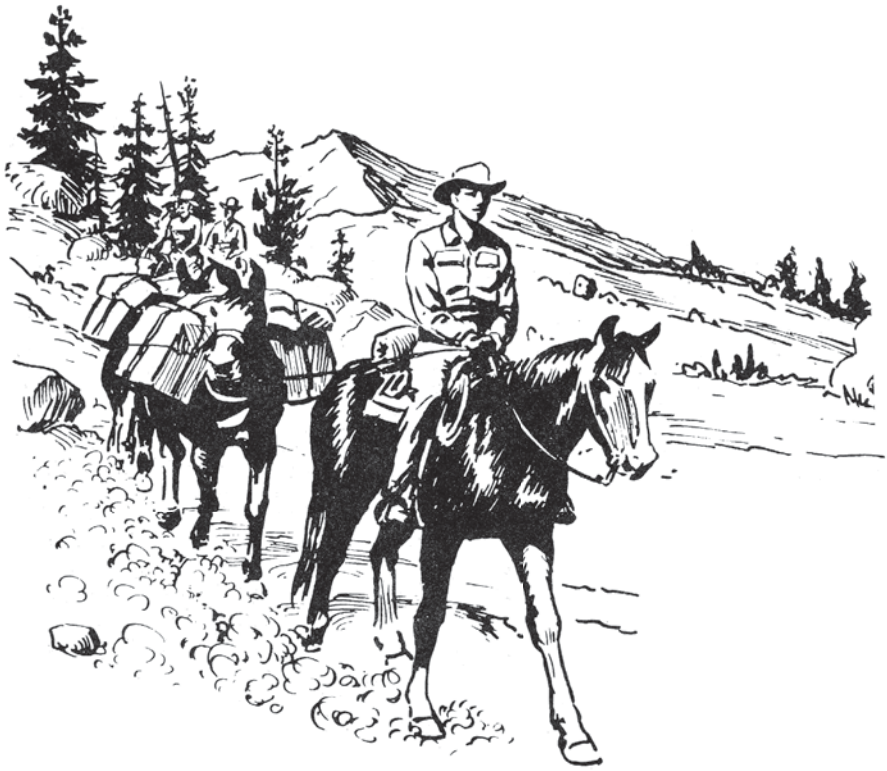
A Trip Through the California Sierras

In September 1904



Previously Unpublished Historical Essay

By George Bucknam Dorr

FOREWORD

by Ray DeLea

There are very few published accounts of pack trips in the Sierra Nevada in the early years of the Twentieth Century. In fact, I am only personally aware of a couple. The first is the 1903 Sierra Club trip into Sequoia National Park. Henry Brown's book Mineral King Country gives a good account of the 1903 Sierra Club High Trip from Mineral King via Farewell Gap to the Kern River, Mt. Whitney and return to the Giant Forest by way of Kaweah Gap to Giant Forest.

The next detailed published account doesn't occur until the 1916 Sierra Club High Trip from Camp Nelson, in Sequoia National Park, to the Kern River, Mt. Whitney, Center Basin, Rae Lake and Onion Valley via Kearsarge Pass. This trip was detailed by Jessie McGilvray Treat and published in one of the Sierra Club's *Bulletins*.

It is no wonder then that it was a treasure to discover George Dorr's 1904 unpublished account of his pack trips to the summit of Mt. Whitney, Mineral King country, and his trans-Sierra trip from Onion Valley (Kearsarge Pass), Kings River, Marvin Pass, JO Pass and Giant Forest. George's description of his High Sierra adventures with a seemingly inexperienced packer was an adventure to be sure. He and his packer's ordeals with mountain mule wrecks, snow, loosing the trail and wandering in circles are humorous but are a reflection on the real ordeals faced by people packing in the Sierra Nevada in those early years. I'm sure that George, being an "easterner," was probably overwhelmed by not only the grandeur of the Sierra Nevada mountains but by the challenges presented to him by his packer. As a Sierra Nevada packer myself for six summers with Mt. Whitney Pack Trains, I can relate to George's mountain trials as well as to those of the packer. George's stories will not only thrill you but give you pause as to the struggles those early packers and guests must have endured to experience John Muir's Range of Light.

