

1952 Sierra High Trip

By David R. Brower

Hikers Follow Flowery Trails in an Unspoiled Wilderness and Climb Over Snow and Rock to Mount Whitney's Skyscraping Summit

WE rendezvoused by the stream at dusk. Below us lay California's Owens Valley, its few lights glowing in the soft July evening like a scattering of hot coals. Above us towered the peaks of the Sierra Nevada, reaching for the stars.

We had gathered at the end of the road—140 men, women, and children—because we shared two happy convictions: first, the belief that our own two feet, unsupported by horse, car, or plane, could carry us over 14,000-foot mountains, through flower-choked meadows, and across snow-chilled upland streams. Second, a common faith that the rewards of great vistas, bright trails, and good companionship in the High Sierra would long outlive memories of a blistered heel, a twanging tendon.

Even 6-year-olds Go on High Trips

We were, in short, members of California's 62-year-old Sierra Club, grouping for our organization's 48th High Trip along this massive range. For two weeks we planned to hike, climb, and camp in a wilderness still unscarred by roads, unruffled by the auto's honk.

Many of us were "repeaters." I had met the Sierra first at the age of six, introduced by parents who wanted my earliest recollections to include those of sleeping under the stars and watching the moon rise over grayblack peaks. Now I in turn was bringing my sons—Ken, who was nearly nine, and Bob, who was seven—back to the "Range of Light."

First task that engaged us all at our roadhead base on Carroll Creek near Mount Whitney was weighing in. Mules would pack our dunnage from this jump-off point to the various camps we would pitch along our route. But the load limit was 30 pounds apiece. We watched as a latecomer, Don Davis, proprietor of a one-man band, tossed his duffel on the scales and sadly read the result.

"Two pounds over! And I've already taken out everything but essentials. Do you think the packers will notice?"

An old-timer from the group near by snorted. "They'll notice! And they may leave your overweight lying in the trail."

Don sighed and began to sort his belongings again. What could he do without?

He wouldn't need food or cooking utensils; the Club's commissary supplied that. Sleeping bag? Absolutely essential. Change of clothes? Well, a lad had better have something to wear when trying to persuade a comely lass to help him with his laundry. Camera? Pictures of this handsome country would be well worth the

sacrifice of other gear. Swim suit, fly rod, guitar? A man must have his pleasures. Air mattress? And his comfort.

Razor? *There* was something to leave in the car. One pound 12 ounces still to be eliminated. Tent? "It never rains at night in the Sierra," someone volunteered. "Why not just take a light tarp for a ground sheet and pitch it as a roof if it does rain?"

Don made the switch, repacked his dunnage bag, and weighed it again.

"Thirty pounds on the nose!" he exclaimed triumphantly—and sat down on his bag to advise those next in line.

Faces radiant but still city-pale ringed our first campfire that evening. Pine smoke rose toward the mountain sky, then blew fitfully downstream. A few newcomers, their lungs not yet hardened to wood smoke and their eyes smarting, scurried out of its path. The smoke, of course, followed them.

In the circle stood Dr. Pat Goldsworthy, one of the trip leaders, a biochemist at the University of Washington. Expectantly the crowd grew quiet as Pat glanced at his watch.

"The official time is 8:47," he began. An immediate checking of timepieces revealed a strange lack of unanimity; but veteran campers knew better than to protest. The leader's time would be the official time.

Two Weeks of Mountain Camping

"Welcome to the 48th Sierra Club High Trip," said Pat. "Most of you know why we're here, but it stands repeating. We're here to enjoy an experience of traveling through a mountain wilderness we've waited at least 50 weeks to see.

"Many of you have seen the Sierra before, and many of you will want to see it again and again. We're going to have fun seeing it.: This is a trip that belongs to all of us, through country that belongs to all of us."

The campfire suddenly settled, and one of the top logs rolled off, sending a shower of sparks against the deep-blue sky and urging a few timid newcomers back out of reach. Pat stopped the log with his foot, swung it back in place, then smiled again.

"We'll share the fun of this trip," he went on. "We'll share some of the inevitable problems of pitching and breaking up six different camps, the pleasures of preparing, serving, and eating 26 mountain meals—and the dubious joy of helping the crew clean up after some of the meals.

"More important, we'll share the mountains. Not just with ourselves, but with others who are coming later this summer, and for many summers to come. It's always been the Club's pride to leave the mountains as clean as we find them, or cleaner. We like the Indian's motto: 'Where I go, I leave no sign.'

