



Sierra Club members on the summit of Boundary Peak, highest point in Nevada. Front row, left to right: Rosie Balsam, Roland Kent, Ken Rich, Jr., John Delmonte; second row: Dick Woodward, Lloyd Balsam, Art Widmer, Louise Werner, Jill Johnson; back row: Walt Collins, Leader Brad Brush, Elgin Pierce, Ken Rich, Sr., Polly Connable, John Nienhuis. Soon after this picture was taken, the climbers scrambled down a ridge, across the state line and up Montgomery Peak, California.

Atop Nevada's Highest Peak

Thanks to the perfection of light plastic gear and dehydrated foods, a hiker can now go out and live comfortably for three days out of a knapsack that weighs 25 pounds or less. And that includes the luxury of a down sleeping bag and an air mattress. Here is another of Louise Werner's delightful stories of fun and adventure on high mountain trails—with many useful hints for those who go in for backpacking.

By LOUISE TOP WERNER

Photos by Niles Werner

Map by Norton Allen

HAVE YOU EVER crossed a state line at 12,800 feet above sea-level? You can do it in the White Mountains, a desert range that stretches for 30 miles along California's central eastern border and then slips over the line into Nevada. Immediately the ridge soars to 13,145 feet, to a point appropriately called "Boun-

dary Peak." Boundary Peak is the highest point in Nevada. Beyond it the ridge falls rapidly to foothills and disappears.

We members of the Desert Peaks Section of the Sierra Club, a group devoted to exploring the desert mountains of the Southwest, naturally felt the attraction of a desert mountain

with such an impressive position and altitude.

We decided to explore Nevada's highest point on a Fourth of July weekend, approaching it from the east. Driving from Los Angeles to Owens Valley via highway 395, we turned northeast at the town of Big Pine, over Westgard Pass into Deep Springs Valley and crossed the line into Fish Lake Valley, Nevada, where the road became 3A. We left the black-topped road at the Highway Maintenance Station in Fish Lake Valley, turning left on a fair desert road that took us 13½ miles to road's-end at 8000 feet in Trail Canyon. The total mileage from Los Angeles was 340.

A stream watered the meadow where the road ended. A board table

and bench and a ring of sooty rocks around a pile of ashes indicated a well-used campsite. It was a clean and pleasant spot, uncluttered by the piles of cans and bottles which mark the stopping place of the litterbug.

We changed from the cool clothing which had made our drive through the desert in July more comfortable, to the warmer, sturdier garb recommended for climbing at high altitudes: trousers of rough twill with voluminous pockets (military ski and marine pants are favorites), a red plaid shirt, a cap with visor to shade the face, boots with rubber lug soles and three pairs of woolen socks.

Foot comfort is of prime importance. One who has not solved his foot problems will hardly enjoy mountaineering. Some like close fitting boots. Personally, I find a boot most comfortable when it is large enough to hold in-soles in addition to three pairs of woolen socks, and still allow the foot play. You will seldom find a boot salesman who has tramped the trails. He will sell a boot that looks good and feels good in the shop. The hiker is interested in how the boot will feel after his feet have pounded the rocks for hours. Niles and I are in the habit of carrying three pairs of woolen socks with us when we go to try on new boots.