NOTE 1: This previously unpublished copyrighted account is held in manuscript form at the Bar Harbor Historical Society. For a full account of the life of Maine land conservationist and horticulturist George B. Dorr, consult Creating Acadia National Park (Bar Harbor: Friends of Acadia, 2016).

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NOTE 2: The graphical content and Foreword were not part of the original manuscript but were added by Ray DeLea to improve the impact of the manuscript.

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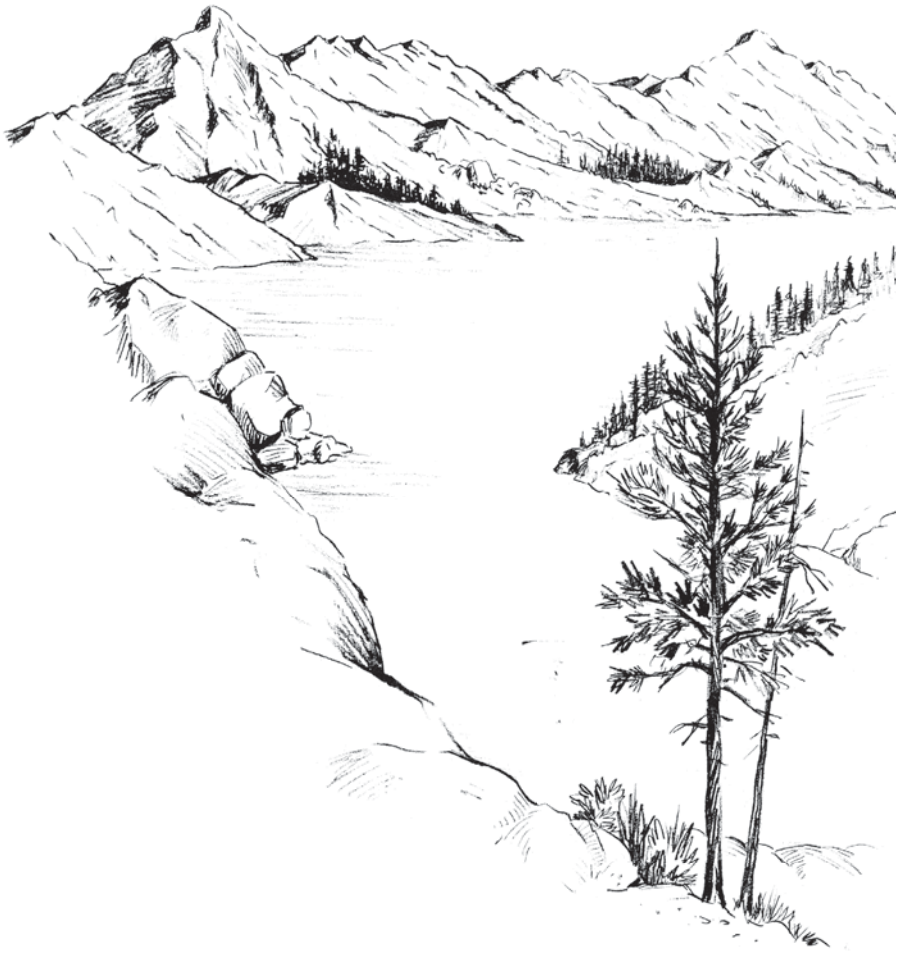


Part II - Mineral King Pack Trip

I started out for my mountain trip from Visalia, one of the small agricultural cities in the broad San Joaquin valley; I went by stage, my way lying at first across the flat plain of the valley floor through yellow stubble fields and past immense orchards of plum trees whose fruit was being gathered up and dried for prunes; then I came into the foothills region with its great orchards of apples, oranges and lemons and its brown hill slopes; and early in the afternoon I reached the ranch of a man named Redstone on the Kaweah river where I was to spend the night.

