

Old Man of the Mountains

By Harold Gilliam

WHEREVER men gather around blazing campfires in the cold nights of the high country and talk of the history of mountaineering, there are certain names that inevitably come into the conversation -- Mallory, Irvine, Mummery, and among Americans John Muir, Clarence King, Norman Clyde.

In terms of pioneering climbs on American peaks, there is never any doubt that the all-time champion was Norman Clyde. There are a good many old-timers in the Sierra Club, whose eyes shine with recollections of the great bear of a man who always carried a mountainous pack—often weighing 100 pounds or more—never removing it except to sleep. One wag dubbed him: "The pack that walks like a man."

The tales of Clyde's endurance are Bunyanesque. He held the speed record for racing up 14,000 foot Mount Shasta, climbed Mount Whitney some fifty times over a period of year, often without pausing for breath, and once in Glacier National Park scrambled up the thirty highest peaks as many days.

Many a mountaineer has struggled up some remote Sierra crag for what he believed was a first ascent, only to find on the summit beneath a cairn of rocks, an empty camera film box with the signature "Norman Clyde" and the date scrawled on the cover. Kilroy himself never turned up in more unexpected places.

Understandably there was genuine excitement at this summer's Sierra Club Base Camp above Lake Sabrina [in California's Sierra Nevada] when into the camp walked a big grizzled man with a giant pack and a thick swatch of white hair showing from beneath the back of his battered campaign hat.. This was indeed Norman Clyde, the legend, still living, climbing and telling his tales of adventure in the high country.

His appearance caused a flurry for another reason as well. Camper Barbara Vye was brushing her teeth one night when the bushes parted and she was suddenly confronted with a shadowy figure she thought was a bear. It was the embarrassed Paul Bunyan of the Sierra, who apologized and asked for directions. "I know my way around the mountain pretty well," he said, "but when I get into camp I'm completely lost."

Clyde had consented to lead Sierra Club hikers into the high country to share with them his lore and techniques. Although he could have had his equipment carried to the base camp by pack animals, as did the rest of the campers, the elderly climber preferred to lug his huge pack on his back to the camp on Baboon creek at 10,600 feet elevation, seven miles and some 1500 feet above the roadhead at Sabrina.

But the pack was a light one, he said—a mere 55 pounds. Most guesses place his age near 80, although he reckons with a grin that he is 350..

Clyde has always been at home in the mountains in winter and in summer. Overtaken by a storm, he burrows into a thicket until the weather clears, then bulldozes his way out.

One time he headed up the precipitous east side of the range and over one of the passes in late October, intending to go out over another pass. But he was caught—without his skis—by the first big storm of the season.

The storm lasted several days, and by the time it was over, all the passes were buried under six feet of soft snow, making the return trip impossible.

There was only one thing to do. He slogged down the western slope of the range some 70 miles into Fresno.



Norman Clyde by Hubert Buel

The most difficult part of the trip, he said later, was trying to get checks cashed in Fresno to buy food.

Whenever someone is lost in the Sierra or whenever a plane crashes on a seemingly inaccessible mountainside, almost inevitably there is a call for the man who knows the range as no one has known it since John Muir.

In 1933 when Clyde's young friend Walter A. Starr Jr., failed to return from a solo climbing expedition in the Minarets. South of Yosemite, parties of the Sierra's best mountaineers combed the area without success. After the other searchers had given up Norman Clyde persisted.

Searching the steeped Minarets with his field glasses, foot by foot, he finally detected a spot high on a 12,000 foot pinnacle from which a slab of rock had recently peeled off and fallen.

Clyde's surmise turned out to be correct. In a notch hundreds of feet below he found the body of his young friend.

To many of the Sierra Club campers who listened to Clyde's tales this summer at Baboon creek, the biggest surprise was his splendid command of the language, his felicitous turn of phrase. The secret was in his famous pack. It developed that in that mysterious mountain of gear he customarily carries volumes of classical literature in half a dozen languages. This summer he was re-reading Goethe's Faust in German.

Under questioning he confessed that he had worked for his Masters Degree in the classics at the University of California more than half a century ago. Then, because of his disinclination to write a thesis, he deserted the groves of academe for the forests of the Sierra, sometimes returning to civilization long enough to earn a grubstake by teaching.

For a time he was a school principal in the Owens Valley town of Independence but lost the job when he fired a gun over the heads of some students perpetrating a destructive Halloween prank.

Under the lodgepole pines of glacial-carved granite basins and along the high trails this summer he has talked not only of Palisade Glacier and Kearsarge Pass, of aretes and cols and couloirs, but of Virgil, Homer, Emerson, Boccaccio, Dante -- all of whom he reads in the original. His eyes were on the summit peaks—both of landscape and literature.

The campers recognized an extraordinary phenomenon—an American prototype, a man of the wilderness in the mold of Daniel Boone, Jim Bridger, Kit Carson and Jedediah Smith, yet a man as much at home in the world of literature as many a university professor.

Perhaps Norman Clyde's real prototype is not the wilderness scout but Henry David Thoreau, the learned Yankee individualist who would have no truck with social conformity but stubbornly went his own way in his cabin at Walden Pond. Clyde's Walden is the entire Sierra, and his cabin is carried on his back.

Although Clyde has often climbed with parties of mountaineers—always as the iron man of the group—most fellow climbers agree that he is hardly an organization man. He is happiest when climbing alone, setting his own pace, looking for new heights to conquer.

In the years since World War II, a new generation of climbers has come to the fore. By the use of coordinated teamwork and specialized equipment—ropes, pitons, expansion bolts—and mathematical calculations, they have been able to scale perpendicular cliffs, such as those of Half Dome and El Capitan, where even Clyde, using only his native endowment, could not go.

Yet there is little doubt that long after the expansion-bolt climbers have ascended the last "inaccessible" pinnacle, the legend of Norman Clyde will continue to be related with awe around mountain campfires for generations to come.

Reprinted by permission of the *San Francisco Sunday Chronicle*

Excerpt taken from the *Sierra Club Bulletin*, September 1961.