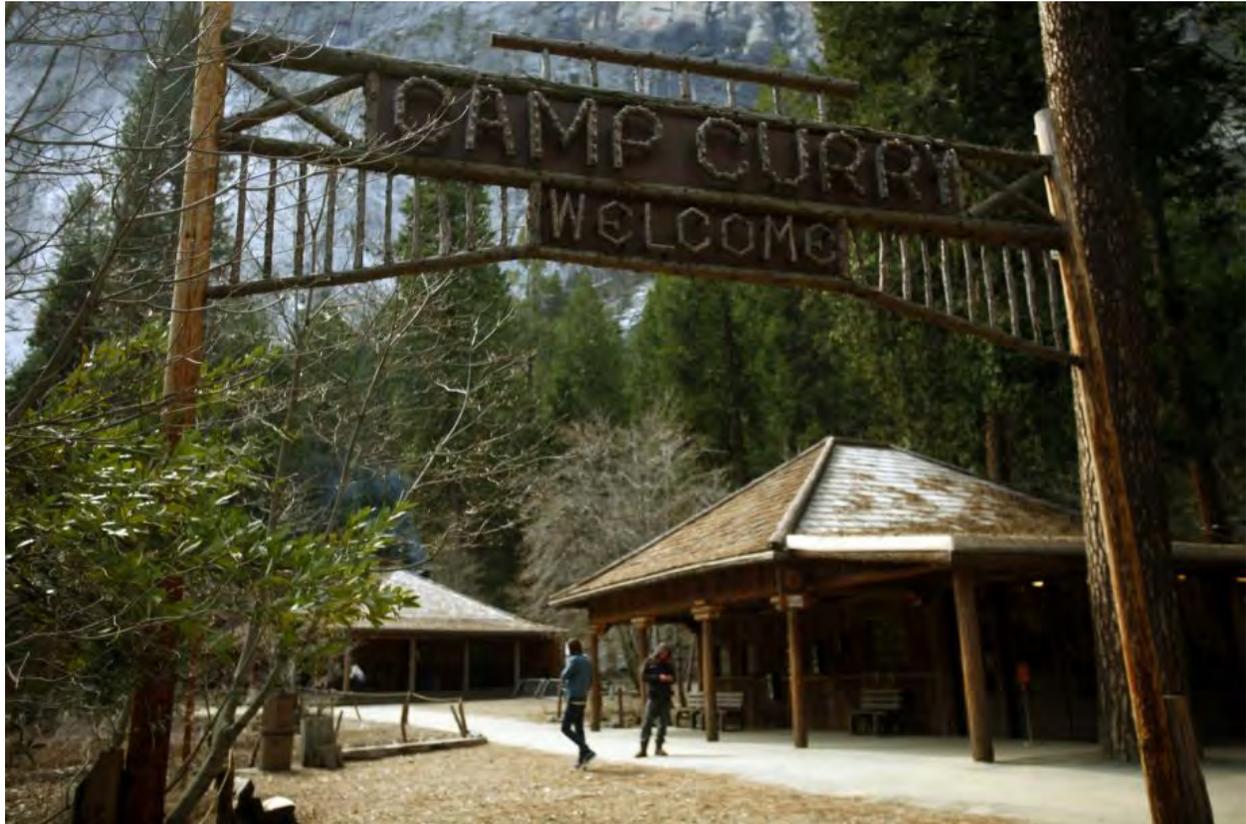


<http://www.sfchronicle.com/news/article/What-s-the-name-Ahwahnee-Hotel-worth-6764464.php>

Yosemite concessionaire gambles with battle over names

By [Joaquin Palomino](#)

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The historic wood sign at Camp Curry still greets visitors arriving at the famous lodging site in Yosemite March 26, 2013. Construction and mitigation measures are progressing at Camp Curry, a year after hantavirus sickened and killed several visitors staying in some of the signature tent cabins

At the heart of Yosemite's trademark battle is a gamble.

