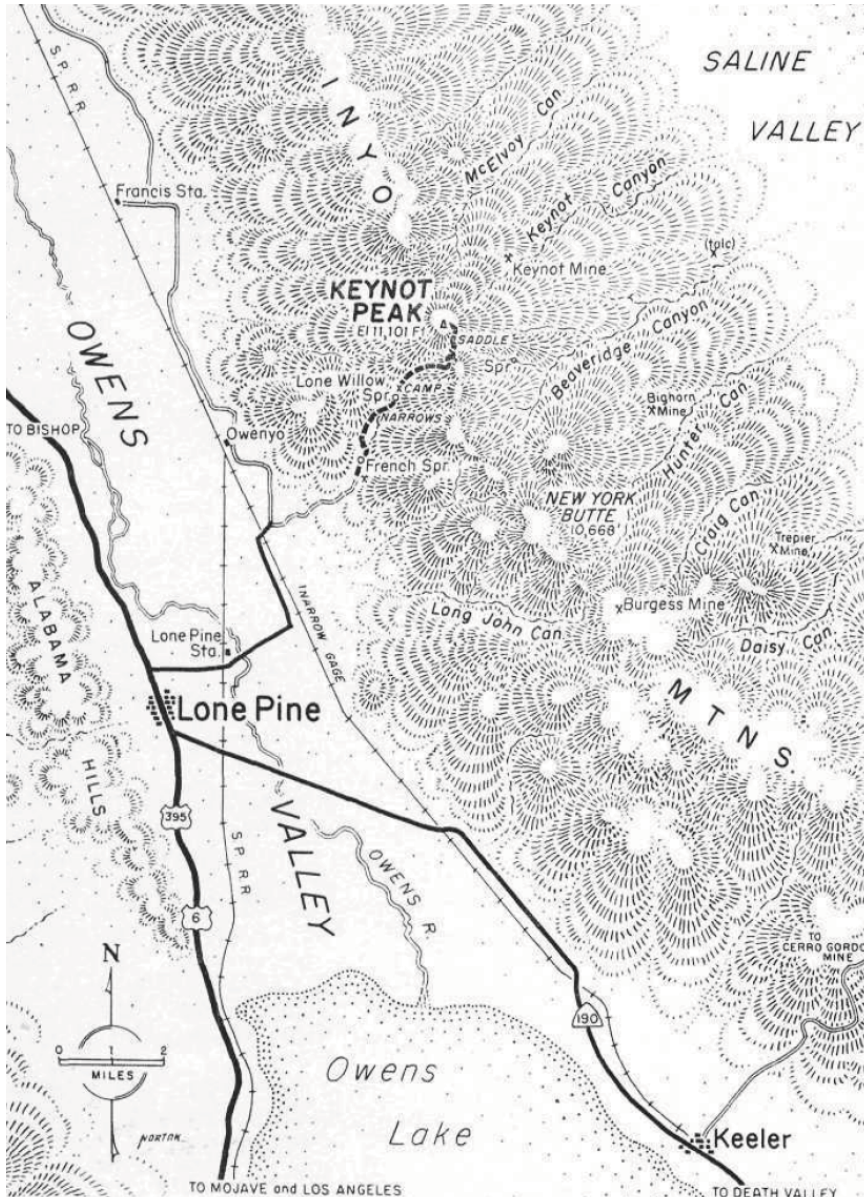


Trail to Keynot Summit

By Louise Top Werner / Photos by Niles Werner / Map by Norton Allen

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KEYNOT is an honest mountain. It rises openly above California's Inyo range, offering a single canyon route to its summit. Here was an easy, pleasant, uncomplicated Memorial Day weekend climb for Desert Peaks members of Southern California Sierra Club. Louise Werner writes of another adventure of this energetic mountain climbing group.



From the Owens Valley highway we could see Mt. Keynot's 11,101-foot summit looming up out of the middle of the Inyo Range in eastern California. A single canyon cut its western slope, opening over an alluvial fan into the valley. Here was an individual among mountains. No hiding behind false summits, no baffling the climber with route-finding problems -- Mt. Keynot laid its cards on the table, face up.

Its originality went further. Instead of thinning its vegetation to a bald dome, Keynot had bared its midriff and covered its upper slopes with pines. Dwellers in the valley call it "the upside-down mountain."

This was the peak 22 of us -- members of the Desert Peaks section of the Sierra Club of California -- had selected for our Memorial Day weekend climb last year. We had not been able to get much advance information about Keynot -- and that fact merely added to the challenge of our adventure.

Just north of Lone Pine our caravan turned to the right off Highway 6-395. At the narrow gauge railroad east of the Lone Pine station we left the pavement for two miles of steep rough driving up the canyon.

