



*Sierra Club party at summit of Coxcomb Peak. Seated, left to right, are Jack Lasner, Marge Henderson, Dick Apel, Bill Henderson, Louise Werner, Tom Corrigan; standing, John Malik, Jon Gardey, Ronald Gilliam, Gary Bratt.*

## *We Climbed Coxcomb Peak . . .*

"This is an exploratory climb," Bill Henderson wrote in the *Sierra Club Bulletin*. "We will try to reach the highest point in the Coxcomb range, north of Desert Center in Southern California." Here is Louise Werner's account of the Sierrans' climb of this little-known desert peak—and of their pre-hike visit to Metropolitan Water District's isolated aqueduct station at Eagle Mountain.

By LOUISE WERNER  
Photos by Niles Werner

**L**IKE THE ragged comb of a fighting cock, the mountains rose from the desert floor north of Desert Center, California. On our map they are marked "Coxcomb." I suspect the title had been Cockscomb before an unknown map-maker streamlined the descriptive name which probably had been given to the range originally by an imaginative old prospector.

This range, with a summit approximately 4400 feet in elevation, was the destination of our Desert Peaks party of Sierra Club members during the New Year's holiday in 1952.

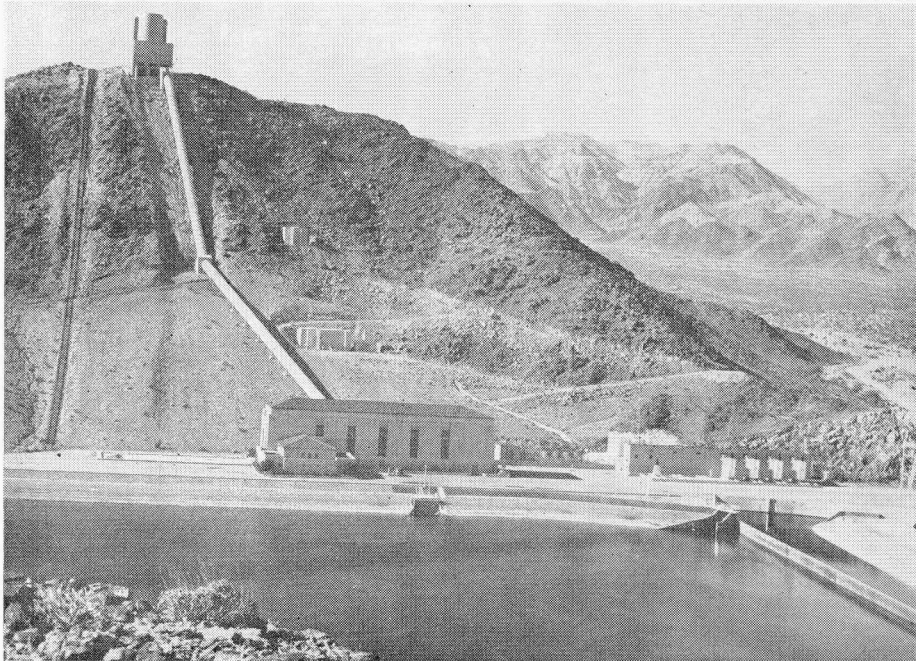
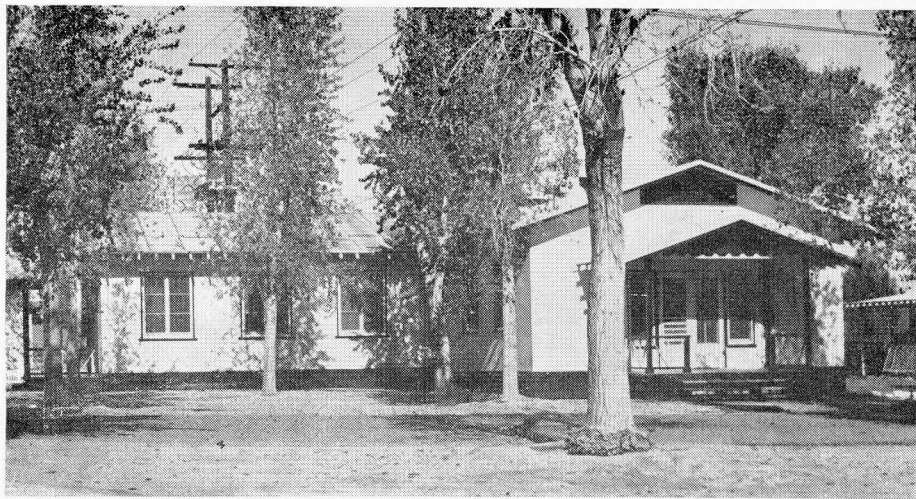
Bill Henderson, a graduate student at the University of California at Los Angeles and an ardent Sierra Club mountaineer, had sparked our enthusiasm for the trip. "This is an exploratory climb," he had written in the *Sierra Club Bulletin*. "We will try to reach the highest point in the Coxcomb range, 10 to 12 miles of trailless hiking, with a 3000-foot gain in elevation. There is no information about the roughness of the terrain, so wear sturdy boots; and bring water, as it will be a dry camp."

