Pacific asks the public to help decipher Muir's journals

By Alex Breitler
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It's not that John Muir had poor penmanship.

When the famed naturalist set out on an adventure, he'd stuff a journal into his back pocket. Into swamps, over glaciers and through snowstorms he went, often pulling out that battered book and scribbling down whatever he saw.

Unable to contain his enthusiasm, Muir wrote into the margins and up the sides of the pages. The pencil marks smeared as each journal jostled about in his pocket. Over time, some of his notes began fading away.

It may be that Muir never intended his journals for an audience.

But fresh off the 100th anniversary of his death on Dec. 24, the University of the Pacific hopes that you will become that audience.

The university, which holds the largest collection of Muir's writings, is stepping up efforts to transcribe dozens of journals, the contents of which are not well known. And Pacific is asking for the public's help.

"You might find something we didn't know about John Muir before," said Michael Wurtz, university archivist.

Pacific holds 76 of Muir's personal journals, dating as far back as 1868.

All have been scanned and posted online. But only about 30 have been completely transcribed.

Wurtz would love to finish the job. After all, transcribed journals can be searched by keyword. If you want to learn everything Muir ever said about pine cones (and he said a lot about them), you could search his journals online for that term.

But first, someone has to dive in and decipher them.

Anyone inclined to help can just log onto the Pacific website and pull up one of the journals on the screen. Grab those reading glasses and do your best to glean a word here or a word there.

Don't worry if you can't understand entire sentences or the broader message Muir was trying to convey.

"It's intimidating, but if you pick up just one word on a page, that's one word we didn't have before," Wurtz said.

He acknowledged that untrained experts might make mistakes, but university staff and Muir researchers will help with quality control.

Some Pacific students have already pitched in, finding the transcription task both exhilarating and exhausting.

One said she got a headache. Another said it was like reading a foreign language.

A third suggested partnering up. "Two brains always work best when trying to transcribe illegible handwriting by a man who has been dead for a hundred years," that student later told Wurtz.

But it wasn't all drudgery. These students were among the first to read vivid descriptions of far-off places, from Alaska to Central America and Europe. And in an age where no one writes stuff down anymore, they learned the value of keeping a journal; one student described a "sudden wave of excitement" at helping to preserve history.

Scholars have had some success, too. Stephanie LeMenager, an English professor at the University of Oregon, worked her way through eight pages describing Muir's journey across Panama in 1868. That was the trip that brought him to California and the Sierra Nevada for the first time.

The journal had been mostly ignored, she later said. And yet, she added, it contains some of Muir's most lyrical prose.

Like this line, the greatest Muir quote you've never heard: "The glory of God is everywhere. How could Moses make the request, 'Show me thy glory' . . . "

Dan Styer, a Muir enthusiast and physicist at Oberlin College in Ohio, said the transcriptions are "fun and mostly easy." He's done about 100 pages so far.

"I need to occasionally puzzle out exactly what Muir meant, but this merely adds to the adventure," Styer said. "To me, it's a lot more fun and challenging than, say, a crossword puzzle."

Students and scholars alike have had their turn. Now it's yours.

If everyone who loves the outdoors as Muir did transcribed just one page, the work would be done virtually overnight, Wurtz said.

While the facts of Muir's life are well known, there may be some secrets yet to be revealed. If nothing else you're likely to uncover some lively turns of phrase, helping ensure that everything the king of conservation scribbled down in those notebooks is preserved.
"The guy was a quote machine," Wurtz said. "There are more Muir nuggets out there — they’re just hiding in these journals, waiting to be discovered."

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Citizen curator

Want to help the University of the Pacific make John Muir’s writings available to everyone? Head to http://wiley/hc694H for complete instructions and to get started. In a nutshell: • Click on "John Muir Journals website." You will see all 78 of his journals. Click on one of them to open it; you can move from page to page on the right side of the screen. • You’ll want to pick a journal that has not yet been transcribed. Click on "View Image and Text"; if there is no text then you can be the first to transcribe that journal. • Go through the journal and write down Muir’s words in a separate email or word document. Having trouble? You can zoom in on each journal page for a closer view. Remember, it’s OK if you get only a word here or a word there, and it’s OK if you finish only a page or two (some of his journals are more than 100 pages long). • Send your transcription to Pacific archivist Michael Wurtz at mwurtz@pacific.edu.