From the end of the road the trail zigzagged toward a twisted pillar of basalt 400 feet up the slope. The desert had stained the boulders along the way a rich mahogany. To the right, in the canyon bottom, a tangle of Virgin's Bower hid the trickle of French's Spring where quail scurried under arroyo willows and an ash-throated fly-catcher dived, clicking its beak on an insect in midair.



Desert Peaks members of the Southern California Sierra Club on the top of Mt. Keynot in the Inyo Range of eastern California.

Front (L/R) are Bob Schmelzer, Margaret Jones, Lorraine Ogg, Louise Werner

Middle (L/R) are Joe Frischen, Roland Kent, Virgil Sisson, Connie Jarabin, Art Widmer, Ed Burnop

Rear (L/R) are Frank Sanborn, John Nienhuis, Dick Kenyon, John Robinson, Jill Johnson, John Wedherg, Ken Rich.

Niles Werner, leader, hitched up the felt pads that kept his 30-pound pack from cutting his shoulders, and began wearing down the zigzags with his slow, seemingly effortless pace. Apricot mallow growing out of the shale looked surprised at 22 pairs of boots plodding by. Traffic on the Keynot trail is light these days.

Between 1878 and 1894 mule hoofs rang almost incessantly on the shale, their pack saddles loaded with gold from the Keynot Mine, half a million dollars' worth. From an 8,000-foot ridge on the other side of the 11,000 foot saddle they came, clattering down the 12-mile trail to French's Spring, there to be relieved of their loads and to drink from the trough, now a pile of planks rotting under a rusted pipe.

The gold was relayed to the 20-mule teams which hauled it 225 miles to Los Angeles. Bev Hunter of Olancho remembers the big barns spaced about 20 miles apart up and down the valley, housing up to 80 mules, the relay stations for the teams. Bev was born and raised in Owens Valley in the days when eggs were a dime a dozen and a good team of horses sold for \$600. "I would have called anyone crazy who said I'd see that day

when cars would roll along the Owens Valley lakebed," says Bev. When he was six it took the family five days to drive 125 miles from their ranch near Independence to the railroad at Mojave.

An up-canyon breeze cooled our backs, perspiring under the packs. Niles paused to look back across the valley at the Sierra Nevada where six peaks over 14,000 feet high paraded their snowy headdresses among their less lofty fellows.

"Which is Mt. Whitney?" asked Roland Kent, 14, our youngest knapsacker. Niles pointed out the needle which, though it marks the highest point in the U.S., stood back, over-shadowed at this elevation by lesser peaks in the foreground.

At the top of the mahogany staircase we rounded a band of basaltic cliffs. The packs lightened when we saw the trail leveling off over a shale terrace patterned with bunches of yellow grass and gray-green sage. To our left a fault cut off the terrace. Here nature had, in one of her convulsive moods, taken the stratum in her bands and twisted it, then brushed over the contorted surfaces with a rich brown varnish.

"What's holding up Assistant Leader Walt Collins?" wondered Niles during a pause on the second terrace.

"Birds," said Frank Sanborn. "I passed him back at French's Spring, stalking birds with his binoculars."

No wonder. Walt had never before spotted the Lutescent and Macgillivray's warblers. Mary DeDcker, a mountaineer-naturalist who lives at the foot of these mountains, was of the opinion that the warblers had sought shelter in the desert from a recent storm in the Sierra. Especially interested in the plants of the Inyos, Mary had already listed under "Plants Along the Keynot Trail," peppergrass, buck-wheat, wishbone bush, wild tobacco, peach thorn, squaw currant and a small fern found under the shady side of rocks. "Arid they call the Inyos barren," she laughed.

On another terrace climbing back toward the main canyon on our right, the shale took on a grapejuice hue. Connie Jarabin, a big fellow with a ready laugh, picked a leaf from the base of a Panamint Plume. "Tastes like cabbage," he said, offering it to Roland. Roland tasted it, screwed up his face, spat it out and reached for his canteen.

Lunch time -- a chance to throw off the packs, stretch out in the sunshine, and after a while revive enough to nibble a carrot, admire a coronet of buds on a prickly pear cactus and inspect Jill Johnson's new Kelty pack. Nylon on an aluminum frame it weighs only two pounds empty. With sleeping bag, ground cloth, a gallon of water, dinner, breakfast and two lunches, sweater, parka, flashlight, toothbrush and matches, the pack weighed 24 pounds.

Connie pointed to a scarlet loco weed and grinned at Roland. "They're good in sandwiches."



"Yeah?" Roland grinned back. "You cat eat it"

After lunch we climbed toward a bluish-gray streak that followed down the left slope into the canyon narrows. The trail began dropping into the narrows too.

