WEEKEND *FOREST*

COLUMN: ON THE ROAD

From Silicon to the Sequoias

// BY ALEXANDER MEDEL



Should we have the fortune to meet, you will immediately learn three things about me: my appreciation for the Great American Songbook, my passion for road trips and my roots in Silicon Valley. Over the course of my writing career at the News, I have written at length about my music tastes and, unsurprisingly, my adventures on the road. Despite my evident pride in this column for being all around the American West, I have never paused to write about my hometown.

My hometown, San Jose, is the most obscure large city in the United States. This is by no means a critique. It simply is the description of an objective fact.

The city has more in common with vanilla ice cream, elevator music and white rice than it does with its relatively more famous urban peers. It has no dishes of note, like Chicago deep dish, nor do its residents talk with the accents of Bostonians or New Yorkers. Seattle has the Space Needle and St. Louis has the Gateway Arch. Meanwhile, San Jose's skyline appears more like a Chat GPT-generated image of a standard American city. I am personally fine with it, but it certainly is no Manhattan.

Sharing my hometown becomes a learning experience to the new people I meet. I have often used a combination of "I'm from San Francisco" or "I'm from the Bay Area" to non-Californians to save myself from presenting a geography lecture about San Jose. Then there was that one person who thought I was Costa Rican. That case required a lecture, and a long one at that.



Obscurity is not necessarily a bad thing, and this is certainly true of San Jose. It merely is a matter of happenstance. The city is not a state capital: that honor goes to Sacramento. San Jose also has the misfortune of being dwarfed in cultural stature, but not population and area size, by its northern neighbor, a little town by the name of San Francisco.

Granted, my hometown does not have a giant orange bridge, an erstwhile island prison or cable cars. Instead, San Jose is known for three things: unaffordable housing, a Dionne Warwick song and, most especially, its status as the capital of Silicon Valley.

Technology is to Silicon Valley as air is to life. Our landmarks consist of Apple Park, the Googleplex and the Meta sign on One Hacker Way. The cardinal virtues of Silicon Valley — innovation, ingenuity and entrepreneurship — manifest themselves everywhere. Startups come as quickly as they go. Net worths climb as fast as they drop. Software travels the distance between the towns of Novel and Obsolete well-past the speed limit. Nothing is permanent. Everything is fluid.

Beneath the dynamism and freneticism inherent in Silicon Valley life, however, is an undercurrent of discontent that runs through the water that only the introspective can feel. People have become too saturated with their oat milk lattes, too comfortable with their Patagonia vests and too trusting of the Waymo taxis on the street.

And this feeling, while pronounced in Silicon Valley, is pervasive everywhere, especially at Yale. At the cost of building connections online, we have become disconnected with the world. At the cost of expanding invisible empires in cyberspace, we have forgotten to build homes of our own on Earth. We embrace our devices with greater love than we would a relative, friend or partner.

We have all become prisoners in a Bastille of bytes and binary. Sadder than the fact that we are prisoners is the fact that we are our own wardens, too. We have forgotten to dance with the sea, summit mountains and enjoy the scent of aged air in ancient forests. We associate the word "apple" with phones rather than fruits and "cloud" now means everything before the fluffy white stuff that floats in the sky. Our eyes are jailed in the unforgiving glow of blue light, and they no longer have the freedom to blink. We have forgotten how to live and to live vivaciously.

On one weekend in July two summers ago, I needed a break. I needed to get away from it all. I traveled east into the Sierra, far from the range of bars and radar waves and the grasp of digital life.

The air was heavy as I climbed further up the mountains. The sky was covered in a cataractous haze. The trees were thinned and charred, sporting an unenviable hue of black and producing an odor which, to the Californian, has become all too familiar. Then the air lightened, the sky cleared and the trees turned a verdant green with a scent more tantalizing than a bottle of Macy's cologne. They towered over us, their shadows crossing the highway, as they welcomed us into Sequoia National Park.

One of three national parks in the Sierra — the others being Yosemite and Kings Canyon — Sequoia's main draw are its eponymous trees.

I learned a lot about them on this trip and enough to make them my favorite type of tree. Giant sequoias, otherwise known as "Sequoiadendron giganteum," naturally occur in the California Sierra and nowhere else in the world. A typical sequoia tree can grow anywhere from 250 to 300 feet and reach an age of two to three millennia, the average age range of your typical Sterling Professor.

Of all the sequoias at the park, the most famous is the General Sherman Tree. Boasting a volume of roughly 52,000 cubic feet, it is, generally speaking, the world's largest tree. The sequoia, 275 feet tall, is taller than Kline Tower by roughly 20 feet and Harkness Tower by roughly 60 feet.

There is something humbling about standing beneath a tree that has seen the world as we know it come to shape. The Romans sailed the Mediterranean, the Han ruled China and the Maya thrived in Mesoamerica in its infancy. By the time the tree was 200 years old, Christ was delivering the Sermon on the Mount. Only for the smallest fraction of its life has it lived concurrently with the Internet. I thought to myself then that if a tree like this one could live without Wi-Fi and a spotty AT&T connection for two millennia, so can we. And, as a budding historian myself, I know we once did.

The General Sherman Tree is one of those things that forces you to put a camera down and just look up — to capture an image with your eyes for your memory and not just with your phone for an Instagram story. After all, a memory can last forever; an Instagram story lasts for a day.