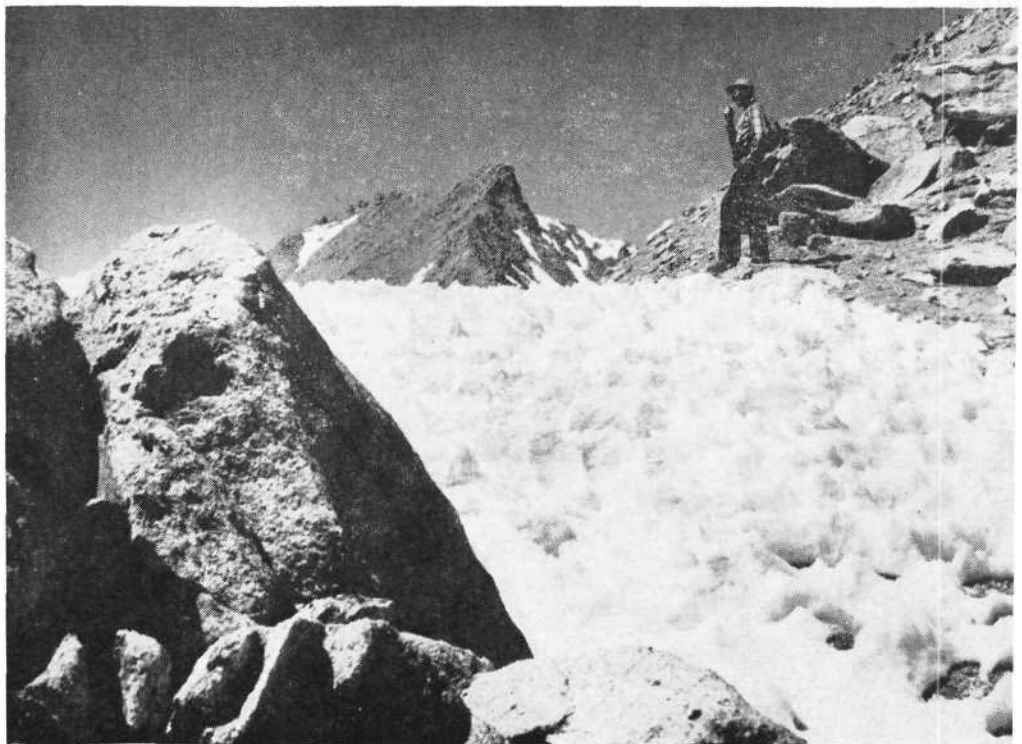
We were to carry our knapsacks about two miles up-canyon to the highest available water, camp there overnight, climb Boundary Peak the second day, camp another night and, knapsacking back to the cars, drive home the third day.

My knapsack bulged with a four and one-half pound down-and-feather sleeping bag, mummy type, a two pound plastic air mattress (a luxury recently added as a concession to age), a one and one-half pound rubberized nylon ground cloth, two dinners, two breakfasts and two lunches (three pounds), nylon parka and wool sweater (14 ounces), a billy can to cook in, a cup and spoon, quart canteen (to be filled next day for the climb to the peak), scout knife, flashlight, matches, dark glasses, first aid kit including sunburn salve and moleskin for blisters. Ten years ago a knapsacker could not eat well, sleep warm and be generally comfortable and prepared for emergencies on a mountaineering weekend such as this with less than a 40-pound pack. Today, with nylons, plastics and improved dehydrated foods, he can do it with 25 pounds or less.

Animal trails meandered up the canyon. A grouse boomed in a willow thicket, a hollow sound with a

