by Nancy Nies

In 1923, at the age of twelve, Nelson Nies joined an outdoor organization for boys, based in Los Angeles, called the Trailfinders — and began a lifelong friendship with Carl Sharsmith, then twenty and a Trailfinder leader, who was destined to become a noted professor of botany at San Jose State University and a legendary ranger-naturalist in Yosemite.

Over the years, Nelson (1911-1990) was to become a mountaineer, a research chemist, and a traveler, as well as my father. His early experiences with Carl and the Trailfinders gave him a love of the mountains and a close friendship, both of which would last the rest of his life. Young Nelson participated in three memorable trans-Sierra treks led by Carl, during the summers of 1927, 1928, and 1929. In his daily journals, Nelson recorded the scientific names of trees and flowers Carl identified as they hiked, and wrote that Carl collected plant specimens. This was an early indication of Carl’s interest in botany, as he was not to obtain his B.A. from UCLA until 1933 and his Ph.D. in botany from Berkeley until 1940.

Carl attended the Yosemite School of Field Natural History in 1930, and the next year was hired as the first seasonal ranger-naturalist in Tuolumne Meadows. In that capacity, Carl would spend more than sixty summers in his beloved Tuolumne, the setting for my own memories of him. I remember Carl in the 1950s and 60s, leading hikes and campfire programs, speaking reverently of flora and fauna, peaks and glaciers, or making us laugh with funny stories and songs. I remember Carl in the early 70s, making an overnight backpack to the Dana Glacier and Dana Plateau with my father and me. And I remember Carl in the early 90s, no longer able to walk far, sitting in a chair in the meadow and regaling his listeners with his “Reminiscences.” Carl received the National Park Service Meritorious Service Award in 1956 and the first Yosemite Award in 1981. He finally retired from NPS in 1993 at age ninety, the oldest active ranger in NPS history — but spent his last summer in Tuolumne, his true home.

Though I knew Carl, I did not know much about his “other life” of university teaching and research, mostly as a professor of botany at San Jose State from 1950 to 1973. I have recently read that he was the first botanist to do extensive research on the alpine flora of the High Sierra, gathering thousands of specimens and publishing papers. I have also learned that SJSU’s 15,000-sheet Carl W. Sharsmith Herbarium consists mainly of native California plants, and that Carl worked on it during his many years as both professor and professor emeritus, personally determining and mounting each species.

In Fremontia (April 1995), Laura Sefchik writes that Carl was a CNPS Fellow, led local chapter outings, and gave $25,000 to CNPS in 1984 in memory of Helen Sharsmith, his wife, also a botanist of note. Sefchik goes on to say that Carl discovered many plants, authoring four, and had two plants named for him—Hackelia sharsmithii (forget-me-not family) and Draba sharsmithii (mustard family).

In 2012, I gave the Yosemite Archives more than fifty letters that Carl Sharsmith wrote to Nelson Nies between 1932 and 1989, along with old photos and other memorabilia — a collection attesting to a lifetime of friendship and achievement. Like my father, I feel fortunate to have known Carl, and to count myself among the tens of thousands of people he inspired in the course of his long life.

Left to right: John Pearne, Carl Sharsmith and Nelson Nies on return from High Sierra trek, 1929