"Finally, we want to remember why these trips were started in the first place by John Muir and Will Colby, back in 1901. It was to encourage people to learn about mountain country, show them how to use it without abusing it, and get their help in conserving it for our children and our children's children."

Tulainyo Lake Sits in a Frozen Cup...

Sierra lakes range from navigable bodies of 200 square miles to small glacial ponds. Tulainyo at 12,865 feet is the highest lake in the United States. Icebound in winter, it has no visible outlet.

Pat paused a moment. "Tomorrow morning the first call will be at 4:30."

Groans and cheers—the cheers from oldtimers who knew that early starts paid off. The sooner we began the long climb up to our 2-mile-high camp in Inyo National Forest, the more ground we could cover before the sun grew uncomfortably warm.

Off as Sunrise Shows the Trail

We were jolted from our sleeping bags next morning by a hideous chorus of wolf calls and would-be yodels: the commissary crew's. They had been up more than an hour preparing breakfast, and now they apparently wanted us to share their misery.

In the Sierra's chill morning air we packed our dunnage, weighed it in again, and gathered in quiet groups around the 20-gallon coffeepot. Slowly the black metallic brew brought us to life. It was light enough to travel now, and in the distance the high places beckoned.

Bruce Morgan, our head packer, would supervise the loading of our eight strings of livestock (a packer, his horse, and five mules per string) that would carry our food, dunnage, and commissary equipment. Thanks to the mules, each of us need shoulder little more than his lunch in a light knapsack.

"Slow and steady wins the race," I reminded my boys as we started out. "And if your heels or toes start to hurt even a little bit, let me know, and we'll fix them so you won't get a blister."

I led the way. I knew enough about small boys on trails to feel sure that, left to themselves, they would scamper up, back, right, and left like exploring puppies. We adopted the infantrymen's schedule of movement—hike for 50 minutes and stop for 10.

At our first break on the zigzag trail we picked a good promontory and stripped down to our hiking shorts. The vista's broad sweep was not of much interest to the boys; they were more concerned with details close at hand—a shiny rock, a fluttering bird, a lizard, or a chance to stir up an anthill with a stick.

What caught my eye was the eons-old evidence of the cataclysmic forces that had made the Sierra Nevada the largest singleblock range within continental United States.

Sierra Uplifted Two Miles

Ours would have been an interesting spot to watch from in Pleistocene times, a million years ago. For then a series of low ranges—the ancestral Sierra—underwent tremendous uplifting along a 430-mile line at the base of the eastern slope. The huge block tilted upward two vertical miles. To the eastward, broad Owens Valley and the Inyo Mountains rose with the Sierra.

About 750,000 years ago, as demonstrated in some geological detective work by the late Francois E. Matthes, Owens Valley dropped until it was two miles below its neighbor, Mount Whitney, highest point in any of our 48 States.

Along Cottonwood Creek, just above the great dropoff to Owens Valley, we stopped for a trail lunch of hardtack, cheese, lunch meat, dried fruit, jam, and chocolate.

When the trail pulled us on, we started a game of seeing how many different flowers we could spot in the well-watered meadows. In all the Sierra we had some 1,200 different plants and ferns to choose from.

Fifty-six varieties and several miles later we heard the cheerful cry, "It's just a quarter of a mile to camp."

It was Dixie Carpenter, mother of two of our commissary crew, reclining beneath a tree just off the trail. A social psychologist, she was now doing her duty as chairman of the morale-building committee (in the Sierra Club it's traditional to have someone stationed to give encouragement near a hard day's end).

Soon we found the commissary, set up by an advance crew the day before, among a grove of trees at about 10,000 feet. Wood was being gathered and pits were being dug. In a short time a stove was in fragrant operation. Promptly my boys whooped it up, greeted old friends, and put on such a display of energy that I wondered if it was really for them I had held the pace down.

1952 Sierra Snowfall 66 Feet

We faced uncertainties. The previous winter had not been too severe, but spring had been cold, and snows had not melted as they should. There were still drifts left over from the previous Sierra winter (1951-52), when the snowfall totaled 66 feet!

Bruce Morgan had sent a crew up to snowblocked Army Pass to see what could be done about opening it. Having tried shovel and dynamite to no avail, they were certain they could not move the pack animals across. Our mules would have to circle south.

I counted on being able to devise some system for getting us over Army Pass, but first I wanted to scout the trail. I remembered the High Trip 12 years ago that circled northern Yosemite National Park and learned in tragic fashion the need of respect for any snow slope, no matter how innocent-looking.

