

"A Conversation with John Muir." *World's Work* [London, England] Nov. 1906, pp. 8249-8250.

### A Conversation with John Muir

"Home is the most dangerous place I ever go to," remarked Mr. John Muir, the famous geologist and naturalist. He was on the train returning from Arizona to his home in Martinez, Cal., after the earthquake. "As long as I camp out in the mountains, without tent or blankets, I get along very well; but the minute I get into a house and have a warm bed and begin to live on fine food, I get into a draft and the first thing I know I am coughing and sneezing and threatened with pneumonia, and altogether miserable. Outdoors is the natural place for a man."

The train was passing through the San Francisco Mountains in northwestern Arizona. The conversation was left to Mr. Muir, in acknowledgment of his superior powers of entertainment and instruction. It drifted naturally on to mountain tramping, and Mr. Muir told of a walk he took around Mt. Shasta several years ago. "I was stopping at Sisson's" he said, "and one morning I thought I'd take a walk, so I put on my hat and started. As I went down the path to the gate, Mrs. Sisson called after me to ask how long it would be before I would be back. 'O, I don't know,' I said, 'not very long, I guess.' 'Will you be back to luncheon?' she asked. 'I expect so,' I said, and went on. After I had got along a bit I concluded to walk up to the timber-line and back again. So I started off up the mountain side. I soon found that I could not go up directly, as I had expected, as there were long gulches full of snow ahead, around which I had to make detours before I could proceed. I kept repeating this performance, intent on getting up, until it was growing dusk before I realized what time it was. But I was used to being caught out so I simply got on the lee side of a big log, made a fire, and went to sleep on a pile of leaves. In the morning I soon reached the timber-line. Then I noticed some new snow formations near the summit, and I concluded to go on up. I made the ascent and got back to the timber-line again by about nightfall of the second day. It was snowing, so I made a bigger fire and lay up closer to my log shelter. When I awoke in the morning I was covered with snow, but I wasn't uncomfortably cold. But I concluded I would work down to a little lower level and continue on around the mountain. By this time I began to feel a little 'gone' from lack of food. I've often spent two days without anything to eat and even felt better for it; but the third day is getting toward the point of being too much. As I tramped along I thought I saw smoke. I stopped and watched it for a long time to make sure that it wasn't a ribbon of cloud. When I was sure it was smoke, I worked toward it, and in about an hour I came on a Mexican sheep-herders' camp. After a lot of signaling and gesticulating, I made them understand that I was very hungry, and at last they got me up a meal. I spent the night with them, and the next day continued my march around the mountain, taking some bread and coffee from the camp. For three days I went on without seeing anybody. On the seventh day I completed the circuit of the mountain, and about noon I sauntered up the walk to Sisson's, as if I had just come in from a half-hour's stroll. Mrs. Sisson saw me and called out, 'Well, Mr. Muir, do you call this a short walk? Where have you been? I've had a guide out searching for you.' 'O, I just took a little

walk: I went around the base of the mountain. But I got back in time for lunch, didn't I? I had been gone seven days and had walked a hundred and twenty miles.

"But that is the way to enjoy the mountains. Walk where you please, when you like, and take your time. The mountains won't hurt you, nor the exposure. Why, I can live out for \$50 a year, for bread and tea and occasionally a little tobacco. All I need is a sack for the bread and a pot to boil water in, and an axe. The rest is easy."

Some one mentioned the "Boole," reputed to be the biggest "big tree."

"Yes," remarked Mr. Muir, "I measured it. I'd been fooled so often with yarns about these biggest trees that I wouldn't go until the engineer who had measured it told me himself that he had used a steel tape. Then I made a three days' journey to the tree. When I measured it, though, the most I could make its girth was fifty feet less than the engineer's figures. But I learned afterward that a lumberman who had helped him had held out that much slack of the tape as a joke. Later, when looking over some of my old note-books, I found memoranda on this very tree, which I had made years before.

"But," added Mr. Muir, "I would go three times around the world to see a tree as big as they said that was."

Then the subject branched off. Later Mr. Muir told of a trip which he and Professor Sargent of Brookline, Mass., took together to study trees in Siberia. "We went out there and saw them all right, and then I wanted to see the Cedars of Lebanon that old Solomon used to build the temple. So while Professor Sargent went back to Petersburg I ran down that way, but was headed off by the smallpox quarantine at Joppa. To fill in the time I went over in the Transcaucasus to see some American copper concessions that are being worked there. When I got back to Constantinople the quarantine was still on, and I took a run up the Nile to see Assouan and the old temples at Karnak. Then I came back and went into Palestine, and saw the Cedars of Lebanon at last. Then Professor Sargent came along, and we went through the Red Sea together, and around to India. I had always wanted to get into the high Himalayas, so I took six weeks to go back into them about 600 miles. After I got back to Calcutta I decided to see some of the trees in Ceylon, and that took several weeks. Then we went on around to Hong Kong. I had a letter from President Roosevelt to Conger at Peking, but when we got to Hong Kong I didn't want to get into the hot, dusty city, so I told Sargent to take the letter and go on up there. 'Why don't you want to go?' says he. 'O, there aren't any trees there.' 'Well, where are you going, then?' he says. 'Never you mind,' says I. 'You go ahead. I'm going to buy a map of the world and figure out a little trip.'"

That "little trip" was to Australia, and included a 2,600-mile excursion into the interior by rail, boat, stage, and afoot, solely to see the great eucalyptus forests. "And," concluded Mr. Muir, "I'd have gone on from there to Chile, to see the *Araucaria imbricata*, if I hadn't found out that the nearest way was to go back home to San Francisco and start over again.

The reference to the *Araucaria imbricata* was to an earlier part of the conversation, about the petrified forests of Arizona. For twenty years the Santa Fé has advertised these forests as a side-trip to be made from either Holbrook or Adamana. "And do you know," said Mr. Muir, "those fellows had waited all that time for me to come down there to find three more forests that not even the people in that country knew about--and one of them is the biggest one there. But what strikes me most about these forests is that there is not a solitary one of their species of trees in the North American continent. These petrified trees were carbon millions of years ago--and yet in Chile to-day there are magnificent forests of this identical species, the *Araucaria imbricata*. And if I live long enough I'm going to make a trip to Chile just to see them."