

The Range of Light From Mt. Whitney

By Blanche Stallings

About eleven o'clock on Sunday night, July 14, we turned away from the big High Trip campfire, at Sierra Creek, and set off to climb Mount Whitney by moonlight and see the sunrise from the summit. We hadn't had much sleep. Some had stayed around the campfire, others had gone on ahead, while some of us had crawled into our sleeping bags for a little nap, just long enough to get deliciously warm and drowsy then crawled out and into our boots. But no matter. You can sleep practically any night, but you can't climb the highest mountain in the United States by moonlight any night and see the sunrise from the top.

We got out of camp and over the first stream without too much difficulty. As we walked along the trail, eager and hopeful, going in and out of the shadows, we had a feeling of gratitude tinged with a sort of wonder to think that time and place and circumstances had coincided to make it possible for us to be where we were. Ever since the Sierra Club's first outing down in the Kern country, in 1903, High Trip parties had been climbing Mount Whitney. What a privilege, what a pleasure, what an excitement, to be carrying on that tradition, even though our "climb" meant merely walking up the trail four thousand feet to the top.

Furthermore although we didn't yet fully realize it, we were to carry on another Whitney tradition, namely, shivering on the summit in the midnight-to-sunrise hours. Of course it was John Muir himself who started that tradition back in 1873 on his first attempt to climb Whitney, when as Francis Farquhar tells us in "The Story of Mount Whitney," "he was among the summit needles (perhaps in the neighborhood of Mount Muir by midnight or eleven o'clock and had to dance all night to keep from freezing," -- and was still able to record that "the stars and the dawn and the sunrise were glorious." But summit shiverings would come later. For the present, although the night was cold, we were warm and quite comfortable

It really seemed like no time at all until someone was saying, "Do you realize we're at timberline?" We stopped and looked about us. There was one large tree skeleton standing off up the slope to the left of the trail. We'd left the trees below all right. It had been suggested that we carry up wood if possible, so we gathered what sticks we could find and went on.

Then came those wonderful hours of walking on and on in the world of granite and moonlight, climbing higher and higher while the moon and the stars moved slowly in the cloudless sky above us. . In thinking of those hours they seem to fall more or less into four parts a sort of Sierra symphony in four movements.

First was the part where the trail leads on and up through the "real cirque or amphitheatre. There were ridges and peaks all about, forming interesting skylines but not hemming us in. It was a high, open, spacious sort of place. Sometimes we'd see far above or below tiny pinpoints of light that were the flashlights of our fellow climbers. Although we seldom needed our lights and got along better without them, we'd flash them on occasionally for a moment, and apparently the others were doing the same. Those were cheerful lights, the ones above indicating where the trail went, the one below indicating how far we'd come. Gradually we rose above the still dark lakes, and what had been our skylines down below. We were getting up now, no doubt about it.

Another light that we'd see from time to time practically all the way to the top was a campfire, presumably our own down at Sierra Creek. We wondered how it happened to be burning all night. It was pleasant to picture the camp down there among the trees: that certain atmosphere and glow of a big campfire after practically everyone has gone off to bed and the fire burns on through the night, casting its quiet warm light on the branches of the trees; darkness around the commissary, with perhaps a few coals still glowing under a kettle or two; moonlight on the meadows and the pine trees and the stream.

Next came something quite different, the fascinating part of the trail that goes around among the pinnacles. What strange spires, what weird forms rising all about us. What an exciting place any time; what an enchanting place in the moonlight! It was somewhere in this general part of the trip when we suddenly felt the faintest touch of cold wind. Up to that moment it had been perfectly still and just pleasantly cold. This was some thing different, the entrance of a theme heretofore merely suggested. From then on the wind became steadily colder and colder as we climbed higher and higher, reaching its climax on the summit. It was also in this general part of the trip that we found the first polemonium, then more and more of it. Bright as the moonlight was, however, polemonium was little more the another clump of something growing until the additional light of a flashlight someone was carrying revealed its fluffy blue blossoms, its graceful green foliage.

But now we were beginning to wonder what was happening over on east side. Hours had passed, and dawn couldn't be far away. As we looked about us and out over the mountains to the west it was still night and full moonlight. But wasn't the sky up to the right just a bit lighter? And what about our shadows? A fellow climber had remarked, as he passed us on the trail, that there would come a moment when the light from the east would be exactly equal to the light from the moon and then we wouldn't have any shadows. We looked for them now. They were still there, but we wondered if they were quite as distinct as they had been before. Another theme that had been running quietly but persistently through the whole trip, continually urging us on, now became more insistent: could we reach the summit by sunrise? We pressed on.

Then all at once came that unforgettable moment—and this was where the next part came in—when we suddenly found ourselves looking out through the first window with its astounding, breathtaking view down the east side. The valley was eleven thousand feet below. Most startling of all, however, was the strip of glowing red sky, fading into orange and yellow, above the eastern horizon. We had hoped to be on the summit by this time. Still, if we had been, as some of the party were, we'd have missed this dramatic view through the first window. Wasn't it really better this way? But now it would be a race to see who reached the summit first, the sun's rays or the mountaineers. We must hurry on, but not too soon. This was something to remember: the way the mountain dropped off below us; the dim early morning light on the rock of the chimney; the valley and mountains beyond it deep blue in night; the tiny cluster of lights that was Lone Pine; the color of the sky; the contrast, so striking at this point, between the mountain world on the one hand and the desert world on the other, between the feeling of night on the west side and of morning on the east side. Then too, for all the spectacular qualities of the scene, there was something completely and utterly unpretentious about it, a wonderful satisfying naturalness and quietness.

