

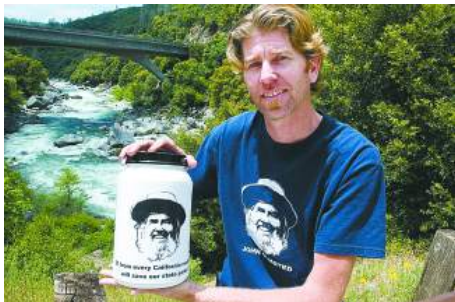
Spencer Kellar
Staff Writer

October 31, 2014

John Olmsted's archives find home at California Academy of Sciences



John Olmsted



Alden Olmsted

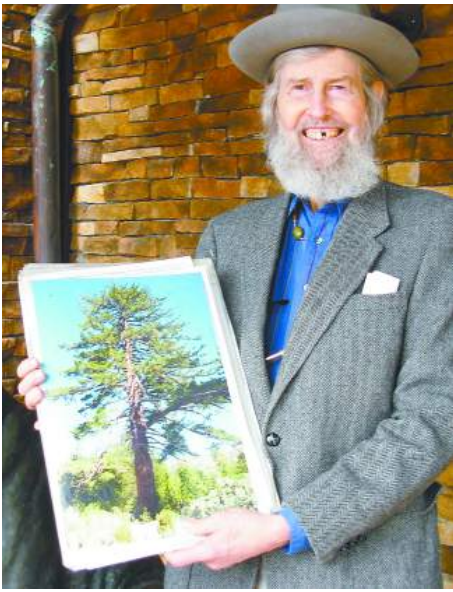


Photo for The Union by John Hart

After spending three years sifting through more than 10,000 photographs, films, and other documents belonging to the renowned California naturalist John D. Olmsted, son Alden says he has finally found the perfect home for his father's massive collection.

Almost all of John's materials, Alden says, have been given to the California Academy of Sciences and their archive department.

The hope is that all of the information will be easily accessible by searching on their website, and will be "protected and available forever."

Alden says he settled on the Academy of Sciences not only for its relevance to his father's life, as John Olmsted once worked close to the academy's museum location as a botanist for the Strybing Arboretum in Golden Gate Park, but also because of the academy's ability and willingness to accept the entire collection.

"I reached out to a few different universities. Some of the universities I reached out to, my dad had been involved with, but with some of them the departments aren't there anymore or the people have changed; or the person who my dad worked with is not there, so they're nice, but you can just tell by talking to them that they don't really get it. So, it kind of took a while to find the right one," Alden said. "UC Davis wasn't able to take much. The Oakland Museum, who he worked with in the (1960s), said they didn't have the capacity.

"The California Academy of Sciences said they were very interested in not just people's work, but the people themselves. The fact that I had his walking stick, hat, boots, and things like that; they were just as interested in those items as the slides."
Alden Olmsted

"The California Academy of Sciences said they were very interested in not just people's work, but the people themselves. The fact that I had his walking stick, hat, boots, and things like that, they were just as interested in those items as the slides. So their goal was to tell the story of the person and not just what they did."

John Olmsted died in 2011 at the age of 73, after a long fight with prostate cancer. Alden, who had moved to Los Angeles to become a filmmaker, returned to care for his father and began documenting their final months together.

The documentary, titled "[My Father, Who Art in Nature](#)," gave a detailed look at the relationship between father and son. For Alden, this was just the beginning of a three-year odyssey that would entail cataloguing a lifetime of work.

"The hardest work I did was cleaning out the house. There were three different categories. His biggest collection was slides, and so it was virtually almost every plant and animal life in California over the last 40 or 50 years. Being a botanist, he started cataloguing things in the late (1950s) and I would say there were around 5,000 slides," Alden said.

"And then with film, it was mostly 16 millimeter film of different hikes and different teachings. There was some sound film, including HikaNation in 1980 where he and a large group of people hiked across the whole United States from the Golden Gate Park to the country's capital in Washington, D.C.

"So all that film, and then a lot of papers and correspondence; journals and newsletters that he would put out through different nonprofits like the California Institute of Man and Nature and the Sequoia Challenge," Alden continued.

“Narrowing it down from a whole house to a small storage unit ... was challenge number one. I was so spent and so finished with that chapter that it took a while to say, ‘OK, well shoot. It’s not doing anyone any good in the storage unit.’ As good as it felt to accomplish that, after a few months passed, I realized I was going to have to do some more work.”

When the project was over, Alden, who had underestimated the amount of time it would take to finish the job, said he was left wondering what was next in his own life.

“When my dad’s estate was closed and we sold the house, all of a sudden I wondered what I was going to do and where I was going to live. I just thought it would take a few months and I’d see if I wanted to go back to Los Angeles or stay in Northern California. That was three years ago, so I started realizing that maybe I was going about it the wrong way or maybe I was supposed to document it. Maybe I was supposed to make something that would inspire or cause people to think about whatever chapter they’re in,” he said.

This idea eventually progressed into a concept for a television series called “Now what?.” With only a vague idea of what he wanted it to be, Alden set up a small Kickstarter and was able to surpass his \$3,000 goal.

“The hope is that I can film my real life and see if I’ve got something for a series. A couple of producers have expressed interest, but they always say the same thing. ‘What do you got? You’ve got to show us something,’” Alden said.

“So this was just a small Kickstarter to jumpstart the project a little bit, and get people involved and remind people that I’m still on this journey. The more I talk to people, I find other people in the same position. Maybe they didn’t get there in the same way with the unique dad thing, but maybe they had a late career start or career change, or a divorce or life change.

“I feel like there’s a lot of people around the ages of 35 to 40 going, ‘Wait a second, wasn’t I going to be further along than I thought I was?’ So I thought I could make it funny and explore it using my dad’s past and the fact that I didn’t really want to step right into his shoes, but in some ways I have.”

Although Alden says he doesn’t have the energy to continue his father’s legacy fully, he remains committed to establishing a trail that would connect almost a dozen state parks in California, which was one of John’s ultimate goals.

“I do have ongoing talks with the state parks and linking them up. He spent his life saving about 11 or 12 different parcels, from Jug Handle in Mendocino to Lake Tahoe. It’s scattered, but if we can connect those dots we can complete what’s called the Cross-California Ecological Trail. It’s already listed on the state of California’s website, but it’s not a completed trail. There’s still sections we have got to figure out ... It’s a dream and it’s close, but it still has to actually be physically ironed out,” he said.

Alden Olmsted also said he wouldn’t rule out making another film concerning his father’s work, this time regarding the fight to save the covered bridge at Bridgeport.

“A few people in Nevada County have asked me for a possible film about Bridgeport, and I do think that’s one final one that might end up being a little bit of a trilogy with the movie about my dad and the movie about Jug Handle,” he said.

“PBS is interested in that, and apparently the people at the South Yuba River Parks Association have been keeping track of which descendants are still alive. So I think that would be interesting if those people are still alive and there’s a story to tell, especially because the bridge is about to go under a few years of repair. I think that might be a worthy film.”

Spencer Kellar is an intern with The Union; he can be reached at NCPCInternC@theunion.com.

Top Video Headlines

of 3