On the watercut walls we read some of the canyon's history. Erosion had left a buttress projecting out of the left wall. On its sheared-off face we saw evidence of faulting and tilting of the strata and of the urgency of hot lava searching out weak spots in the shale, churning tunnels as it swirled. The sheared-off shale glowed like polished walnut while the cross sections of the tufa swirls looked like the roots of branches roughly broken off at the trunk. A lower plug had eroded out leaving a cave 20 feet high.

At the base of this buttress water dribbled over a lime bog. A single willow spread above it. 'I had heard rumors about a Lone Willow Spring,' said Niles, when some demurred at having carried a gallon of water, "but I didn't feel like depending on a rumor to water a crowd."

"Ugh', " said Lloyd Balsam, the Desert Peakers' chairman. "Now we have no excuse for not washing." Most Desert Peakers prefer not washing to carrying wash water on their backs. Aromatic plants like juniper, and sage may substitute quite well for soap and water, with the added advantage that they don't rob the skin of natural oils.

Ken Rich dug a hole in the bog with a tin cup and spoon and soon had a clear pool. It tasted slightly of minerals.

Three and a half miles above French's Spring we made camp on a semi-level spot bordered on the north by a 15-foot gully, just above the Lone Willow Spring. At some time during the past a cloudburst, a real gully-washer, must have thundered down the canyon through the narrows, carrying down pine trees from above Mt. Keynot's midriff. The logs came in handy, and our fire blazed brightly that night.

Desert Peakers eat strange things for breakfast on knapsack trips. Few care to risk carrying raw eggs; a frying pan is hardly worth its weight in a pack. Some had brought their eggs hard-boiled. One mixed powdered egg yolk with powdered milk and cocoa. John Nienhuis was the envy of everyone when he pulled two quart cartons of fresh milk out of a pocket in his knapsack. "Long as I had to carry a gallon of liquid ... " he said. We remembered a trip when a carton of milk in a knapsack got all mixed up with a sleeping bag. Most oldtimers carry instant coffee but Niles likes to start a long climbing day with a cup of hot jello.

The moon still hung over the south wall when we started our six-mile trek to the summit. For a mile or so we followed the gully. The narrows, deep in shadows, were left behind. As they fell below, the slopes took on a roundness, except where scarred by volcanic dikes.

The sun, though it would not show over the crest of the Inyos for hours yet, caused the Sierra snows to blush. Mormon tea was a lively green growing out of the same shale as sage and bunchgrass, which paled into the background.

We zigged right to avoid the cliffs of the midriff, then zagged back toward the almost straight line above which the pines had survived. The first pines, white and dead, marked a fork in the trail. The right branch led up toward the Burgess Mine on the ridge several miles to the south. We had traveled toward the sun for two hours while it had traveled toward us, yet we had not met; the ridge stood between us.

We had been hiking in forest for some time when castle ramparts loomed on the skyline nearby. At 8: 30 we pulled up to the saddle and met the sun. A hitching rack of pine poles sagged beside the trail. Did the muleteers enjoy the view while they rested the mules after their three-mile pull from the mine? Or were they bored with slopes falling away beneath their feet, and hankering for the level living below? We of the cities enjoyed the canyons filled with tall pines that streaked down toward the Saline Valley.

Here in his youth, Bev Hunter roped bighorn sheep. Some of the rams had a horn-spread of three feet. "Then you had the rough job of bull-dogging them to get your rope back," he says. Bev's skill with a bronc and a rope later led to his sharing a bunk with the late Will Rogers in a Wild West Show.

On the saddle the trail deserted us to contour down the east side to the Keynot Mine. With the help of the map we picked out Keynot Canyon, but even with binoculars we couldn't spot the mine. The Mineralogist's Report which had described "the Keynot vein, free gold in granite ... seven tunnels . . . a five-stamp mill . . . water from Hahn's Canyon three miles south ... " didn't mention the score of shacks that mushroomed out of rock, pine-poles and brush, or the piano that rode mule-back over the 11,000 foot saddle. Keynot's little boom was hardly heard among the big noises of Panamint City and Cerro Gordo. No tourists prowl among the rockpiles that once housed its hopeful miners.

A half-mile of trailless scrambling put us on the summit. Friendly ranges rose all around; northeast, the Last Chance Range where we had once explored Dry Mountain, to the east the Panamints where we had visited Telescope Peak not long ago, beyond, with Death Valley hiding between, the Grapevine Range.

The register placed on Keynot Peak October, 1950, by another Desert Peaks group showed that we were the fifth party to climb the peak since then.

In the pines a Clark's Nutcracker scolded and little birds chickadee-dee-deed and everything seemed pleasantly uncomplicated, just as the mountain had promised us at the start.