Our interest was further fanned by the fact that we would be gathering

information to be put later into a *Guide to the Desert Ranges of the Southwest*, a project of the Desert Peaks Section of the Sierra Club. Hundreds of mountain ranges erupt from the Southwest desert floor, and there is little or nothing in print about many of them. Our exploration would help. We felt like pioneers.

Twelve of us would make the trip. Bill and Marge Henderson had invited U.C.L.A. Mountaineers Dick Kenyon, Jon Gardey, Dick Apel, John Malik, Gary Bratt, Jack Lasner and Ronald Gilliam. Tom Corrigan, my husband Niles and myself completed the party.

We drove the 175 miles from Los Angeles east on U. S. Highway 60 to the town of Desert Center. From here we could see the southern tip of the Coxcomb range, about eight miles to the north. The range widens out in a northwesternly direction for about 20



*Above—Aqueduct workers and their families live comfortably in the isolated community of Camp, at Eagle Mountain. Homes, shaded with cottonwood trees, are modern, completely electric. Housewives shop at Indio, 51 miles away.*

*Below—Metropolitan Water District's aqueduct at Eagle Mountain. This is one of the pumping stations which help lift Colorado River water over mountain barriers to consumers in Southern California.*

miles. The widest part, near the north end, contains the highest point.

On the map we noticed a broken line running through the southern tip of the Coxcombs, indicating where the Metropolitan Aqueduct tunneled through the range, bringing Colorado River water to Southern California. Our eyes followed the line southwest across Chuckawalla Valley to the Eagle Mountain Aqueduct Station.

Everyday we Southern Californians use water brought to us through this aqueduct. But we seldom give a thought to the people involved in keeping this water coming, in helping it over the mountain barriers between source and consumer. We had an extra long holiday, a little more than we needed for our exploratory climb, so

we decided to visit the Eagle Mountain station and Camp, where the maintenance workers live.

The road to the station takes off from Highway 60 about three miles west of Desert Center. Six and a half miles of secondary hard-surfaced all-weather road took us northward to the open reservoir and the pumping station.

Water does not flow into Southern California as easily as tourists. Here and there along the line it must be given a boost. This is done by pumping the water up a slope, to allow gravity to take it on to the next station. The 240-mile aqueduct has five such pumping stations.

At Eagle Mountain it takes nine maintenance workers to keep this proc-

ess running smoothly. The workers and their families live in Camp. Even L. A. Ledbetter, utility man at the station and a bachelor, is given family responsibility — he daily drives the children to school in Desert Center. At that time, the entire grade school population consisted of two girls, Judith Ann and Linda Lee Dean, 10 and eight respectively. They are daughters of Highline Patrolman Ralph Dean.

Have you ever speculated on how you would manage if you lived in an isolated, sundrenched outpost on the Colorado Desert? No public library, no theater, no opera house. Not even a store. Knowing all your neighbors intimately, and being known the same way.

No streetcars, buses, traffic jams, factory whistles or ambulance sirens. A peace and quiet so audible to the city dweller, that he cannot sleep at night until he becomes conditioned to it. More sunshine to the cubic inch than you'll find almost anywhere in the world and at night more stars. And occasionally a rattlesnake under your porch.

Wide open spaces all around, with low hills in the background. Bighorn sheep roaming by. And on Saturday afternoons Johnny doesn't counter you with, "But mother, all the other kids get to go to the show, why can't I?"

Camp, they call the little village the aqueduct built for its maintenance workers. A dozen well-kept, white frame buildings line the main street. Tall spreading cottonwoods shade the houses—not identical houses, but individual ones.