As we passed each window after that the eastern sky was brighter and there was more light on the spires rising above the openings.. Then we'd go back into the moonlit world. As we approached the last window there was so much light on the spire that we were sure we'd see the sun when we reached it, but we didn't. Only the lighter eastern sky, the darkness of the valley, the little lights of Lone Pine.

Then came another distinctive part of the trip, the summit. It began with that last long drag. We tried to go faster but simply couldn't at that altitude. We passed a snowfield. There was ice on the trail at one place. But at last someone ahead was on the skyline, and soon we were on the final rock slabs just below the summit. Had

we made it? We looked out over the east side. The sun was a round fiery ball coming over the skyline. The first rays got there ahead of us. But no matter. It was the end of the moonlight climb, it was the top of the United States, it was the top of the "Range of Light," and it was sunrise! It was also something else.

If Professor Langley, after selecting Mount Whitney (quoting Mr. Farquhar) "as the site for conducting observations to determine the amount and quality of the heat sent to the earth by the sun," had confined his stay: on the summit to a sunrise hour, as we did, I think he might well have been justified in concluding that the amount of solar heat was, after all, so nearly infinitesimal as to be scarcely worth measuring. Yes, now more than ever it was cold. It was bitterly, fiercely cold, and the wind cut through parkas and jackets as if they had been sieves. Someone said the thermometer registered thirty degrees, but the wind made it seem even colder, so much so in fact that it would have been a bit difficult at times for some of us to remember what we'd come up for, anyhow, if it hadn't been for the campfire over by the hut.

How grateful we were for that fire! Someone had gone up on horseback the afternoon before and taken a pack of wood, and almost everyone had carried up a few pieces from timberline. It all added up to a little fire that will long be remembered as the only warm thing on the summit, even if the wind did swirl smoke in all directions at once.

As one stood by the fire it was interesting to note that the members of the party, many of whom had reached the top long before, were in various states of activity. Some were lying fast asleep in a sort of rocky hollow, stretched out flat, with just the tops of their heads sticking out of warm looking sleeping bags. Not a bad idea, taking along your sleeping bag. Even if you didn't lie down and go to sleep in it you could drape it about the body, as some were demonstrating, thus creating a stunning effect while providing additional warmth. At the other extreme were those who seemed not unduly tired, sleepy, or cold. They'd stand there scanning the landscape, looking through their binoculars, pointing in various directions, calling off the peaks.

Others of us were in about an average state. We'd stay by the fire for while, then go out in the wind and look at things for a while. And what things as were there to be seen, what matchless views of the Sierra, north, south, and west, what magnificent views of the east side, what mountains and passes and divides and canyons and lakes to be identified! Not only were there all these superb summit sights, but there were also all the special sunrise excitements, such as watching the various peaks light up as the first rays of the sun touched them.

Then there was the strange effect over to the west. All along the western horizon, just above the skyline, was a narrow and clearly defined strip of sky that appeared lighter, clearer, than the sky above the strip. Yet there seemed to be no clouds, no fog, no mist. It is difficult to describe, but the strip of sky and the sky above the strip were somehow different, the light was different. Then directly in front of us on the horizon, as we stood with our backs to the sun, was a pyramid—the shadow of Whitney, we were informed. Or was it? Someone waved his arms, but no change or motion was visible on the pyramid shadow. After all, what's a mere arm waving alongside of Whitney.

Of course we wanted to inspect the hut while we were there. Unfortunately the door had blown down and there was a lot of snow inside. It was even colder in there than it was outside, so we didn't linger. Then, as was to be expected, there were several in the party who still hadn't had enough excitement, so off they went to climb Mount Muir.

Well, I guess that pretty well covers the trip—except that we came down of course, and saw everything by sunlight that we'd seen by moonlight. After we got well down off the summit and out of the cold wind we began to get warm, then very sleepy; so sleepy in fact that we actually dozed off several times while walking

along the trail. But one good look at Whitney dropping off below would always bring us out of it in a hurry. Then too, we began to see the most beautiful polemonium, now completely revealed in all its loveliness of color, form, and setting in the bright morning light.

It would have been pleasant to be back in camp in time for hotcakes, and perhaps some of the party were; but that was not to be for us. However, we were perfectly satisfied to lie down in the warm sunshine under the clear blue sky in a beautiful little alpine meadow and eat what we had in our lunch bags. Then a few more hours on the trail, and we were back in camp in our sleeping bags, where we could look up and see the pine needles shining in the sun, then close our eyes and dream about Mount Whitney, grand old mountain, with its spires and pinnacles and chimneys and windows, its views, its history and tradition. Long may it rise in majesty above a glorious unspoiled wilderness. May many happy climbers stand upon its windswept summit. May many happy hearts rejoice in the range of light from Mount Whitney.

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