

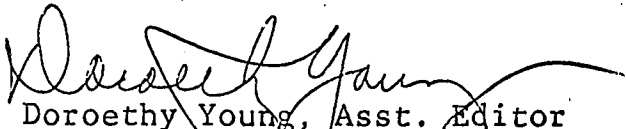
July 20, 1980

David L. Hackett
Mt. Whitney Ranger District
Inyo National Forest
P.O. Box 8
Lone Pine, California 93545

Dear Mr. Hackett:

In response to your letter of May 9, 1980, I am providing a rough draft of some history on the Ashrama which will be printed in a newsletter. I hope this will be some help in "nominating the main structure as a National Historic site".

Sincerely,


Doroethy Young, Asst. Editor
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cc: National Parks and Services
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HISTORY OF THE ASHRAMA
(Located in the Sierras: Lone Pine, California)
Doroethy Leonard

[There are very few of us who remember the building of the Ashrama, and so before the mythology that is developing becomes too far afield, I am putting down a skeletal history. These are my own direct memories or from the memoirs of Franklin and Sherifa Wolff.]

In 1928, Franklin and Sarah (Sherifa) Wolff, filled with a mutual dedication toward each other and toward a spiritual ideal felt deep within, hiked into Hunter's Flat (currently named Whitney Portal). This location is at the base of Mt. Whitney, which at that time was the highest mountain in the U.S. (This was before Alaska, with Mt. Denali, became a state.) At this time Franklin and Sherifa had been married only five or six years. They packed their tent, typewriters and camping supplies onto a couple of burros from the nearby Olivas Ranch. They set up camp at the base of the waterfalls that fill the small lake. It was here that Franklin Wolff began his first book, Re-embodiment. Sherifa was also an author and was involved in writing insightful articles, as well as a small Sanskrit dictionary called Devanagari.

Because of this two month camping experience, the Wolff's decided to spend more time in the mountains. They believed the teachings that stated that the most spiritual place is the highest place. The Forestry Service had stated that in order to spend any real length of time camping in that area, a structure would have to be built. Building permits were not available at Hunter's Flat, so Franklin and Sherifa explored the next-nearest canyon, Tuttle Creek Canyon. Here the beauty of the pine trees, the clear, cold creek, the remoteness and serene quiet, would provide the perfect atmosphere for this project.

The school, they thought, would be a place of religious or spiritual education and worship which would be non-denominational and non-sectarian. As Franklin Wolff and a couple of friends from Los Angeles cleared off a space on which to build, Wolff decided to use the natural stone as the main building material. (Cement was carried in on burros and mixed daily.) The building is 2000 square feet and in the form of a balanced cross, signifying equilibrium!

Dr. Wolff was lecturing at that time in various cities across the United States. He had engagements in Los Angeles (their home was in San Fernando), Chicago, Des Moines, Milwaukee, etc. Soon there were many who became interested in his teaching and groups were formed. Some volunteers joined in the effort of building the Ashrama. Gene Sedwick, who was a concert violinist from Chicago, would travel to Lone Pine on his motorcycle in order to help. Jim Briggs, Sherifa's son, built the fire place. Sherifa joined in mixing the cement. In a year or so, others joined so that there would be as many as 30 people camping there. They lived in large tents and had communal meals. They worked hard during the day and studied or listened to Gene play his violin or guitar around the campfire at night.

Initially the group would, with the Olivas burros, travel into the canyon from the north side. However, soon Franklin Wolff began clearing a dirt access road (beginning from the top, he said), on the south side of the canyon. This road is now just a foot path. Dynamite was used for clearing, and later for more stone for the walls. Wolff was the main dynamite expert, Briggs and Pete Geshell (both mining engineers) later would join in that task. Eventually the road was adequate so that a tractor and a small flatbed trailer would carry supplies and sometimes people all the way up. The burros lost their job.

Throughout the years the name of this building changed from Summer Camp to Rama Sangha School, to Ashrama. The Lone Pine residents refer to it as "The Monastery," and the hiker's manual calls it the "Stone House."

About 1930 the four cardinal pillars were constructed. The altar was the first major project. It did not have an inscription at that time. In the 1960's an unknown visitor chiseled the following:

Father, Into thy eternal wisdom, all creative love, and infinite power
I direct my thoughts, give my devotion and manifest my energy
that I may know, love, and serve thee.

In subsequent years the stone work, stone fireplace, heavy beamed roof, window casings and door casings were completed. Before the windows and doors could be added, work ceased. This was due to the fact that Sherifa could no longer make the trip and, as Franklin Wolff stated, she was the main impetus behind this project. This was 1950.

Friends, family and visitors would often visit and clear the area of debris thoughtless campers or hunters left behind. In 1963 the Wilderness Area Act included this area of Tuttle Creek Canyon. At that time the Forestry Service seriously considered dynamiting the building to comply with the 1963 act. Dr. Wolff wondered if the initial contract couldn't supersede this, and some Lone Pine residents pleaded their case. About 1970 a video crew from Los Angeles came in to make a video to further help the cause of saving the Ashrama. Today the Forestry Service in Lone Pine seems to understand this substantial history: a request for the Ashrama to be declared a national monument, with a detailed description and history, was sent to Sacramento officials.

People who visit the Ashrama today all seem to feel the spiritual presence there, as well as marveling over the heroic accomplishment. It is a wonderful hike up the trail, across the rushing creek and into a very peaceful and impressive Great Space.