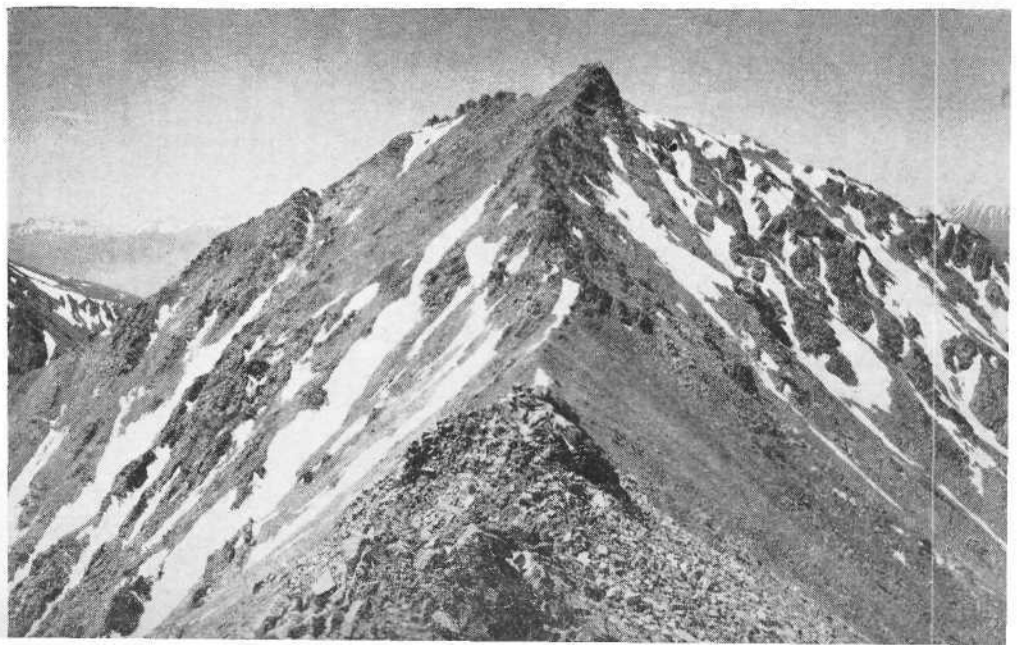


From Boundary Peak, highest point in Nevada . . .



With a pause to view Fish Lake Valley below . . .

. . . We dipped across the border to California's Montgomery Peak.





mysteriously aloof note in it, and soon the plump gray bird fluttered into our path and whirled noisily away.

Birch and willow thickets gave way to a spongy meadow where wild onions mingled with iris and tomato red columbines above a cloud of blown dandelions. The spiralling leaves of skunk cabbage decorated the stream's edge, and wild roses caught at our clothes. "The Mountain's Pride," a pink and blue penstemon, stood off by itself, too dainty to join the others.

Trail Canyon is one of the few remaining refuges of the wild horse in Nevada. Though their ancestors were domestic horses who strayed from ranches in the valleys below, these animals in their battle for survival have become like mountain goats, climbing the rocky slopes where no

domestic horse can follow. In summer they crop the grass in the high meadows; in winter they paw the snow from the frozen sage and gnaw at scrub pine, greasewood and rabbit brush. Half a dozen of them watched us from near the top of an 11,000 foot slope that enclosed the canyon on the north. Their hoof-prints and droppings along our trail indicated that the stream was a popular rendezvous.

The canyon climbed so gradually we hardly realized we were gaining elevation. Contouring up the slope a little, to avoid particularly dense thickets of willow and birch, we passed immense old pinyon pines whose bases had been washed bare on the lower side, exposing unbelievably large ramifications of roots that had developed bark for protection.

Some of our friends were already camped in the highest part of the canyon that afforded both water and level space, at about 9500 feet. On the north the sage-covered slope, olive drab with shadows, went up to 11,000 feet; on the south a lower, more gradual slope bristled with dark green pinyon pines. The stream, here little more than a trickle, cut through the turf. A quarter mile to the southwest, beyond a jumble of boulders, a tongue of snow hugged a trough in a yellow slope that climbed up to a ridge beyond which hid Boundary Peak, our objective for the morrow.

Sparrows riddle-dee-deed in the willows as we washed up and gathered wood to cook our dinner. A Clark's crow scoffed from a pinyon pine when we unpacked our dehydrated meal. As an experiment we had brought a new—and "improved," the manufacturers claimed—brand of dehydrated food. The vegetable stew weighed about an ounce per serving. To two servings we added a 7-ounce can of veal loaf. A package of biscuit mix promised, on the label, to make dumplings when mixed with water and cooked in the stew. We dropped a dumpling in the stew. It changed its mind and became gravy.

The same biscuit mix promised to become a pancake batter when stirred with water and powdered egg. We poured a little on a greased aluminum foil pie plate set on the coals. It spread, filled the plate, puffed up until two inches high, browned beautifully on both sides and ended up as a shortcake on which we poured dried peach sauce. Tea and sugar completed a dinner that had weighed only eight ounces per person in our packs.

The sun sank behind the head of the canyon and immediately we felt a nip in the air. It was hard to believe we had sweltered in Fish Lake Valley that noon at a temperature above 90. Six hours later and 4500 feet higher, it took a wool sweater, a parka and a roaring campfire to keep us warm.

Knowing the leader would be waking us at daybreak, we didn't linger long around the fire.