Concessionaire Delaware North has operated major park facilities for more than two decades. It's leaving in the spring and thought the new operator, Aramark, would pay \$51 million to hold onto the original names of the hotels and campsites — a sum it considers fair compensation for historic titles like the Ahwahnee Hotel, Curry Village and Badger Pass.

But if the park renames its lodges, camps and ski areas — which it announced Thursday that it would do, at least temporarily — Delaware North will be left with trademarks worth little outside the granite spires, sequoia groves and raging rivers of one of America’s best-known national parks.

“The move is pretty risky, because they’re asking for a lot of money and they may wind up with hardly any value at all,” said Ira Kalb, a marketing professor at the University of Southern California. The Ahwahnee, he said, “is just an American Indian name that got associated with a hotel. It makes sense in the context of Yosemite, but I’m not sure it has value outside of the park.”

Delaware North and the National Park Service have been in a legal battle since September, shortly after the company lost a \$2 billion bid to continue operating in Yosemite. The firm says its contract gives it intellectual property rights over hotel and facility names, and that anyone moving into them has to pay a hefty sum for their rights — a move some considered bold.

It isn’t out of character for Delaware North to take a gamble, though. The company, which was started in 1915, runs concessions in a number of casinos and racing tracks. A Sports Illustrated article in the 1970s reportedly called Louis Jacobs — who founded Emprise Corp., which later became Delaware North — the godfather of sports gambling.

In the 1970s, Emprise was the focus of a congressional hearing that found the company “knew, or should have known” it had done business with criminals. The committee uncovered no evidence that Emprise itself was a part of organized crime, but in 1972 a federal court ruled that the firm had conspired to use interstate transportation in aid of racketeering.

‘Highest level of scrutiny’

The company is still run by the family that founded it. Delaware North’s chairman is Boston Bruins owner Jeremy Jacobs — the son of Emprise founder, Lou Jacobs. Jeremy Jacobs recently relinquished his position as CEO to two of his sons, who split the duties.

Company officials say Delaware North shouldn’t be judged by the unsavory history of its forebear.

“Emprise is a twice-removed, dissolved predecessor of current-day Delaware North,” said Glen White, a company spokesman. “Current management was not involved in Emprise, and we hold more than 700 liquor licenses and numerous gaming licenses, which puts us under the highest level of scrutiny.”

Delaware North Cos. has more than \$3 billion in annual revenue and ranks No. 158 on the Forbes list of largest privately held companies in the country. It owns Boston’s TD Garden and has contracts with Kennedy Space Center’s visitor complex, Wembley Stadium in London, and the Australian Open, making it a major player in the concession industry.

But the trademark battle in Yosemite has put the New York company in the crosshairs, perhaps unfairly, according to Dan Jensen, former president of Delaware North Yosemite, now a consultant for the company. He said the firm has no intention of taking the historic names out of the Sierra, and just wants to receive adequate compensation for them.

“Do I think it’s fair that the Awhanhee name should leave Yosemite? No, I don’t think that’s fair at all. I think the name should stay in the park” he said. “The question is what the value of that name is, and I think the experts should decide that.”

In certain cases, trying to claim a well-known name could be a savvy business tactic, and Delaware North may have assumed that Aramark wouldn't want to risk changing the names associated with Yosemite. "A name or brand is a relationship between buyer and seller, and anytime you rename something you lose that relationship," Kalb of USC said.

Destination over name

But the principle might make more sense in a crowded marketplace — not a one-of-a-kind place like a hotel in the Yosemite Valley. "The destination is much more important than the name of the place they're going to stay," Kalb said.

Kim Lawson, director of public relations and media at Visit Yosemite Madera County, doubts that bookings will drop after the Awhanhee hotel becomes the Majestic Yosemite Hotel, which is the Park Service's proposed name.

"People don't choose to go to the Awhanhee because its named the Awhanhee, they chose to go to Awhanhee because it's in Yosemite," she said.

On March 1, when Aramark takes over the operations, all of the historic properties now run by Delaware North will be renamed.

"It's a shame to see them change, and everyone hopes it's temporary," Lawson said. "But at the same time, we are not losing the most important thing, which is Yosemite itself."

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