Main Street Visalia, CA - circa 1906

My only fellow passenger on the stage was a young electrician from Ohio who had been superintending the construction of a

power plant in the high Sierra which was to supply the valley region opposite with light and power. He had been out there all summer, and his wife, an Ohio girl – they were only marred in the spring – had been there with him and was waiting for him then with horse and buggy at a station on the stage route. But stopping at another station an hour or two before we got there, they told him he was wanted at the telephone and in a few moments he came back and said that they had rung him up from San Francisco to order him to take the next stage back and the night train on to there. He had been away a fortnight and up travelling nearly the whole night before and had counted on getting at least a day or two of rest and with his wife. But he was only able to drive on with me until he reached the station where she was to meet him and then turn back for another five hours' ride across the dusty plain and a night upon the cars. His wife was waiting when he got there and her delight at getting him back and dismay a moment afterward when he told her he had got to leave her again in half an hour – she was all alone there with him so far as friends went – was quite pathetic.

Early the next morning I left the Redstone ranch and drove up all day into the mountains over a road which climbed six thousand feet and which brought me to a park established by the government in one of its forest reservations for the preservation of a splendid growth of giant sequoias. There in the midst of a forest of these trees, mingled with pines and firs, a rough summer camp had been established by two ranchers from below, Broder and Hopper by name, who also outfitted people for trips through the mountains beyond.

We passed no house upon the way after our first couple of hours upon the road and ate our lunch by a spring at the roadside, taking the same horses through with us all day. It was fairly late in the afternoon when we reached the coniferous forest, these conifers not growing in that region lower than five thousand feet or so above the sea, and then in the course of another hour or two, after passing two or three camps of negro soldiers stationed there to guard the park and save it from fire, we reached the camp where I was going. It had one wooden cabin which served as dining room and kitchen, and a number of tents to sleep in. In the evening there was a campfire which lighted up in a wonderful way the great trunks of the sequoias and the tall, branchless shafts of the firs amongst which they were growing.

The great sequoias have but a narrow range of altitude, growing in fairly level belts along the western slope of the Sierras at a height of six or seven thousand feet above the sea, where the first heavy rain-clouds form. Nor do they follow the deeper valleys eastward into the mountain range but stay scattered here and there along its western headlands.

Up and down the length of the Sierras they range, in widely separated groups, for two hundred and fifty to three hundred miles. The forest I was in, the largest of these groups, lay toward the center of this range; it was about eight miles in length, terminating at either end with singular abruptness though the pines and firs which grew a1ong with the sequoias in it continued on uninterruptedly

Doubtless the lower limit of the sequoia's growth is set by rain,

its growth beginning at the lowest point at which it can obtain from the up-driven ocean air rain and dew sufficient for its needs, and a leaf evaporation checked at night by falling temperature; while its upward limit, lying close upon the downward one, is similarly set by its avoidance of the mountain cold of the region to which it has been driven by its need of moisture but which is perhaps less natural to it than a lower one. Probably too the narrow, island-like areas in which it grows amongst the general forest are not as accidental as they seem but have an unseen cause in warmth and moisture-bearing currents of the atmosphere or cold ones from the mountain peaks to north and east. The largest and the finest trees were apt I found to grow in dells or hollows on the mountain slopes where there was greater moisture in the soil.

The only other still existing species of sequoia, the Redwood of commerce, grows in similar fashion in northern California along a narrow belt between the Coast Range mountains and the sea where the rainfall is the heaviest in the state and where its rainless summers are compensated by dense continual fogs. The redwood has developed a vigorous power of sprouting from the root when the trunk has been destroyed by axe or fire and this seems to have weakened, through long absence of selection, the vitality of its seed but the giant sequoia in the Sierras seemed to seed itself, so far as I could see, freely wherever it could get a moist and open seed bed. Once I saw a small and grassy meadow bordered by some old sequoias where a dense growth of young ones, bunched together where the seeds had fallen, was growing up in the most vigorous way, its trees ranging from young seedlings up to others of fifty feet or more in height still clothed to the ground with their dense foliage. So probably

Giant Sequoia Tree

the reason why one does not see more young trees growing in the present groves is mainly due to the dry climate of today in California, making the forest floor even where the old sequoias grow too dry to serve them well as nursery beds; and partly too to the way in which the sequoia forest is invaded by other trees which grow from a drier seed bed or in deeper shade than the sequoia can. But there can be no question but that if moist and open seed beds were prepared for it and sown with the collected seed – a small expense – a new sequoia forest would spring up far greater in extent than the existing one, along its general range. And the tree is so beautiful in its youth and grows so rapidly that this would be well worth the doing, especially as the region where it might be done is one of immense future importance to California in relief from the summer's heat and drought in the great plains below.