We found Mr. Ledbetter trimming a bamboo windbreak. He showed us his fine bed of 'mums, a row of sweet-peas in bloom and some tomato plants bearing good sized fruit.

"I came here in 1933, during construction, and stayed on as utility man," he told us. "You ought to go over to the garage and talk to our station mechanic, Elmo Field. He's been here 18 years too. He has the first *Desert Magazine* ever printed. Editor Randall Henderson tried to buy it off him once, but he wouldn't sell."

Mr. Field told us that he remembers temperatures as high as 120 and as low as 22 degrees. We were enjoying right then a sunny-nippy 50. Rain-fall averages three inches annually.

"I shot a rattlesnake under my porch last week," said Mr. Field, in answer to our question about snakes. "We don't have sidewinders here. And not as many rattlers as we used to. You see, General Patton's Army was all through here. They sure went after the



rattlers. Other wildlife seems scarcer too."

Kit foxes occasionally sneak past camp. A herd of eight bighorn sheep sometimes roams in sight. For about 11 years, the oldtimers in Camp had recognized an old ram among the sheep. Every year he seemed to look thinner. Last year they noticed that he was nothing but skin and bones. He staggered along, hardly able to keep up with the herd. They saw him finally falter, and stop. The herd went on without him.

Some of the men went up from Camp to see what was wrong. The ram saw them coming, but didn't run away. He settled himself down on the ground. The men realized that he was dying. Though his legs could no longer support his body, his head still carried high his magnificent set of horns.

Mrs. Weeks hiked up and took a picture of him. We felt fortunate when she let us have the negative. Though we have often seen bighorn sheep at a distance in the desert mountains, we have never been able to get a picture of one. For pictures, it seems you either have to stalk them alone (a party is too noisy) or catch them dying. Either way takes a lot of patience.

There are no stores in Camp. Once a week the housewives list what supplies they need, and a truck goes to Indio for them. The nearest movie is at Indio, 51 miles away, and so is the nearest high school.

"Radio? Reception is poor here," said Mr. Field. "Better from the east than from the west. Television is impossible." Hills circle the horizon.

The men work 22 days and then have six days off. Mr. and Mrs. Field often spend their time off exploring the prehistoric Indian campgrounds in the Pinto Basin. They also like to go to Idyllwild in the San Jacinto Mountains, about a hundred miles west of Camp. It is the nearest wooded area. Mrs. Field teaches school in Desert Center.

The two rows of yellow cottonwoods that line the main street beckoned us. A little girl in a red coat was pumping a swing in one of the yards. "Her mother is probably in," said my husband, readying his camera. We had heard that this being a holiday, many of the women would not be in Camp.

"When you've got two small youngsters, you don't go so much," said the lady of the house, who introduced herself as Mrs. C. A. Weeks, wife of one of the station's two highline patrolmen. She invited us into her attractive 5-room home.

The Weeks' home is typical: electrically heated in winter and electrically



*Linda, 8, and Judith Ann Dean, 10, daughters of Eagle Mountain Station's Highline Patrolman Ralph Dean, have no sidewalks on which to play. But the garage provides an excellent rink for their Christmas skates.*