My parents and I spent the rest of the day exploring the park. My dad climbed Moro Rock, my mom climbed a downed sequoia and we all could not resist the prospect of driving through the park's Tunnel Log, which we did and did not regret. The next morning found us coursing through the dramatic cliffsides and jagged mountains of the Kings Canyon Scenic Byway.

Kings Canyon National Park lies just north of Sequoia on the Generals Highway. There are two major sections, General Grant Grove and the eponymous canyon. The latter area had just reopened, and it was where we spent our morning. The drive on the byway was surprisingly more beautiful than I had expected, and the destination was all the more wonderful.

Kings Canyon is often labeled "the little Yosemite," and for good reason. Both trace their origins to the work of glaciers. The two national parks offer valleys clothed with lush meadows and waterfalls that animate the senses. Both share granite mountains dressed in the shawls of pines that have perfected the art of capturing the awe of visitors. The only difference is that Yosemite is just too busy. If Yosemite is a turbulent sea of cars battered by a deluge of tourists, Kings Canyon is a brooding river.

The day was perfect. In fact, it was so perfect that it was almost unsettling. The sky was a bright blue, and the air smelled crisp and clean. An idyllic tranquility murmured through the air, interrupted by the occasional sigh of a hiker or the hushed lecture of a ranger. The ponderosas were still. The rocks were contemplative. The river followed its course with the gentleness of a motherly embrace.

It was here, in a canyon of unassuming beauty, that I felt finally far-removed from my Silicon Valley life. No emails. No calls. No Instagram DMs. No LinkedIn invites. No Canvas notifications. Just me and the world before me.

Just after the sun had reached its zenith, we had joined the audience surrounding the General Grant Tree, another sequoia which just so happened to be the world's second largest tree. The crowd was varied, from tourists climbing out of their tour buses to grandparents relating to their grandchildren their memories of the park. A mother pushed a stroller nearby, pointing out the "pretty trees" to her son. The father was close, taking photos of a placard he planned to read but will probably forget.

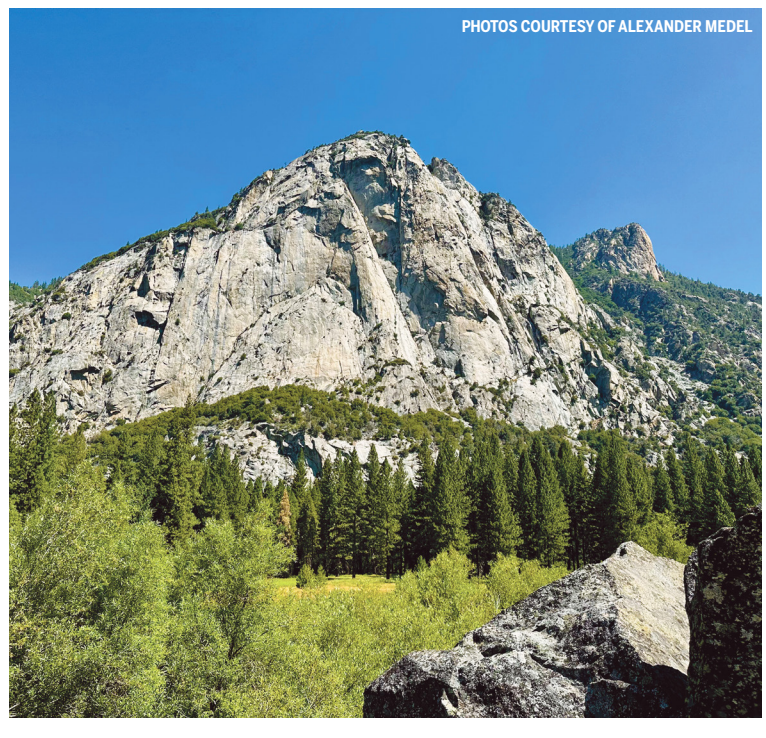
Soon enough, my views of sequoias at the grove would be covered by arms reaching out for selfies. The wind would be drowned out by directions to smile or recommendations for optimal angles "for the gram." By the time we had reached the Central Valley, I got signal. This was followed by the tympanic pings of notifications reminding me that I was on my way back to Silicon Valley — on my way back home.

I was looking for a kinder epilogue at the end of this journey: one that promised complete freedom from the tethers of technology and one that embraced balance with the world beyond it. Instead, I received a final chapter, a perfect bookend, that reminded me of the life I was about to return to: timeblocks on Google Calendar, to-do lists on my Notes app that can cross the Pacific and the occasional doomscroll.

I am not advocating for a return to the state of nature à la Hobbes and Locke, nor am I indicting technology as a whole. Technology is not an inherently bad thing. After all, it has propelled humanity toward progress. We have advanced the arts, humanities and sciences with innovation. We have bridged divides and connected the world in ways unthinkable a century ago. We have explored the confines of Earth and reached for the stars. To deny these facts is foolish, but to embrace technology while leaving room for nothing else is just as foolish.

I am all for technology — my roots compel me to say so — but I am a stronger advocate for balance. Staying connected online and staying connected offline are not mutually exclusive. Online work is a mainstay of the Yale experience. At the same time, however, we cannot let technology consume hours of our time. Time spent on YouTube rabbit holes or TikTok brainrot can be spent catching up with friends, picking up an interesting book that has gathered dust on your bookshelf or, in my case, taking a road trip.

I needed a break, and I found it in the Sierra. In doing so, I relearned what it was like to live — a great, liberating feeling. And, if anything, I gleaned from that experience an important lesson: sometimes, to reconnect with the world, all you have to do is disconnect.



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