

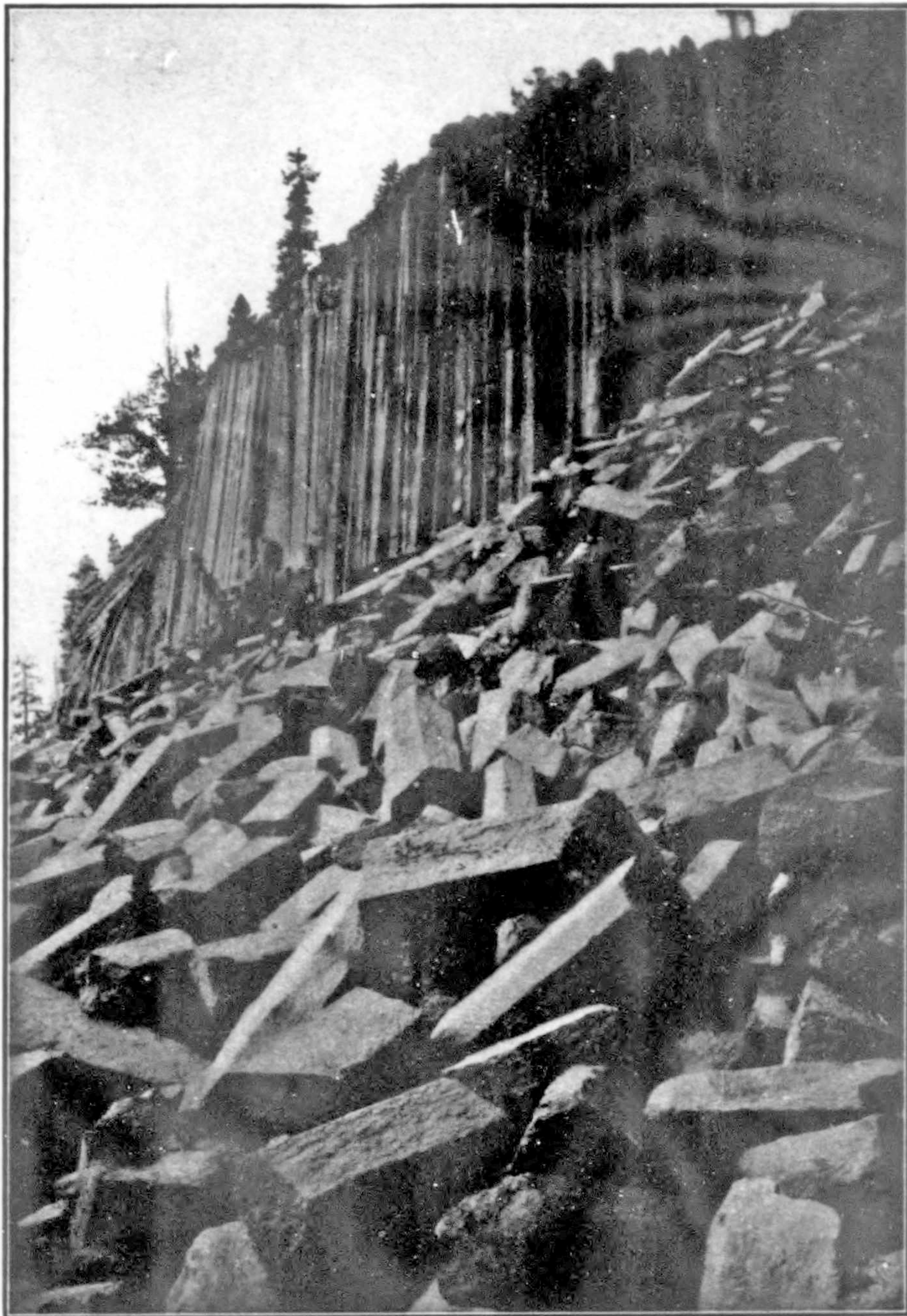
THE DEVIL'S POSTPILE.

BY J. N. LE CONTE.

