

Pathways: A Story of Trails and Men (1968), by John W. Bingaman

CHAPTER VIII

Gabriel Sovulewski, Dean of Trail Builders

It is only fitting and proper to give Mr. Sovulewski posthumously the praise, honor, and fame due him.

He was born August 12, 1866, in Suwalki, Poland. He enlisted in the U.S. Army November 19, 1888, and advanced to quartermaster sergeant. In 1891-1892 he was placed in charge of the General Grant National Park, which was then under military rule. He was in Yosemite with the U.S. Troops 1895-1896-1897. During the Spanish American War he was in the Philippines, 1899. He returned to Yosemite with the troops as packer and guide.

Sovulewski was supervisor of Yosemite National Park from August 12, 1906, to March 4, 1916, when he became special ranger and acting superintendent. He served as general foreman, administrative, from July 1, 1917 to April 30, 1920 on which date he was appointed park supervisor, the position he held until his retirement, August 31, 1936.

During Mr. Sovulewski's many years of service in Yosemite National Park, most of the trails were laid out and improved under his direction. Deeply imbued with the spirit of public service, he worked unceasingly to make accessible the marvelous beauties of Yosemite high country. Long hours in the saddle were his to the day of his retirement.

To build and maintain the trail system, the Department of Interior hired 75 to 80 horses and mules per month each season, in addition to the 27 head owned by the department. The cost was \$9.50 per month for draft animals, and \$7.50 for driving, saddle, and pack animals. Common labor was .50 to .75 cents per hour.

Many trails beyond the rim of Yosemite Valley were nothing more than cattle and sheep trails. In some cases the first trails have been entirely abandoned and rebuilt, and in almost all cases they have been improved, as far as maintenance funds permitted. So in 1914, Mr. Sovulewski continued with construction and maintenance of the existing trails and built new ones as trail money was appropriated by the Interior Department.

When the troops withdrew from the park each fall, Mr. Sovulewski was left in charge. Something of the confidence felt by the Army officers during the periods of his responsibilities may be recognized in the following quotations from a letter addressed to Mrs. Sovulewski, in December 1908, by Major Benson, 5th Cavalry. "I found Yosemite far ahead of any other place in the world. I am more happy, however, to have it left in the care of such capable true men, as Mr. Sovulewski. I have known him for twenty years now, and he has shown himself to be a man of sterling character, of great capabilities, honest, and true in all things."

In a letter Mr. Sovulewski remarked on trail building, "Trail building is a very important work in the National Parks, when we consider the object for which the parks were created, and on that

account any official in charge of a particular park who will delegate trail construction to anyone not in sympathy with this object or who does not fully understand the meaning and intention of park creation, without personal inspection and satisfaction will be liable to make a serious mistake.”

He claimed, “There are six parts to remember in trail construction, It requires strength, determination, a natural instinct for direction, love for the work, love of nature, and an ability to forget everything for the time except the object in view, and to be able to sit in the saddle for 12 or 14 hours, or walk the same number of hours if required in order to find the best possible way.

“The party of workmen varies according to the location and amount of work to be done, and the tools and materials for the different kinds of work. The gang should not, as a rule exceed nine men, including the foreman, packer and cook.

“The foreman should be a practical trail builder, have experience in wood craft, know how to handle tools, and to know and take charge of explosives. He should be able to take full charge in all trail construction.

“In construction of trails under favorable circumstances, ascending long, steep hills, the grades should not be lower than 15 percent, and not exceeding 30 percent. The width of the trail will depend, as stated, on the importance of the trail, averages about 4 feet is sufficient, in passing dangerous points 6 feet is safer. Of course this brings the cost up, and in some cases a two foot trail in some places is safe enough, and comfortable to travel in single file.

“The trail should be well brushed along its course in order that the traveler riding along will not be annoyed with overhanging limbs or undergrowth on the sides.

“The cost of construction is of local consideration, depending on conditions as to layout of ‘trail, cost of labor and materials, distance from supplies, etc. The cost of trail construction in the Yosemite National Park varies from \$25.00 to \$2,500 per mile, that was in the days of low labor cost, in later d’ay of high costs it could exceed up to \$10,000 per mile.”

Much has been said and written about construction of trails, also bridges across creeks. Mr. Sovulewski was most successful in building and maintaining trails and accomplished more than any one man in this work.

Gabriel died November 29, 1938. Both Mr. and Mrs. Sovulewski are buried in the [Yosemite Pioneer Cemetery](#).