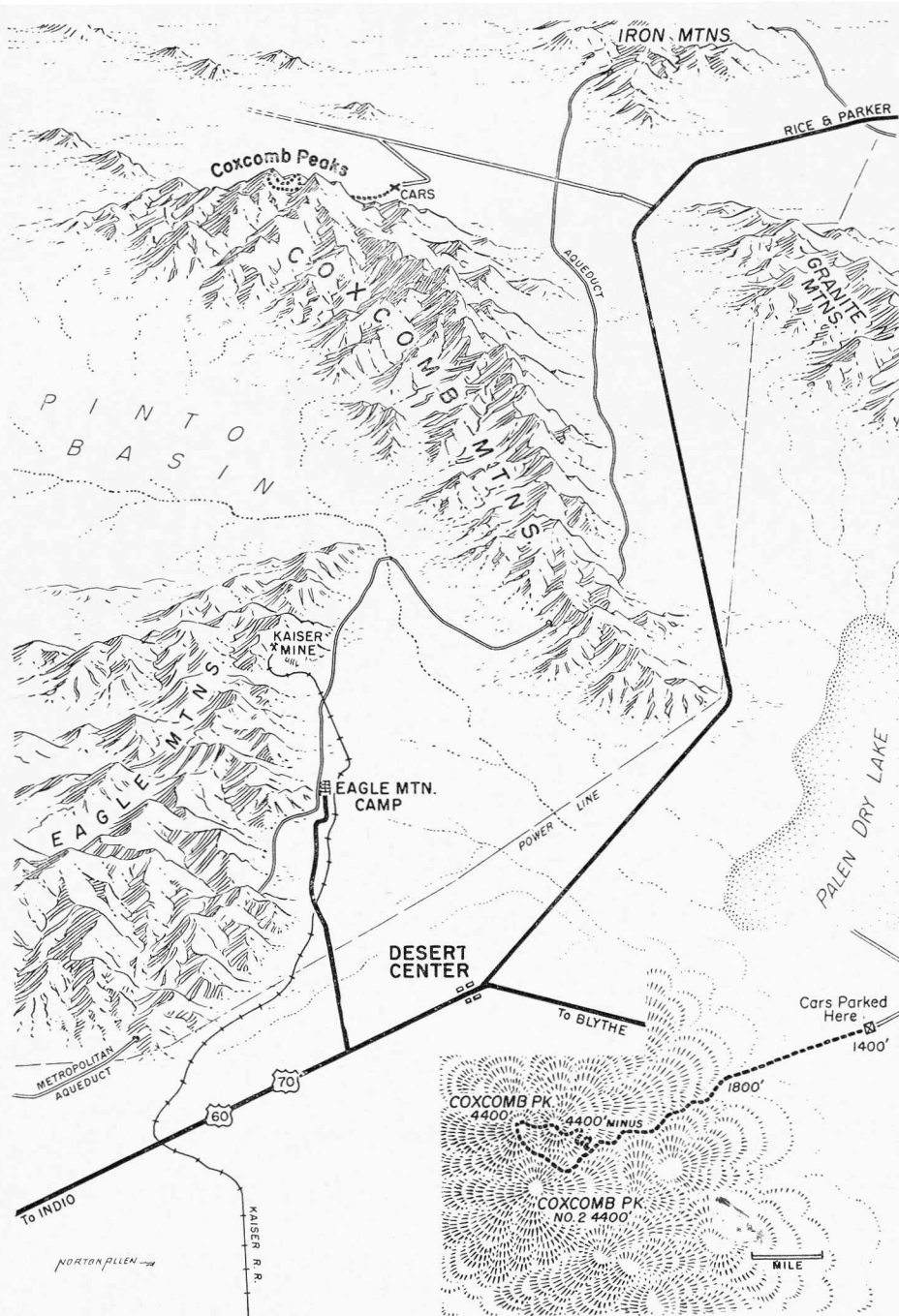
cooled in summer. Mrs. Weeks cooks with electricity. Not many of us city women can afford completely electrified homes.

We prowled around Camp some more and found two lighted tennis courts, a swimming pool and a community barbeque shaded with feathery green tamarisk trees. Through a gap in the greenery, we could see, across a seven-mile stretch of desert, a large, triangular white scar on the face of the Eagle Mountains. That, we learned, was Kaiser's Eagle Mountain Iron Mine. Two of the women from

Camp work in the mine office, and some families attend church there. It is the nearest church to Camp.

Mr. Field had gone to lunch, and the two Dean girls had transformed the garage into a roller skating rink. There are no sidewalks in Camp, and the pavement is pretty rough for roller skating. What's a girl to do in a case like that, if she gets a pair of roller skates for Christmas?

We'd had an enjoyable day at the Eagle Mountain Aqueduct Station. Our goal now was the opposite side of the



Coxcombs, and a camp within striking distance of the highest point.

To reach the east side of the Coxcomb Range, we took the Parker Dam road out of Desert Center. Twenty eight miles northeast of Desert Center, we angled left on a dirt road. This seven-mile stretch is washboard, but firm. We turned left again on a little-used road that wasn't much more than a cleared strip, stayed on it for a mile and a half and turned right on a similar strip. A mile later we stopped and made camp.

Our object was to get as near as possible to the eastern base of the northern end of the Coxcomb Range. Bill Henderson's weapons carrier, which he calls "Brunhilde, the Elephant Wagon," could have gone an-

other mile or two, but we had two town cars in the caravan. Besides, this spot was littered with timbers left by Patton's Army, and we wanted to take advantage of the handy fuel supply. The elevation was about 1400 feet.