"It's snow; it's soft, so let's slide down it" has all too often led to disaster, and in northeastern Yosemite it did.

One man, relaxing his vigilance for a second on Matterhorn Peak, catapulted down the slope and onto jagged rocks below, at the cost of a broken pelvis and some 50 stitches in his scalp. Next day, in the same snowbank, another man paid for the same mistake with a broken leg.

With Phil Berry, our mountaineering guide for this summer's trip, I started out. Three miles of rapid travel took us to Golden Trout Camp. The many Cottonwood Lakes below Army Pass came next. Then we were in highbasin country, a world of granite scarred by glaciers.

Lightning Too Close for Comfort

By the time we had climbed to the last basin under Army Pass, the sky became ominous, and before long we were caught in a shower of half snow, half hail. Shorts were no armor against this, so we pulled on climbing pants and parkas. As we scurried for shelter, lightning struck on the ridges and thunder bounced around the basin walls.

We found a big boulder just as heavy rain set in and crawled under it to eat our lunch. It was a trifle cramped, but dry—for a while. Then rivulets curled in under our overhang and dripped remorselessly down our necks.

We might have weathered the rain, but the electrical display became too dramatic for comfort. California's mountains are not noted for their violent thunderstorms. But this one was out to set a record. Lightning crashed often and close. Finally, when one thunderbolt exploded a few yards away like a 240mm. shell, Phil yelled, "Let's get out of here!"

The downpour soon found its way through our "waterproof" parkas. Meadows were flooding; trails were streams.

We slopped the five miles back to camp. There our friends told us they had had no rain at all.

Our second day's hike was to be 10 miles— a mile longer than the first. Again we felt it imperative to start early. In the Sierra, storms usually blow up in the afternoon, concentrating on the peaks and ridges; if we could cross the passes during the morning, we might fulfill the Club's proud if exaggerated boast: "It never rains on a well-managed High Trip!"

In most other years, it's true, the weather had made it pretty easy to live up to that claim. But 1952 had given us six consecutive days of rain, and the law of averages, I felt, might well catch up with us this summer.

At any rate, Phil Berry and I pushed up to the top of the pass by noon. Chopping his way up the final snow slope, Phil scooped out bucketlike footholds and planted a rope anchor that could serve as a hand line. The sun was still shining at intervals when the first members came up, speedy people who wanted to ascend 14,042-foot Mount Langley, southernmost of the high peaks along the Sierra crest. In ordinary weather it is an easy climb.

Looking down from the mouth of the pass, I could see now that a lot of our members wouldn't make it before the storm broke. Little groups were scattered along the trail a full two miles back. And somewhere in those miles were my own boys, with Jane Goldsworthy "baby-hiking." Reluctantly I turned my back on them and set off down the other side of the mountain to our next campsite on Rock Creek, where I had work to do. Within moments the storm swept the ridge with a barrage of hail and snow.

Jane told me later how she and the boys fared. As they approached the pass, my son Ken made up his mind the storm would be good fun. But Bob, the younger, became worried and upset. He remembered the warning given the night before—don't get caught on the heights with lightning crackling down.

Hail Mothball Size

"The hail," said Jane, "was the size of mothballs and felt like rocks when it hit. Bob insisted he wasn't going to climb the pass. When I saw that snow had covered your tracks, I was inclined to agree with him. We went on, however, though we could hardly see where we were going. Then I stumbled on the fixed guide rope."

"Didn't you find the bucket holds?" I asked.

"Not at first. They were filled with hail. But Marge Farquhar, one of the morale builders up on the pass, sang out: 'Use the steps and come on up.' So I pawed around, found the holds, dug them out with my tin cup, and up we went.

"There was Marge, sitting there as happily as if she were snug and dry in an opera box."

I might have known it: Marge is a director of the Sierra Club, a first-rate mountaineer, and a mother of three skillfully following their parents' footsteps. She'd packed her rucksack that morning with one eye on the weather, and now she could laugh at the storm, clad as she was in waterproof, windproof outer garments, and inner clothing that was both light and warm. Not everybody would have enjoyed that display of thunder and hail; but when Marge exclaimed, "It was magnificent!" I knew she meant it.

