

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Previously Unpublished Historical Essay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It is no wonder then that it was a treasure to discover George Dorr's 1904 unpublished account of his pack trips to the summit of Mt.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NOTE 1: This previously unpublished copyrighted account is held in manuscript form at the Bar Harbor Historical Society.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 I - Mt. Whitney Trip

I had a very interesting trip out west, from first to last, for I had never been in any part of California before and even the things that disappointed me interested me as well. I went straight out to San Francisco stayed there for three or four days, seeing some of the Berkeley College men to who I had letters and then down to Monterey, to see its cypresses. From there I went on down the coast to Santa Barbara and Los Angeles. At Los Angeles I ran down for a day and night to Santa Catalina Island and then I went straight up through the San Joaquin Valley to Visalia in the Kaweah River country whence I went up by stage to Giant Forest in the national Sequoia Park where I outfitted for my mountain trip.

I took a packer, a Maine man originally and of my own name, and some mules and we went out together for a three weeks' trip across the high Sierras to Owens Valley on their eastern side, going out through the Kern River country and returning by Kearsarge Pass and King's River, then back to Giant Forest where I started from.

Some of the men I met at Berkeley College, who had been out on geological and botanical expeditions through that region laid this route out for me as the most interesting I could follow and it certainly opened up magnificent scenery and showed me the Sierra forests in a most interesting way. But the distances were great, the trail steep and difficult, the cañons we had to cross profound, and the weather was stormy, in spite of John Muir who writes of



Winter on the summit of Mt. Whitney

delightful Indian summer weather lasting on until November in the mountains there. The first storm broke while my packer and I were climbing Mt. Whitney, the highest mountain in the States, and when we reached the top we were in the fiercest storm of wind and bitter, cutting sleet and snow I ever ran up against. We had slept the night before, as we usually did throughout the trip, without a tent although I had carried one of light oil-silk along and when we got back to camp our camping outfit, spread out over the ground, was already buried two or three inches deep in snow. We got the tent up for shelter, with some difficulty, and then my packer, exhausted by the cold and climb gave out, the middle of the afternoon, rolled himself up shivering in his blankets and under mine which I piled up over him until night, and slept until I called him in the morning.

We were then camped on the edge of a high Alpine meadow, eleven thousand feet above the sea. It snowed all that day. The next day it snowed again but we got off in the morning and rode all day through the storm, fearing to get snowed in upon the heights and having no feed for our stock who depend on grazing in the mountain meadows. Toward dusk we lost our way, my packer never having been over the trail which we were following before, and we camped at sundown on the edge of another meadow only a thousand feet or so lower than the one which we had left. By that time it had stopped snowing and we spread out our blankets and provisions and cooked our supper only to have it begin to snow again while we ate it. We put up the tent again and made ourselves fairly comfortable under it although it snowed all through the night. In the morning it cleared but it was bitterly cold and all the wood about had soaked up so much moisture from the snow that we found it impossible to start a fire. Toward noon, however, the sun came out and then the scene was beautiful beyond words, the mountains all about us covered with fresh fallen snow which covered too the meadow down below us and loaded down the pines and firs what shut it in.

The next morning we started out again, found our trail and followed it up over a high pass that led from the western to the eastern watershed. The snow lay three and four feet deep over the summit of the pass, obliterating the trail. The last few hundred feet of climb on either side went steeply up and down a granite slide, the rocks big and loosely piled together and the whole bedded deep in snow. It was very difficult getting up it with our loaded mules but when it came to getting them down on the other side it seemed to me almost impossible without some accident. However, I went

first, feeling the way as best I could among the rocks and leading my unloaded saddle horse, a sure-footed beast, behind me. Then when I had explored the way my packer drove the loaded animals down along it and somehow they got through all right – no eastern horses could have done it.

Then it was plain sailing until we reached the edge of Owens Valley where we came out on one of the most magnificent scenes that I have ever looked on. Owens Valley skirts the base of the high Sierras from Nevada southward on the eastern side. Owens River runs down from the eastern slope of the Sierras further north, to Owens Lake which lies across the valley like the Dead Sea across the Valley or the Jordan, a great salt pool with smooth salt plains that were its bottom once stretching out from it to north and south.

The trail that I was following led me suddenly out above the valley opposite this lake which lay six thousand feet below me, its nearer surface pale gray-green, its farther surface lost in the dark shadow and the swirling mists of a thunder squall which lay over it, black and awful, its cloud-mass rent by flashes of lightning, the whole far down below the point on which we stood. Further up, the valley lay in sunshine, a desert bounded on its eastern side by desert mountains with here and there a splash of green upon its floor where irrigation turned it into garden. A little later we, too, were swallowed up in a fierce hail storm and then descended rapidly to the valley and rode for hours across it until long after dark, to reach a village that had seemed quite near when we stood and looked at from up above.

We slept that night at the foot of a great stack of hay, alfalfa hay, not nearly so good to sleep on as eastern Timothy, by the way, and ate ripe grapes from off their vines and thawed out in the sunshine. Then we rode up the valley twenty miles to another ranch above and the next day started up Kearsarge Pass to return back west.