

Cloudburst Portals ... 1945

By Rena Elizabeth Roop- Moore

It was July 1945 and raining at the Whitney Portals. For weeks now, rain has fallen off and on, more prominently during the afternoons, accompanied by lightning flashes and distant thunder. Low, omnibus clouds hovered over the pine-crowded mountains, hiding the peaks from view. Fish jumped in the little lake below the Mt. Whitney Pack Station, located in the upper end of the Portals, a picturesque camper's paradise, fourteen miles above the desert oasis of Lone Pine in California's Owens Valley. This day seemed no exception, other than by noon the sky was darkened, the clouds more threatening, it was not to be as we thought. Just another rainy day.



Mt. Whitney Pack Station & Saddle Shed

south of the now dry bed of Owens Lake, in Inyo County. Whitney Portal was formerly known as Hunter's Flat. It hugs the mountainside half way between the desert town of Lone Pine and the summit of Mt. Whitney, the highest point in the United States. The Portals is where you have to park your car to camp, visit, or to hike the trails.

[*The trail to the summit of Mt. Whitney starts*] from the pack station, [*and for*] two miles zigzag up the mountain behind it. [*Another trail*], one steeper, starts from the picnic area, and is a short cut to the upper horse trail, which starts from the corrals. The paved road circles the small lake below the pack station, with parking places, scattered picnic tables, stoves, wares, faucets, with no overnight camping signs, and is a quarter of a mile above the camping area. From the camp sites the rugged outline of Mt. Whitney can be seen silhouetted against the sky, and sometimes, in season, mirrors flashing from the summit by someone who "made it" to the top.

At night campfires glow all through the canyon, and is a heartwarming sight. At the head of the canyon, across from the pack station, Lone Pine falls tumble, sparkling and flashing, over the rocky ledges into the stream below, which gushes uproariously down through the Portal and across the desert to the aqueduct.

About the middle of the camping area, a wooden bridge crosses the stream to the Meysan Trail, and to where cabin sites are located. A paved road winds up and around to the last one. The Father Crowley cabin clings to an attractive alcove here, which, after Father Crowley's death was purchased by George

My daughter, three sons and myself were spending the summer of '45, there by invitation of Ted Cook, co-owner of the Mt. Whitney Pack Trains (packing out of Whitney Portals and also out of Carroll Creek, some miles to the south) to more or less "look after the place," which had been closed through WWII. We usually camped at the Whitney Portals anyway, so for the first time, we were enjoying a "housed-in" summer at our favorite vacation spot.

Whitney Portal is at the eastern slopes of the Sierra Nevada's, in Inyo National Forest, which extends 125 miles from the head of Owens River watershed at Deadman's Pass, to some 15 miles

Putnam, ex-husband of Amelia Earhart, and has now a new owner. In 1945, George Putnam was spending the summer here in the Portals. In pre-war years, parties were packed from Whitney Portals into the backcountry and to the summit of Mt. Whitney. Pack trains went out daily, and throngs of campers crowded the corral clearing to watch the packing and saddling up. This went on from June into September, then deer hunting parties were packed in until October 15th, but the pack station was closed through WWII and never opened again, except as a store and for special trips made by appointment. Even through the war years, with the older boys in the service, the younger children and I sought occasional refuge at Whitney Portals.

Now in 1945, we were there again. This time in the cabin of the closed down pack station. Ten-year-old Willis and twelve-year-old Beth were quite fed-up with so much rain, but to fourteen year old



Mt. Whitney Pack Station corrals at Whitney Portal

George, it was a time for good fishing. As I finished my shopping list, on this Memorial Day, an older son, Bob, came down to the stone steps from the corrals and announced he was ready to drive us to Lone Pine for supplies. All of us, except George, who wanted to stay and fish in the little lake, climbed into the old family car and headed for the valley below. As we drove down the curing mountain road, into the desert, the world became brighter. Although clouds still obscured the mountains, there was even sunshine in the desert, and it was hot. In Lone Pine we met my husband with the pick-up truck from Carroll Creek, the other pack station of the Mt. Whitney Pack Trains, nine miles south of town, from

where he, Fred Moore, was packing that year. He was to take us back to Whitney Portals after we purchased our supplies; Bob was staying in town for a few days. When I came out of Joseph's, I looked across the miles at the cloud-shrouded mountains where George was alone, and felt uneasy.