Sinking into the buoyant depths of the new air mattress, I felt entirely repaid for the extra two pounds it had weighed in the pack. Buoyancy is not the only recommendation for an air mattress. In high altitudes a 4½ pound down-and-feather sleeping bag alone sometimes hardly keeps the camper warm. An air mattress under it, however, insulates him from the cold and damp that comes up from the ground.

Breakfast over, Leader Brad Brush,



Climbing up the backbone, the yellow slope of scree—finely broken rock into which footsteps sink and slide back—fell behind and the hikers' pace quickened to Boundary Peak ahead.

a young accountant from Glendale, California, gave the call to start. Though the sun would not hit camp for some time yet, the snow tongue that marked our route lay white against the yellow scree to the southwest. Elgin Pierce, John Delmonte with son James, 15, and Dick Woodward fell in line immediately, as usual. These powerhouses never need a second call. As they crossed the stream and traversed a meadow thick with yellow mimulus, John Nienhuis, Ken Rich with Ken Jr., 10, joined them, scaring up a jackrabbit that streaked off toward the jumble of boulders ahead.

"On the map, Boundary Peak, Montgomery Peak and Mt. Dubois appear to be close together along the ridge," said Roland Kent, 14. "Why can't we climb all three today?" Any argument that experience might put up against such youthful exuberance merely went in one ear and out the other. He had to see for himself.

The vanguard waited at the snow tongue for the others to catch up. Walt Collins paused to watch a hawk

sail over the ridge. Lloyd and Rosemarie Balsam, Polly Connable, Art Widmer and Jill Johnson together examined some quartz specimens they had picked up among the granite. Walt Heninger took advantage of the rest to lean on his cane and tell an anecdote. Back at camp Clem and Lee Todd were just starting, with Assistant Leader John Wedburg bringing up the rear. The job of assistant leader is not a popular one, since he must keep the rear end of the line always in view, sacrificing the opportunity of climbing with the group. Another of his duties is to carry the first aid equipment.

The long yellow scree slope stretched up to the ridge. We had left all trails behind. Scree is finely broken rock that has eroded off above, poured down and covered the slopes below. We avoid ascending on scree whenever we can because footsteps easily sink and slide back in the soft stuff. This one we couldn't avoid without going a long way around. So we called on our patience and went at it, resting often on outcropping boulders that seemed like islands of stability in a sea of scree.

Ken Jr., with youthful eagerness, attacked the scree aggressively with the result that he moved a lot of scree downhill without gaining much headway. "Take it easy," warned his father. "Save your energy." And that's about the only way you can make headway on scree: place your foot lightly, transfer your weight with a minimum of motion, and you will do a minimum of sliding.

Unstable as the scree was, rosettes of stonecrops had anchored in it. Patches of fragrant white phlox attracted swarms of small blue butterflies. Corsages of cinquefoil glistened yellow, as if security were not important.

The longest scree slope comes to an end, and so did this one. From the top of the ridge our campsite in the canyon bottom 1500 feet below still lay in shadow, but sunlight flooded the upper half of the north slope. Something stirred among the sage there and Walt Collins picked up the wild horses in his binoculars, in about the same spot we had seen them the day before. We could now see over the



Ken Rich, Jr., 10, carried his 10-pound pack two miles to this campsite, then up the next day to the top of Boundary Peak.

11,000 foot ridge to a mesa dark green with pinyon pines.

But our route lay in the opposite direction, where the ridge humped skyward. Pinnacles thrust up out of it like vertebrae on the backbone of a dinosaur. Sudden gusts of wind rattled among the boulders as if through dry paper. Up here it felt more like November than the Fourth of July.

Rounding a pinnacle we surprised a rosy finch pecking away at a pitted snow patch. Not many birds venture to an altitude of 12,000 feet. The rosy finch, a mountaineer at heart, has discovered in these lonely high snow patches a never ending food supply. Every sunny day the perfectly preserved bodies of insects thaw out on the surface: butterflies, moths and other winged insects, who sailed up on air currents, never to return. Spiders are often seen high up on glaciers. Seeds, too, are carried up.

If you ask a human mountain climber why he climbs mountains his answer is likely to be somewhat unclear. The rosy finch has a perfectly understandable answer. He climbs in order to eat from a deep freeze that Nature automatically keeps well stocked with his favorite foods.