A frosty nip in the air drew us close to our campfire, as we celebrated the going out of the Old Year. Millions of stars burned coldly in the blue bowl of sky that covered us. A sliver of setting moon illuminated the Coxcombs. Wraiths of cloud drifting over it made weird faces, with the moon sliver as a single eye. Not an artificial light was visible anywhere.

Maestro Jon Gardey wielded a creosote baton. Gary Bratt strummed chords on a uke, and Dick Apel pumped a toy concertina while Marge

Henderson and I vibrated melody on two combs. Niles Werner occasionally added the cymbal clash of two tin cups. Bill Henderson boomed out the bass on a pie tin, and Jack Lasner added an exotic touch by rattling rocks in a tin can. What the musicians lacked in finesse, they made up in enthusiasm. A gallon tin full of hot punch made by Jack Lasner warmed the shivering musicians before they crawled into their sleeping bags.

New Year's day dawned clear and crisp — perfect hiking weather. We left camp at about seven a.m. The contour lines on Bill's topo map indicated that we might run into some steep going, so Tom Corrigan carried the rope. Shell holes pitted the two miles between camp and the base of the mountains. At the turnoff from the Parker Dam Highway, we had encountered a sign saying: "DANGER! Do not handle unfamiliar objects found on the desert. They may be unexploded ammunition."

We made our way through creosote and staghorn cactus as high as our heads. Desert lupine hugged the ground. Rounded bladder pod bushes sported gay yellow blooms.

"The map shows a canyon leading in about here," said Bill. "It seems to head directly for the highest point. Or I should say the highest points. There seem to be two points very nearly the same elevation."

The canyon shut us in, as if the Coxcombs had accepted us as visitors and closed the door. We walked single-file up a sand-carpeted wash, following the fresh tracks of bighorn sheep and coyotes. The next bend was never far ahead. The wash sloped upward so easily at first, we hardly realized we were climbing. Our eyes wandered up and down the rocky, out-sloping walls. The nubby rocks gleamed rich red-brown — like the patina of hardwood furniture that has been polished for 50 years. An airy blue sky drenched in sunlight furnished a pleasing complement in the color scheme. Here and there a vine crawled on the white sandy floor, bearing gourds the size and shape of oranges.

Soon the canyon walls took on bolder patterns. Rock faces reached out toward us at gravity-defying angles. Walls met sky in a clash of gendarmes, pinnacles and needles. A little higher up, the canyon was choked at intervals with boulder slides. No easy walking here, looking at the scenery! On all fours, we scrambled over boulders, keeping our eyes on the trail.

The rough, coarse granite gave excellent traction for our lug-soled boots, especially when large slabs lay at the angle where maximum friction was



necessary to hold us on. But I had neglected to bring gloves, and I skinned my fingers scrambling up jagged slopes.

We Sierrans like a climb with variety, and this one had it. Stretches of easy sandy wash alternated with rock-scrambles. We encountered a tarantula sunning himself on a boulder. He was sluggishly indifferent to our prodings. The shadows had crept down one wall and were climbing the other. A small flock of birds darted between the canyon walls. Hardy ground-cherries with little lantern-like pods peered out of crannies.

We stopped to admire some boulders that were attractively honeycombed with small cavities, probably the work of wind and sand. The cavities themselves were larger than their openings, and their floors were covered with sand — excellent shelters for rodents or birds.

We had not yet spied the summit, but figured it was to our right. We climbed out of the canyon and topped a saddle at about 4000 feet. Ahead we saw a single peak, its slopes dotted with pinyon pine. Out of a depression near by rose an exceptionally large pine specimen. The ground underneath it was lush with vegetation, and we suspected there might be a spring.