The foliage of the sequoia is dense when the tree is young, clothing it to the ground and giving it a cone-like and aspiring form. This form it keeps, with thinner foliage, as an older tree until the growing distance between its leading shoots and the roots from which the sap is pumped to them begins to limit their supply, when the lateral branches, better nourished, broaden out and give the tree in age a round-topped character, some of these branches growing then to a great size. While this is going on the lower branches gradually die away, leaving the great shaft of the trunk bare for a hundred feet or more. The foliage is tassel-like in character, the tassel upward turned and cone-like the tree itself in shape, the leaves, a warm and yellow green in color, growing stiffly forward from the branchlet stem which is itself as green as they, and having the size and somewhat of the rounded form of bits of twine. The roots are fibrous, not extending far away hut filling the ground around the tree with an inverted cup-shaped mass, while the trunk swells out near the ground to a diameter that is sometimes half again as great as what it has fifteen or twenty feet above, buttressing the shaft, which stands erect through the Sierra gales rather by its own solidity and basal breadth than by a grip upon the ground like that of oaks or pines. The largest tree I saw was two hundred and seventy-five feet high and somewhat over thirty feet across upon the ground, its age supposed to be not less than five thousand years and possibly considerably more, judging by the counted rings on others that have been felled or cut into. The rings in all of the outer portion of the older trees are extraordinarily close together, showing how slow the growth to that great size has been. I could hardly have counted some that I looked at myself without a microscope.

One's first impression of the older trees is that of giant shafts with gnarled, irregular branches and tufts of foliage at their top. The leaves and branches seem but an accessory to the shaft rather than it a column built up for their support. The uppermost branches too heighten this effect in which one feels at first a lack of grace, standing out broken, bare and dead against the sky in nearly all the older trees, which have been either struck by lightning in the course of their long centuries of life or broken by some winter gale when laden with ice and snow. But the color of the warm green foliage high up against the sky and the warm red color or the deeply furrowed bark below are singularly beautiful and the massive dignity of the shaft itself united to the sense one has of its great age and permanence is most impressive, the impression growing on one rather than lessening as one lingers in its presence. The bark is very thick, fifteen or eighteen inches often in the older trees, and it is said to be very resistant to fire, protecting the tree, together with the tree's own height, and saving it when all the other forest trees about are swept away.

The most striking tree which grows with the sequoias, companion to it in its forests but ranging besides the whole length of the Sierra in its lower forest belt, is the sugar Pine, Pinus Lambertiana, the largest of all pine trees in the world. I saw many trees in the course of my trip that were from seven to eight feet through, a yard above the ground, and a few that were still larger. The tree grows also to great height; trees of two hundred and fifty feet and upward being often cut by the lumbermen, they told me. Its foliage is like the foliage of our white pine, which its wood resembles also, it being far the most valuable commercially of all the trees that grow on the Pacific slope. It is much more open in its habit, however, than our white pine, not

making such dense masses of foliage but thrusting out long limbs that are bare and branchless near the tree, droop at a distance from it, and then rise again as they divide and clothe themselves with foliage in their outer part. And these long limbs, reaching out distinct and separate above the general forest and waving with wide sweeps in every wind, combine with the tree's great height and straight, majestic trunk to give it its distinctive character and the forest where it grows one of its most striking features. The bark is finely ribbed and firm even on the oldest trees and warm brown in color, the trunk being branchless usually to a great height and never, so far as I had opportunity to see, remaining clothed to the ground as it comes to be an older tree, as our white pine does when growing in the open.