At 13,000 feet most of us were pressing into action recesses of our lungs we never use at sea-level. One or two felt nauseated. Some took salt tablets. Clem Todd, whose family is in the citrus industry in Riverside, California, told us that laboratory tests show that we lose Vitamin C through our pores as well as salt. That may explain why climbers so relish citrus at high altitude levels. Tensing Norkey, the Sherpa who climbed Mt. Everest, spoke repeatedly about his craving for "lemon water."

A climber can usually overcome altitude nausea by conditioning, exposing himself gradually to high and higher altitudes. Once overcome by nausea he may not get over it until he goes down, but the chances are that if he tries it again soon, he will go higher before becoming nauseated. An ounce of conditioning is worth a pound of antidotes.

Altitudes between 12,000 and 20,000 feet stimulate one who is conditioned to them. It may be that he absorbs a stimulant from the rarified atmosphere, possibly cosmic rays. About 12 airline miles south of where we were climbing, the University of California was studying cosmic rays on White Mountain Peak, 14,242 feet high, the highest peak entirely surrounded by desert in the United States. Whatever the cause of the stimulation, it sharpens the senses and makes one's spirits soar.

People who climb together to these altitudes develop a peculiar rapport. They will drink from the same canteen without fear of germs; they will share their food, their wraps, their socks—anything they have considered worth carrying in their cut-to-the-bone packs. We have yet to hear of any ill effects from such unsanitary behavior. The expansive feeling lasts for days after coming back to sea-level.

The scree slope had fallen far below where it lay glaring in the midday sun. We pulled up over a hump and lost sight of it. Dead ahead an easy incline led to the summit of Boundary Peak.

Any direction presented the eye a roller coaster ride along snow-etched ridges, up over pinnacles, down pinyon covered slopes, into deep canyons, across salt flats and up to lakes and mountain peaks.

The White Mountain Range itself stretched southwest. Half an airline mile away, across a 300 foot dip in the ridge, Montgomery Peak in California curved up to 13,442 feet. Most of us scrambled across, pausing in the lower part of the saddle to drink from our canteens a toast to the fact that we were crossing the line into Cali-

fornia without a customs official asking us whether we carried any citrus.

From the summit of Montgomery Peak, Roland Kent, the eager youngster who had expressed a wish early that morning to climb three peaks in one day, looked over toward the third peak across a 2000 foot drop and said no more about it.

Returning over Boundary Peak, we wrote our names in the aluminum register box the Desert Peaks Section had placed there in 1947. In the intervening six years nine parties had signed in, three of them Desert Peaks groups.

Ladybugs swarmed over the summit boulders and flying ants an inch long wanted to share our fruit cocktail and sardines. It had taken five hours to climb both peaks. We congratulated Ken, Jr., on being the youngest to have accomplished that feat.

From the summit back to camp took less than three hours. The scree that had slowed our ascent let us down in a hurry. We sank a boot into it and slid a yard, sank another boot and slid two yards. We literally skated down.

Though thousands of motorists drive up Owens Valley every summer, along the western base of the White Mountains, few recognize that here is the highest desert range in the country. Unlike the Sierra Nevada whose spectacular beauty is displayed on the other side of the valley, the White Mountains save their charms for those who explore them.

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JACK MITCHELL VICTIM OF AUTOMOBILE ACCIDENT

Jack Mitchell, widely known in the West as the owner and guide at Mitchell's Caverns in the Providence Mountains of California, met a tragic death October 28 while he was doing a good turn for one of the visitors at the Caverns.

According to the report received at *Desert Magazine* office, a visitor's car got out of control and lodged against one of the cabins near the Mitchell home. In an effort to help the motorist, Mitchell crawled under the auto with a wrench. When the car was released it rolled downhill, dragging Jack with it. Finally it fell over a low wall and Mitchell was crushed beneath the weight of the vehicle. Mrs. Mitchell and others lifted him into another auto and started for Needles to take him to a hospital. He died before reaching Essex. Mrs. Mitchell plans to make her home with her daughter, Mrs. Al Beauchamp in Needles.