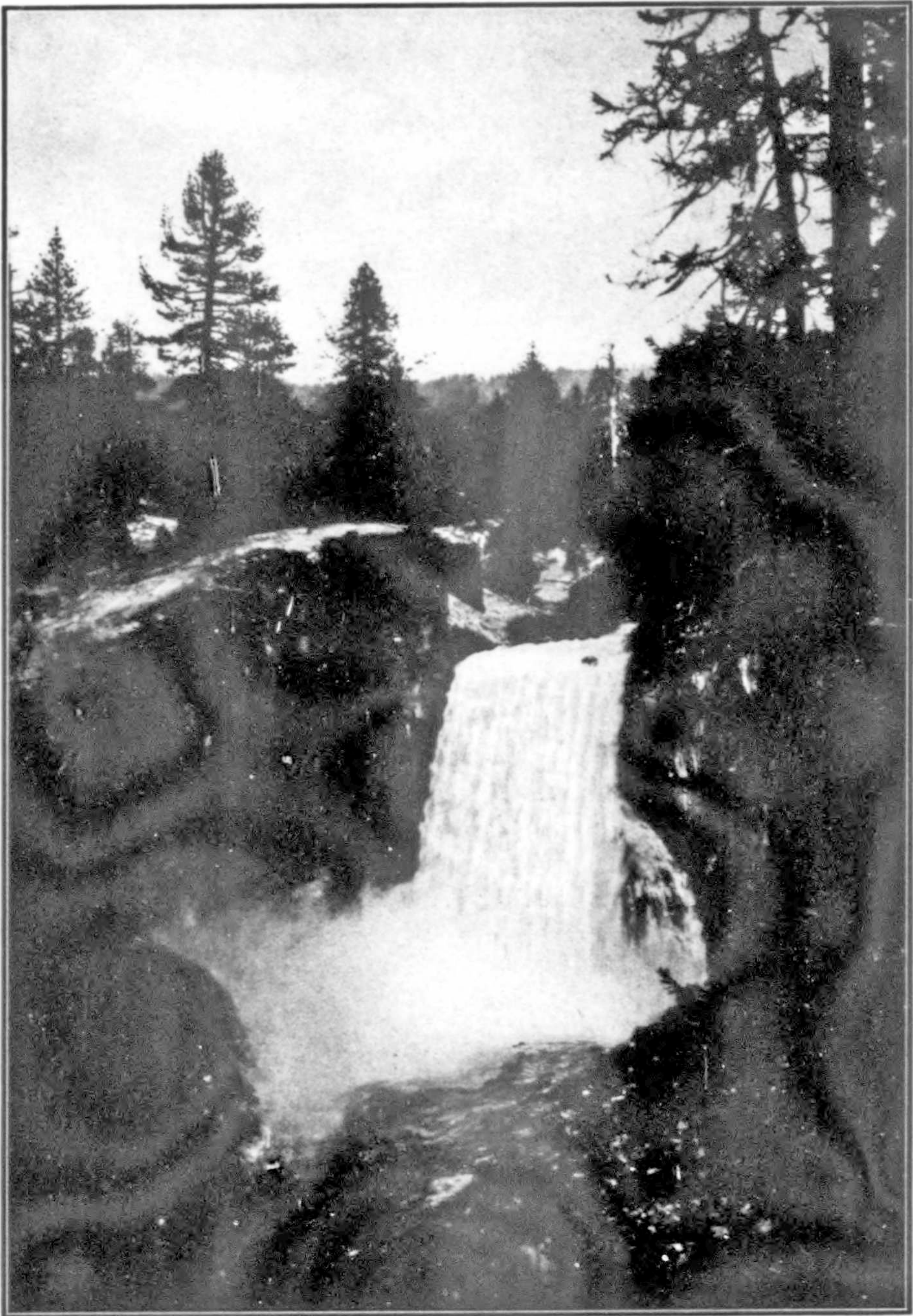
The creation by the President of the "Devil's Postpile National Monument" on the 6th of July last calls attention more strongly than ever to the beautiful region of the Middle Fork of the San Joaquin River. Not only does this basin embrace such curiosities as the recently established monument, but also one of the finest groups of mountain peaks, the finest group of residual glaciers, and the finest evidences of recent volcanic activity to be found in the Sierra Nevada. With the creation of this National monument, travel will be still more strongly attracted in this direction, so that a few words descriptive of the region will not be amiss.

The culminating points of the upper Middle Fork lie in the Ritter group, which consists of Mt. Ritter, Banner Peak, and the Minarets. These form a very high and rugged divide trending north and south, and drained on the east by the Middle and on the west by the North Fork of the San Joaquin River. The cañons on both sides are cut to a great depth, so that the mountains between rise to a very considerable height above the surrounding country. The peaks average between 12,500 and 13,150 feet above sea-level, and the rock, unlike most of the Sierra, is black metamorphic. The brilliancy of contrast between this and the snow, the exceptional ruggedness of sculpture characteristic of this type of rock, and the great height of the peaks, both absolute and relative, unite to make this group the most magnificent piece of mountain scenery which we have in the Sierra Nevada.