The forest is an open one throughout the whole Sierra region. Deciduous trees there are none but bush-like willows, poplars and alder trees of no great size along the hanks of streams, and in the lower valley-bottoms only, oaks and large-leaved maples. But bushes of the sort one finds in semi-arid regions, low, still and spreading, grow over the open slopes and in broad patches here and there among the pines where sunlight falls. But there are other slopes whole mountain sides sometimes – open or dotted only with occasional pines, that but for them seem absolutely bare of plant or shrub, steep slopes of rock and sand.

There are few herbaceous plants beneath the forest trees and almost none that grow upon the open slopes – except where water flows; the soil granitic sands and gravels – is too barren and the rainfall in the summer time too slight for that. And though there are many

open meadows in among the higher mountains, left by glaciers, they are apt to be too wet for any but marsh plants to grow in them. The real Sierra gardens lie along the banks of streams alone, or here and there in patches upon slopes kept moist by water soaking down from springs above, or else on ledges, narrow shelters along the faces of the cliffs, onto which water comes dripping down in early summer from melting snow above. When I was there it was too late for any but a few belated flowers – gentians in the meadows here and there; brilliant penstemons glowing along the well-drained sides of some steep water course, with an occasional belated columbine or other mountain flower among the rocks; but it was evident that in spite of countless little mountain gardens brilliant in the early summer yet the region as a whole is barren in herbaceous life though what it has is brilliant in its flowering time and grows abundantly where it can grow at all, in tiny oases along great barren [mountain slopes].

Mineral King

Animal life I hardly saw on all my trip, save deer in the Government Park from which I started. The footprints of wild cats wee fairly common on the snow or running along the sandy trails, and there were occasional tracks of hares and foxes. But almost the only animals I actually saw, the deer apart, were squirrels which were wonderfully abundant and active everywhere, gathering up the forest cones and storing them for winter. Birds were also rare, though woodpeckers were fairly common. I never saw an eagle on my trip and rarely hawk, but owls I often heard at night, hooting in the forest.

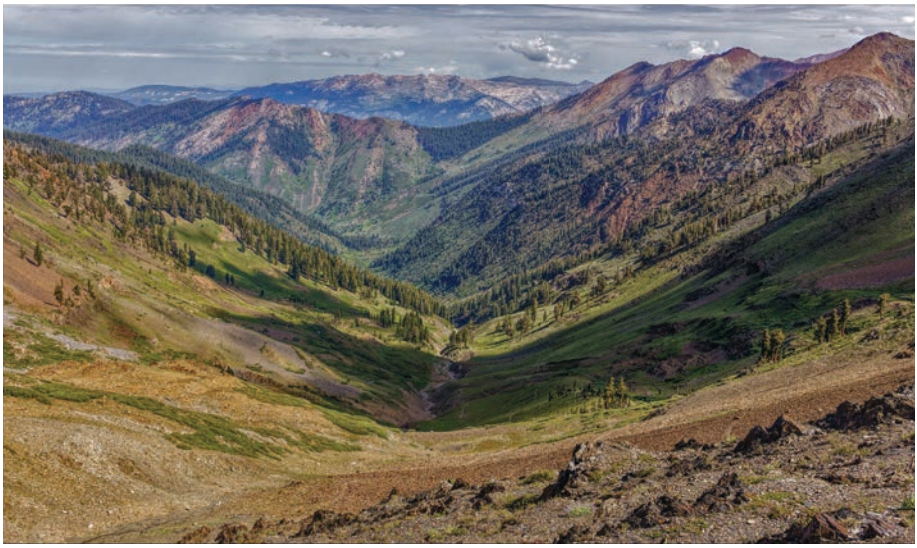
The men to whose camp I had come at Giant Forest had no packer there to send out with me nor a full supply of mules and horses but they sent me over with the camp cook – a lank, red-bearded man – to another place, two days' ride away across the mountains, where they had some men and animals at work packing cement up for a reservoir / dam that an electric power company was building. This was a place called Mineral King, a rough camp of a few scattered shanties and a store, occupied in summer only – a place to which miners and prospectors came to get supplies or hunters as a starting point from which to go up through the higher mountains and the wild region to the eastward. It lay at the head of one of the valleys that penetrated these mountains from the west. A rough stage road ran up the valley to it, and from it several trails led up across the mountains.