A horse, a mule, a tent, a small campfire, and a huge pile of food covered with canvas marked our campsite in the meadow-floored canyon of Rock Creek, a tributary of the Kern River. In command I found Tommy Jefferson, a full-blooded Mono Indian who has been packing the Club for many years. Tommy and his companion had moved these supplies up ahead of time on pack animals.

Squirrels Raid the Food Cache

"Any visitors ? " I asked Tommy.

"No bears," he replied with a grin. "Plenty of squirrels and chipmunks, though. Group of 'em snuck in under the canvas and staged a picnic, until I broke up the party. Getting kind of chilly, isn't it?"

"It is. And in just a few minutes a lot of wet, shivering people will be piling in here. Let's build up the fire."

Quent Stiles and John Blinks, our woodcutting and pit-digging Harvard Medical School students, rounded up volunteers and marched off with ax and saw to a clump of trees. They cut down a dead stump of resin-filled whitebark pine, a type of wood that burns almost like a torch, giving off clouds of black smoke but lots of heat as well— wonderful stuff for kindling. The forest's loose wood they left for parties not equipped to take trees apart.

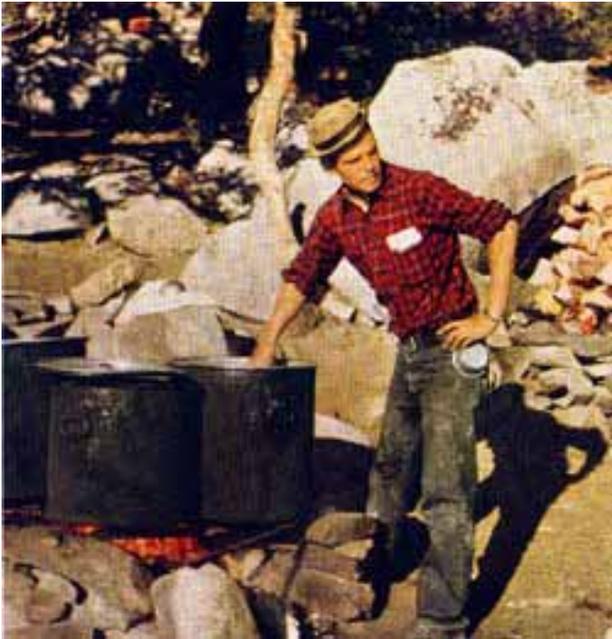
Soon the last of our stragglers had come in, and our small fire seemed in danger of being smothered.

"Let's get some songs started," someone suggested, and we did. In spite of the wet, spirits were high, and the singing helped to keep them there. Some of us even tried dancing, but stopped abruptly when each movement brushed our damp, chill clothing against our even chillier skin.

The arrival of mule strings with dunnage and cooking equipment set the camp into a frenzy. Each packer tied up his string, threw off the diamond hitches, removed the tarps, and unloaded, one mule at a time.

If his mule was on its first or second trip, the packer blindfolded it before loosening a single rope. Acting like a bronco, it can turn a camp into an impromptu rodeo if some sudden sound or movement alarms it. Taking off at a lope, the mule appears especially happy if its unloading has been only half-completed, giving it a chance to finish the job.

Fortunately, most of our pack animals proved tired enough to stand still, anxious only to be relieved of their burdens and to roll in the nearest pasture. More commotion was caused by hikers milling about in range of those lethal hoofs, searching for their packs and sleeping bags.



From amiable chaos, order gradually emerged. Soon the stove was up and puffing smoke. Fireplaces were built for the big pots of soup, coffee, chocolate, and cereal, and for tubs of wash water, and the aroma of food was presently wafted along by the mountain winds. The food cache was systematically reassembled under a canvas pitched to give the cooks a dry place to work.

While this was going on, others scouted the woods for bed sites. Old hands looked for a spot on the uphill side of a tree, where the years had gathered enough soil, topped with duff, to make a reasonable couch, once a few pine cones and rocks had been removed. A hat, a bandanna, or a cup was enough to mark such a spot as private property.

The assignment of bed-site territory follows a Sierra Club tradition. Men sleep upstream, women downstream, married couples in between or across the stream. The category "married" includes families—a mother and son, or father and daughter—who would like to camp on the same knoll.

Why Women Sleep Downstream

The packers' camp, usually upstream with the men, must have enough trees on which ropes can be strung to form a corral. Commissary, a term applied to cook crew and their equipment, is central. Woe to the member who camps too close to commissary, unless he does not mind being awakened early.

"But why," a freshman asked me, "do you always put the men upstream?"