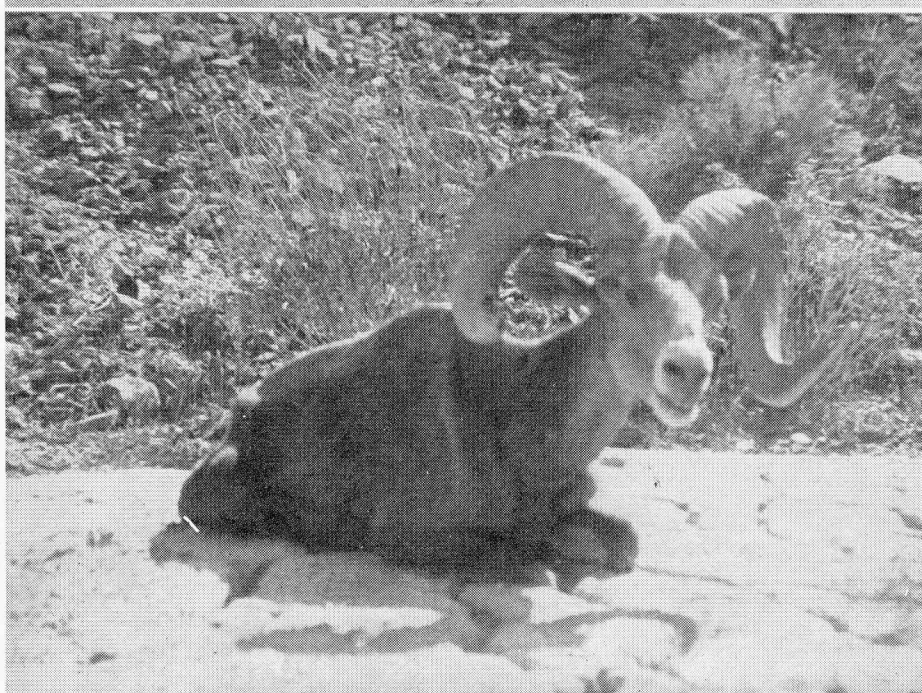
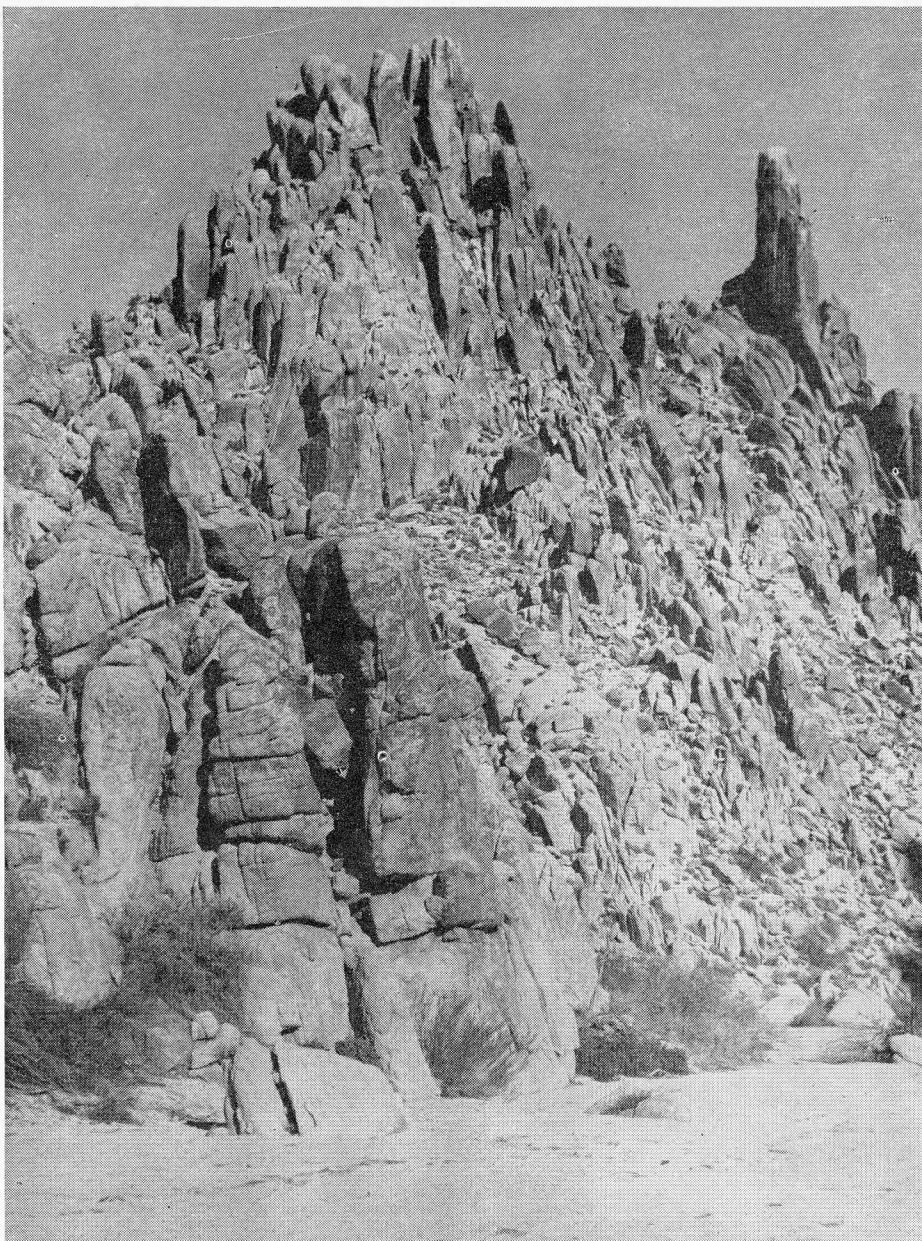
We contoured up the pinyon-dotted slope. As we spiralled from north to west, we saw, across a 200-foot drop, another ridge, with two summits that looked higher. Momentary discouragement engulfed us. It's an experience familiar to all mountain climbers — when a peak is practically climbed suddenly to find a higher summit ahead.