My own camp outfit included a light tent; a couple of old comforters – comfits as they call them there – cotton wadded; a sleeping bag which I had made myself in San Francisco out of an

army blanket and a swan's down quilt; a camera outfit which I found it difficult to make use of upon a trip so rough and hasty; a few books about the trees and mountains; and a change of boots and clothing. It could be loaded easily enough upon a single mule so far as weight went but the care we had to take to shelter my cameras and their belongings from the rough mule hitches necessary to keep the loads from shifting made the load a difficult one to pack.

The rest of our outfit consisted of our food supplies, cooking utensils, my packer's bed – a pile of cotton-wadded comfits – and a small canvas bag in which he kept his clothes. This might easily have been made a fairly light load for another mule but my outfitter, to whom I left the detail of supplies, made it heavy with canned foods, preserves and other needless things. We were well started on our way to Mineral King however before I found this out. Our way lay up through the belt of sugar pines and giant sequoias, then along a barren ridge of rock and steeply down a vast slope of dust-like sand with desert vegetation growing sparsely through it, then across the river at its bottom – three-thousand feet or so below the upland meadow where we had stopped at noon to feed our stock and lunch – and up a similar steep slope, not quite so high, upon its other side. My horse, a small one at beat, I found in no condition to carry me up or down these slopes without distress, so I got off and walked, leading him, while my long-legged guide, the cook – a guide by courtesy, for I found he knew the trail no better than I did myself – rode ahead contentedly on a lean gray horse of tougher make than mine which he was mounted on. The last ascent, coming toward the end of a long day. and that the first one out, was very fatiguing. I led my horse, moreover, and he instead of being grateful to me for

walking had a most exasperating trick of stopping every little while, pulling me back when the climb was steepest.



Looking north towards Timber Gap from Farewell Gap

At length we got up to the top of the steeper slope, however, and passed in solemn twilight into a gently sloping glade shadowed by giant firs. Some larger wild animal – we could not distinguish what – bounded across it as we rode in. As we went on the darkness deepened quickly and by the time we reached the further end of the glade and rode on out of it through a low, dense wood to the crest of the ridge we had been climbing, our mules and horses only saw the trail.

Then descending again, after a little we came suddenly out of the wood and found ourselves at the head of a grassy opening fringed with tall, dark firs which led far and steeply down into a valley filled with pale blue light and misty distances by the moon just rising over

the mountains opposite. It was too dark to go further – we had only come so far because we had passed no grazing ground before since early in the afternoon – and we were ourselves too tired. We stopped and listened. There was a low gurgle of water near us in the grass, and we unpacked our mules and camped just where we were.

It was my first night out. I lay down against one of the roots of a great fir tree – a tree which I measured in the morning and found to be eighteen feet around. It overhung the sloping meadow at its very head, just above the little spring, so that I could hear its water gently fall as I lay in bed. Other firs rose up on either side the meadow, which were scarcely smaller than the one beneath which I was sleeping and which seemed in the dimness of the night to rise to immeasurable heights against the sky, undefined. And down beyond lay the great depth of the moonlit, misty valley and the pale blue, moonlit and partly shadowed mountains on its farther aide. It was a wonderful camping ground, full of poetry.

The next morning I waked with the dawn, the whole aspect of nature changed. A few rosy clouds were floating over the mountains to the eastward, the landscape was full of daytime color. I roused my companion who gathered in our grazing stock. We made a hasty breakfast and started down the trail. An hour below we reached the meadows – Wet Meadows called – where we had panned, by the map, to camp the night before – a level bit of open marsh land set amidst a wood of pine and fir, dense for the region. We did not pause there but rode on all the morning through, crossing the valley down into which we had looked from our camping ground the night before and climbing up its further side.

It was not until noon that we reached another camping ground, so rocky and barren of all herbage were the valley sides which we were traversing, but at noon we came to a most interesting spot where a little circular meadow was enclosed by an isolated grove of giant sequoias – the first we had seen since starting – whose seedlings, growing in dense clumps and ranging from trees just big enough to be visible to others fifty or sixty feet in height with lower limbs still sweeping to the ground, filled the drier fringes of the meadow. This was the best seeding ground of the sequoia that I saw and showed its need quite plainly, a moist soil and an open, sheltered exposure.

