

# Do You Remember?



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## Dr. John Paul Degnan

An Irish immigrant couple, Bridget (Dixon) and John Degnan, journeyed to California in 1884 and settled in the Old Village in Yosemite Valley. John worked steadily as a laborer and caretaker for the administrators of the state grant that ran Yosemite and did odd construction jobs for the hotels and stagecoach companies. Yosemite National Park's "History and Culture" on-line information says, "But it was Bridget who became the family's breadwinner, of sorts. Her baking skills not only nourished her family of ten, but also an entire community for more than 50 years."

In 1898 John built a larger house, and the bakery in front of the house expanded into their dining room as a small restaurant. Two years later, they bought a brick Dutch oven in which Bridget could bake 100 loaves of bread at a time. They moved the bakery to the back of the house and added a small grocery store to the restaurant. One of their sons died as a young boy, but all the rest of their children attended college.

In 1956, after the death of their parents in the early 40s, the children moved the business

into the present Yosemite Village. Degnan's Deli remained a family-owned business until 1974. The modern A-framed Deli still caters to today's tourists with homemade sandwiches. The 1898 house and bakery were moved to the Pioneer Yosemite History Center in the 1980s. This is not a museum, but a collection of old buildings that include the Degnan house, the powderhouse and jail, the blacksmith shop, a covered bridge, the ranger patrol cabins, and other historic structures.

John P. Degnan, the Degnan's second son and third child, was born in October 1888. He came to the Bay Area and attended Santa Clara University and continued his schooling at Stanford Medical School, graduating in 1918. He became an intern at St. Joseph Hospital in San Francisco. He was drafted by the army; the 1920 census shows him at Camp Steven D. Little in Nogales, Arizona. By this time he was married to Mary Frances Barrett; the first of their three daughters was born in 1920. In April 1921 he took charge of the Groveland, California, Hetch Hetchy Hospital. Familiar to many in the area,

he became known as "Doc" to everyone. Ted Wurm, in his book about Hetch Hetchy, said that Engineer Lou McAtee called Degnan "the finest construction doctor he knew." Wurm added, "Many remembered the time Doc commandeered a 'hot' locomotive at Groveland during a snowstorm to rush off and deliver a baby at a lonely farmhouse far out of town." Degnan dealt with mundane medical affairs but also had to take care of men who were horribly injured while working in the Hetch Hetchy tunnels.

When the project from the mountains moved down to the valley floor, Hetch Hetchy chose Livermore as its local headquarters. A new hospital was built here on South L Street on the Livermore Sanitarium grounds just northwest of the L Street bridge. Doc took over on 1 August 1930. His new hospital was 187 by 51 feet; an enclosed sun porch separated it from a smaller annex housing the dining room and kitchens. Floor plans included an operating room, an x-ray room, offices, waiting room, and three large wards. Degnan served Hetch



**Hetch Hetchy Hospital** (Photo from Livermore Heritage Guild)

Hetchy's clientele until the project closed in December of 1934. The hospital closed and became the property of the sanitarium.

Doc stayed on in Livermore, starting a family practice. Many local patients remember him well; they always mention what a good bedside manner he had when he made house-calls. He wore glasses and was not very tall and rather fat. He lived with his daughters at 813 South L Street, the little house north of the large brown shingled house at the northwest corner of College and L Street. His office was at Third and South L.

Josie Rochin recalled that when her mother took her and her three sisters to see the doctor, he refused payment, saying "You've got four

beautiful daughters—you don't owe me anything." Later, while at Yosemite, she was surprised to see him there dressed in his casual park clothes—bib overalls. Susan Junk remembered that her mother, Kitsy Peterman Junk, was born at the Hetch Hetchy Hospital in 1932. Since at that time the southern limit of Livermore was College Avenue, Kitsy wondered if she were truly a Livermore native.

Doc's oldest daughter, Francis, became a Carmelite nun. Another daughter, Margaret (known as Peggy), followed in her father's footsteps and became a doctor. On the day of her graduation from Creighton University in Omaha in June 1948, she was in the hospital having her second child. Her husband, Dr. Robert

A. Jeffrey, had graduated from the university the previous year, and he accepted her diploma at the graduation ceremony. When they came to Livermore after graduation, Dr. Robert Jeffrey practiced with his father-in-law until he was drafted into the Korean War. The youngest daughter, Helen, known as Nell, married an attorney. Doc retired from his practice, probably around 1956, and moved back to the mountains. He died in January 1974 at his ranch near Groveland, north of Yosemite National Park. Funeral services were held at St. Ignatius Church on the campus of the University of San Francisco; he was buried in the Jesuit Cemetery at Santa Clara.

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