We stopped and bolstered our courage with lunch. Bill got out his hand level and sighted across at the two peaks. "They're so nearly the same elevation, that I can't tell the difference from here," he said. "We'll have to climb one and see."

"Which one?" we wanted to know, having visions of having to climb them

*Above—The rocky walls of Coxcomb Canyon are weathered to a rich red-brown—"like the patina of hardwood furniture that has been polished for 50 years," writes the author.*

*Below—When the old ram lay dying on the hillside above Camp, Mrs. C. A. Weeks, wife of one of the aqueduct station's highline patrolmen, hiked up for this picture. Though his legs could no longer support his body, the old bighorn's head still carried high his magnificent set of horns.*





*A gently sloping wash provided easy walking at the entrance of Coxcomb Canyon. Soon canyon walls narrowed, and the party had to contend with catsclaw and slippery weather-varnished boulders.*

both. One looked more difficult than the other so we settled for the easier one, the one to our right.

We dropped down 200 feet, and from there a 20-minute rock scramble put us on top. Bill sighted across. He made unintelligible noises while we waited for the verdict. Finally he said, "As far as I can make out, the two points are exactly the same elevation."

Gary Bratt had a look and declared the one we were on was higher, though only by a hairbreadth. Tom Corrigan agreed. We found no benchmark, cairn or any other indication that others had been here ahead of us. This is unusual, especially in an area where the military has been stationed. We built a cairn and left a can with our names. Bill wrote: "This is presumably the highest point in the Coxcomb Range."

Our peak was on the western edge of the north part of the range. In the immediate foreground, steep ragged gulleys tore down the slopes in the direction of Pinto Basin. But the eye-catchers in that direction were the

peaks of San Gorgonio and San Jacinto, snow-mantled and mysterious, in the far distance. Across the Chuckawalla Valley we caught a glint of sun on water. It helped us to spot the Eagle Mountain Aqueduct Station, backed up against the thin chain of the Eagle Mountains.

The view to the southeast encouraged speculation and planning for future climbs. Range after range of desert mountains stretched away as far as we could see: the Palens, the Granites, the Little Marias, the Big Marias. Like an undulating carpet of chocolate-brown velvet, they stretched to the vanishing point.

It's a wonderful feeling to sit on top of a desert range. On snow peaks the climber usually must arrive before eleven a.m. to be reasonably sure of a view. And then he is uneasy about the weather, and anyway, there's no place to sit except on the cold snow. On High Sierra peaks afternoon storms can hit suddenly, and it's always a long way back to camp. But on most

desert peaks, these worries are forgotten. The view lasts all day. One can bask on the warm rocks without fear of a sudden storm. And the desert peaks are hospitable for three seasons of the year, which is more than can be said for most mountains.

On our way down we avoided Lunch Peak and the saddle by staying in a gulley to the right. We reached the cars at about 4:30 p.m. From our map we had guessed the trip would take a good half day, be fairly direct and perhaps require a rope here and there. As it turned out, it took a full day, wound around a good deal, and we had no need of the rope.

But these things—the unexpected, the uncalculable—are what make up the thrill of exploration in the uncharted mountain ranges of the vast Southwest desert land. Having climbed Coxcomb Peak unguided, we had gathered information which would be helpful to future mountaineers. Tired but happy, we knew we were one chapter nearer publication of our *Desert Ranges Guide*.