We stayed there for a couple of hours. I was sorry afterward that I had not stayed on until the next day, to make a better study of these younger trees. Then we rode on up a narrow valley with a tumultuous stream, which we left at last to climb a huge glacier moraine beyond which we passed into a hanging valley with precipitous sides, gradually rising toward a wooded ridge which closed the valley in behind and formed, pillared on either side by mountains, the pass to Mineral King – Timber Gap as it was called. Our stock, evidently not in good condition when we started and over-loaded for their strength, began to show signs of exhaustion although our pace was slow. Presently one of the mules lay down upon the trail. A horse would not have done it until his last ounce of energy was spent but that is one of the ways, as I found afterward, in which a mule is different from a horse – as soon as they get discouraged they lie down. The man I had with me, who had never packed before, knew little more about their ways than I myself. We were only three or four miles at most, as well as we could reckon

from the map, from Mineral King. A more experienced packer would have simply shifted the pack from the mule on to one of the saddle horses and left the mule to follow – which she could have done quite easily as her condition in the morning showed. But I had her upon my conscience and leaving my man to follow after me in the early morning with the stock, I took a few things with me for the night in case I missed the trail – for it was then sundown and red sunset clouds were already floating in the western sky – and went on alone, on foot, to Mineral King.

I got up over the pass and through its timbered gap before it got too dark to see. An open slope of dry, hard earth and broken stone swept down from the timber's edge into the valley where the lights of the little settlement for which I was bound could be already seen two thousand feet below. It was rough going for I only had a pair of stout moccasins upon my feet and the twilight was too dim to pick one's way, out at last I got down, found the roadway in the valley bottom, crossed a river, and made my way in the dark to Mineral King's Post Office and only store.

It was not a very promising place to arrive at. Two or three men were lounging about a roughly carpentered room but no one seemed prepared to shoulder any responsibility for making me at home. At last it was arranged that I should have a room to sleep in there, above the store, and get my meals as I could elsewhere. Then I asked where I could find the man who was to go out with me as a packer. A little hut one hundred feet away was pointed out and there I went. Four men were playing cards around a table. I asked if Frank Dorr – the man who was to go out with me as packer – was there, and

one of the men came out to speak with me. Finding who I was he asked me in, introduced me to his companions, one of whom then offered to cook me up some supper – fried ham and fried potatoes – cut in chunks soda biscuit and a pot of tea. Afterward, I sat and talked with them awhile and then went back to my room above the store, where I found after I had put my light out that I could see stars from my bed through cracks and openings between the rough-hewn shingles which made the buildings roof.

The next day the man I had left behind was slow in coming on and we lost the morning but immediately after dinner Frank Dorr and I started on our three weeks' trip, having in the meantime overhauled our baggage and left some of the heaviest of our food supplies and other things behind. But as our journey was to be a hard one and Dorr, moreover thought it best to take a tremendously heavy Dutch oven, or iron baking pan and a few other heavy things along from Mineral King, we decided fortunately as it proved, to take along an extra mule to carry them.

We rode for a time up the valley we were in, passing on the way a strongly effervescent mineral spring where we stopped and drank, the water being as pleasant as that of any of the famous springs I know. We passed several such springs upon our trip and they seemed to be common in the region. Some of them being hot and others cold and evidently varying widely in the salts which they contained. Further up we climbed another steep moraine into a hanging valley. Bare of trees, which reminded me very much of Alpine valleys I have seen in Switzerland just below the snow line. This valley we rode throughout the length, coming at its further end to a steep ascent

whose bare crest flanked on either side by mountains, formed the pass to the region we were going to – a pass called Farewell Gap.

The crest was narrow, its further, southern side was so steep and shalely, and the wind that blew across it so gusty and fierce that it seemed to me for a moment my horse could hardly keep his footing on the scarce trodden trail which we began to descend.

The view had wholly changed. A range of volcanic mountains formed the western side of the valley we had come into and instead of gray granite.

A group of Sierra Club folks in Mineral King in 1906