This splendid mountain mass does not lie upon the main crest, but is embraced, as has been stated, by two



THE DEVIL'S POSTPILE, A WONDERFUL CLIFF OF COLUMNAR BASALT.
Photograph by J. N. Le Conte.



RAINBOW FALLS, DEVIL'S POSTPILE NATIONAL MONUMENT.
Photograph by J. N. Le Conte.

branches of the San Joaquin. The crest itself is not so high, and shoots off to the east from a point a mile or so north of Ritter. It then turns southeasterly and breaks down into a rolling mass of mountains whose lowest point is at the Mammoth Pass. The Middle Fork of the San Joaquin heads in Thousand Island Lake at the base of Banner Peak, flows easterly and then southeasterly, following the depression between the main crest and the Ritter group. The elevation of the lake at its source is 9,800 feet. Mt. Ritter rises sheer 3,500 feet above it and composes one of the most stupendous mountain pictures which the Sierra affords. The lake itself is very nearly at the timber-line, and furnishes fair camping for those who wish to ascend the mountain by way of its precipitous northern face.

At the outlet of the lake trails will be found following down the river cañon, but the main route is by way of the Agnew Trail, which follows along the mountain-slope to the east of the stream and about one thousand feet above it. Shortly after leaving the lake the volcanic rock is encountered, which covers the whole basin of the upper Middle Fork as far as the Fish Creek Divide. The route down the cañon is said to be very beautiful. I have not traversed the cañon myself, but a very complete description of it is given by Mr. T. S. Solomons in one of the early publications of the Sierra Club.* The upper trail, however, is well traveled and easily followed. It furnishes a magnificent view of the precipitous eastern face of the Ritter group. From its snowfields several large streams—Badger, Shadow and Minaret creeks—and a number of smaller ones plunge in cascades over the opposite cliffs into the cañon below.

Passing still southward through Agnew Meadow and through beautifully forested country, the trail reaches the river again at Pumice Flats. All this region, as well as that about Mammoth Pass, is covered with pumice and

* "Among the Sources of the San Joaquin," T. S. Solomons, *SIERRA CLUB BULLETIN*, Vol. I, No. 3, Jan. 1894, pp. 71-74.

fine volcanic ash. South of Pumice Flat the trail passes between the Devil's Postpile and the river, and then joins the main Mammoth Trail, which connects the settlements near Wawona and Summerdale with Long Valley on the eastern slope.

The Devil's Postpile is a wonderful cliff of columnar basalt facing the river. The columns are quite perfect prisms, nearly vertical, and fitted together like the cells of a honeycomb. Most of the prisms are pentagonal, though some are of four or six sides. The standing columns are about two feet in diameter and forty feet high. At the base of the cliff is an enormous pile of these prismatic fragments. The cliff facing the river furnishes the best example of this columnar basalt structure, but wherever the bedrock is exposed beneath the pumice covering the same formation can be seen.

Joining the Mammoth Trail and following it east about a mile, we come upon Reds Meadow. This is an ideal camping-spot—a fine luxuriant meadow fringed with splendid forest. Through it flows several clear rushing streams well stocked with trout, and a fine hot spring bubbles out of the hillside near by. From Reds Meadow the Mammoth Trail passes easterly over the Sierra summit, down past the Mammoth Lakes and mine to the Mineral Park settlement and out on the desert plains toward Owens River.

Following the San Joaquin River down about one and one-half miles below the Mammoth Crossing, we come upon the Rainbow Fall. This fall is formed by the entire volume of the Middle Fork pouring in a smooth broad sheet over a ledge of volcanic rock into a box cañon. The height of the fall is about one hundred and forty feet, its width perhaps ninety feet when the stream is in flood, and the drop is absolutely vertical. Both this and the Devil's Postpile are included in the recently established National monument. The area set aside is rectangular in form, one-half mile wide east and west and two and one-half miles long north and south.

In addition to the attractions in and around Reds Meadow there are others at a greater distance. About nine miles south is the magnificent cañon of Fish Creek, with the Red Slate group of peaks at its head. On the opposite side of the river the various tributaries flowing down from the Minarets are worthy of attention, particularly Shadow Creek, which drains the south slope of Mt. Ritter and from whose source an easy ascent of the mountain can be made. Fair trails, made for the most part by prospectors, cover the entire region, which is destined soon to become one of the best known portions of the High Sierra.