

# This Day in History... February 20, 1902

## Birth of Ansel Adams

Photographer Ansel Easton Adams was born on February 20, 1902, in San Francisco, California. Adams was one of America's most famous photographers, known for his portraits of American landscapes, which helped promote environmental and conservation causes.

Adams was an active child and enjoyed spending time outdoors, collecting bugs and exploring nature. Adams began playing the piano when he was 12 and trained for several years to become a classical pianist.

In 1916, Adams was home sick in bed reading James Hutchings's book, *In the Heart of the Sierras*. He convinced his parents to get him a camera and let him visit Yosemite National Park. Adams was taken with the natural beauty and enthusiastically took pictures around the park. As he later recalled, "A new era began for me." Adams got better cameras and a tripod and returned to the park in 1917 and 1918. He also started working for a local photographer to learn important techniques.



*Conservationist John Muir formed the Sierra Club in 1892 "to make the mountains glad."*

In 1919, Adams joined John Muir's Sierra Club. He worked as the summer caretaker of their facility at Yosemite and served as their trip photographer. Adams remained a member of the club throughout his life and eventually served on the board of directors for 37 years. As part of the club, he made several first ascents in the Sierra Nevada.

Adams published his first photos in 1921 and started selling prints the following year. In his early years, Adams adopted the popular trend of pictorialism, which used soft focus and light to resemble paintings. This was short-lived however, and Adams instead chose to take pictures with sharp focus and high contrast. In 1927, Adams published his first portfolio of prints, *Parmelian Prints of the High Sierras*. The collection of 18 prints has been called "a landmark work in twentieth-century photography." The success of Adams's first portfolio helped him get commercial work, photographing wealthy patrons.

In the 1930s, Adams befriended fellow photographer Paul Strand, who greatly influenced his work. Strand encouraged Adams to become a full-time photographer, at a time when he still thought he might become a pianist. At Adams's first solo exhibition in 1931, he displayed 60 prints from the Sierra Nevada Mountains. One review said, "His photographs are like portraits of the giant peaks, which seem to be inhabited by mythical gods." Adams opened his own gallery in San Francisco in 1933 and started writing essays for photography magazines.

During the 1930s Adams was upset over the commercial development of the Yosemite Valley – it had a pool hall, bowling alley, golf course, and more. In 1938 he published a limited-edition book, *Sierra Nevada: The John Muir Trail* as part of the Sierra Club's mission to establish Kings Canyon National Park. Adams also testified before Congress and the park was established in 1940.

In the 1940s, Adams held the largest photography show in the West, *A Pageant of Photography*, which attracted millions of visitors. He also taught and published a children's book about Yosemite. During World War II, Adams published a book of photos of Japanese internment camps while also providing prints of Japanese military installations for the war effort. He received his first of three Guggenheim fellowships in 1946 – that first one was to photograph every US national park.

In 1952, Adams helped found the photography magazine, *Aperture*. He also started holding annual workshops at Yosemite in 1955. In the 1960s and 70s, Adams spent a good deal of time printing old negatives he had never printed before. He also reprinted popular photos for art museums. In 1979, he was commissioned by President Jimmy Carter to take the first official photographic presidential portrait. He received the 1980 Presidential Medal of Freedom for efforts "to preserve this country's wild and scenic areas, both on film and on earth." Adams died on April 22, 1984. Adams received many awards during his lifetime and the Sierra Club and Wilderness Society have awards named after him. There's also a wilderness area and mountain named after him in the Sierra Nevada.



*Adams' Sand Dunes, Sunrise, from the Masters of American Photography sheet.*



*Many of Adams's early photos were of the Yosemite Valley.*

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