they're not afraid of something that's going to just leave them, you know, a little bit scratched.

But they are so confident running around here in the rocks and climbing trees and they're not freaked out about what could be here because they know what it is here and there's nothing they need to be afraid of. And, you know, they're very, very confident and very empowered in this world that they're part of.

LUPIN: This is the most exciting thing but it's pretty exciting that a bear came close to us at dinner time.

ELIZA: We like to sing songs and roast marshmallows and play games around the campfire.

LUPIN: And he was ripping the log. He was ripping the log apart.

ELIZA: There was a song that we learned in school about the seven contents and to the same tune we made up a song about Tuolumne.

Okay. One, two, three.

(ELIZA & LUPIN sing the following:)

"Puppy Dome. Kitty Dome. Dog Lake,
Dog Dome, Marmet Rock. Don't forget
Lembert Dome. Don't forget Cathedral
Peak. These are the places of Tuolumne.

These are the places of Tuolumne."

RANGER AMSTUTZ: I really enjoy the openness of the community that is inspired by these tent cabins.

We have great rituals here. We campfires. And we have, you know, our neighbors up there are going to have -- next Thursday they're going to have an art gallery opening where everybody's contributing art or some humor.

MR. AMSTUTZ: Poetry performance.

RANGER AMSTUTZ: Poetry performances. But, yeah, just little things like that, good but simple, just community events that aren't based on technology really, except we did have a slide show on the side of the tent cabin last week where we invited anyone who wanted to come see.

(AMSTUTZ FAMILY sing the following:)

"In Tuolumne. In Tuolumne. You can fish. You can fish. All you catch are big ones. All you catch are big ones.
Ha, Ha, Ha. Ha, Ha, Ha.

"In Tuolumne. In Tuolumne."

RANGER EISSLER: There is no end of playful things to do. It was just this grand adventure.

(MUSIC)

(END)