As soon as our boxes were loaded into the truck, we started on our return trip. We had been gone between three and four hours. As we entered the foothills, there was a strange quietness, and my uneasiness grew. Rocks began to appear in the road that were never there before, and as we climbed the rocks increased. Twice we had to stop while Fred got out and moved large ones out of our way. Beth never said a word, but she too, got out of the truck each time her dad did. At the last turn, before entering the camp area, it sounded like we could hear cries for help. Then we made the turn and looked ahead in horror. The road was gone and there were cries for help. The lower camp site, below the road was a scene of muddy destruction, with tops of cars and tents protruding from it, with people crowding every high place above to high ground.

[All we could see were] tops of cars, boulders, trees, and some [people] trapped in their cars. The rain had stopped, but in our absence there had been a fast-terrorizing cloudburst that changed it all. It left

moving masses of mud, tree limbs, water and debris flowing down from the upper campground and pack station.

And then we saw George. He was coming toward us, climbing over and through the debris, crying and covered in mud, and chilled to the bone. I ran to help him and Fred ran to the truck to get a blanket to wrap him in. When we got him to safety in the truck, we were again aware of others needing help. Fred called down to them to stay where they were while we went for the rangers, because we could not get to them. Somehow Fred got the truck turned around, drove madly down the narrow rock-strewn road to the valley, across the desert to Lone Pine. The people in town were hard to convince, until they saw George that such a terrible condition could exist at Whitney Portals. But soon the rangers and many volunteers were on their way to the scene of the terror-stricken campers.

Already the cabin owners of Meysan side of the stream, where not much damage was done, were on the job, rescuing people from their place of refuge. George Putnam among them. He had to cut the top from one tent to rescue a trapped family. It is said that fate plays no favorites, but this time it did, as I believe it often does. One man's little camp was scarcely touched by the swirling mass of destruction. It so happened that everything he owned in the world was there inside his patched tent and battered old car. And the man? George (our son), saw what happened to him and told us about it afterwards.

George had gone into the cabin to fix lunch. It had begun to rain hard. It beat down on the cabin with a tremendous pounding, turning into hail, and the water rushed down the mountain side in torrents, becoming a wall of water, rocks, logs and pieces of the corral fence, and even equipment from the saddle shed. It hit the cabin with terrific



Mt. Whitney Pack Station – Whitney Portal Store

force breaking the window and rushing through the door, washing in all manner of rubble, and a man! The man was alive, and the moment he saw George he yelled, "Get on the top bunk!" But George couldn't make it. He was carried out the front door and down among the trees, where he managed to grab a limb and hang on for dear life. He gradually pulled himself up to a stronger limb above the swift current. When it was over, which seemed an eternity, it took a while for George to muster up courage to climb down and make his way above it and follow the

mountain around to the end of the camp area, where he saw us.

Scores of cars were damaged beyond repair and camping equipment utterly ruined, but to my knowledge no one was killed or injured seriously. There were many personal losses. Our suitcases were buried under three foot of mud in the cabin and the saddle she completely washed away. A cloudburst can happen most anywhere and anytime in the mountains, but seldom with such destructive results. I was told that this one was so disastrous because the stream reverted back to an old streambed, which had been blocked up years ago before the pack station was built, which was directly in its path.

Now, after fourteen years, the road to Whitney Portals is better than ever, and the camps have all been repaired, but here and there a grim reminders of that never-to-be-forgotten **1945 Cloudburst!**

NOTE: Items in italics are the webmaster's clarifications.



Whitney Portal after the winter avalanche of 1970. Saddle shed gone. Corral and store heavily damage.