"Women are always rinsing out clothes," I explained, "so we put them downstream where they can wash whenever they want to. Since men never seem to wash at all, we feel safe in having them above commissary."

Actually, washing arrangements have suffered some changes even in relatively brief experience. As recently as 1934 I was on the trail for 30 days without seeing another person except my companions. But nowadays the interval is more likely to be 30 minutes.

As a result, commissary today supplies our hikers with plenty of buckets. These they fill at the stream or from commissary's own tubs of hot water, use for washing or laundering, and then toss the water out well back from the bank.

Food Servers Eat First.

The cooks' cry summoned everyone to the commissary area, but only a few to eat. The packers, the crew, and the volunteers who would serve the courses were dining first. They could never otherwise have survived being so close to food, and unfed.

Moments later, servers dished up for the crowd steaming cups of Rock Creek soup, named for the stream from which it was largely composed. A salad of raw vegetables and cabbage, which rides the mules better than lettuce, followed the soup. Then potatoes and meat went on the line. A dessert of fruit and cookies topped the meal.

The kind of meat on the menu depends on the night it is served. Lamb, for instance, is eaten early on the trip because it doesn't carry well; canned ham is saved for last because it does. The first beef night is likely to be a stew from odds and ends off the hindquarter of a steer. Next is roast-beef night. Finally, mellowed to perfection, come the steaks. Several waiting lines are laid out and labeled "still mooing," "rare," "medium," and "well done."

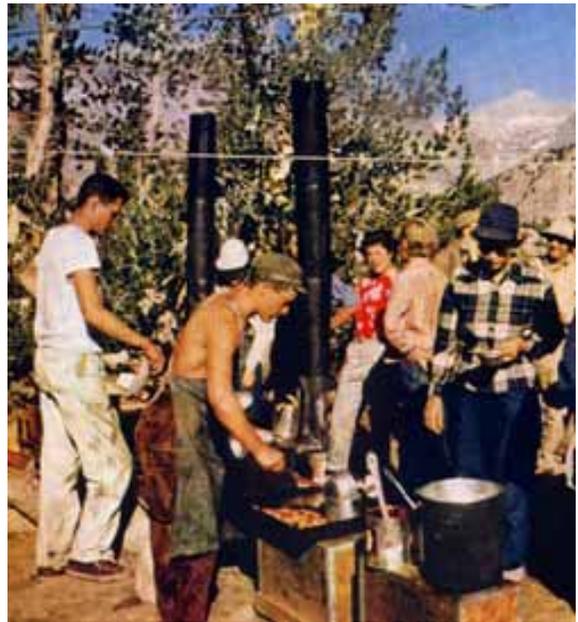
"Life seems neither long nor short," John Muir wrote of Sierra travel, "and we take no more heed to save time or make haste than do the trees and stars."

That first evening beside Rock Creek we counted some of the heedless stars. But we had to count fast, for rain soon set in.

The next day we stayed at this same campsite, exploring near by and resting a bit. But for the packers this meant no recess at all: in the Sierra Club system, layover days mean nothing but a chance for the packers to steal a march on the rest of the party.

If the following day's hike is to be seven miles or less, the pack train carries commissary supplies and equipment up to the new camp in the morning, returns in the afternoon for dunnage, and packs up again. If it's more than seven miles between camps, the party is split. Half the climbers and half the commissary department move on the first day, with the stock returning to carry gear for the other half on the morrow.

Such split moves and three-way moves are complicated; nevertheless, the system allows one head of stock to serve three people, an amazingly favorable ratio for a pack trip. Luxurious private trips often take three or four animals to serve one person.



Our next hike was to take us to Crabtree Creek, with headwaters near Trail Crest, and it would be a split-move operation. Bruce Morgan went over the maps with me.

"Timberline Lake," he said, "is the best place to camp. Put your packers at the upper end of it, just where the trail starts up to the next bench. There's lots of room for the people over in the trees to the south."

A Trail Across Three Giants

Our first group of climbers struck out on a route that lay near the Sierra's crest. Their trail would lead them directly to the new camp, but would include ascents of Mount Le Conte, 13,960 feet; Mount Mallory, 13,870; and Mount McAdie, 13,800, on the Sierra ridge leading to Mount Whitney.

Ken, Bob, several other hikers, and myself chose instead a longer but less strenuous route that lay in the Kern River basin. Al Carpenter broke trail at a 5-mile-an-hour pace to place Sierra Club arrows at confusing trail junctions. My boys and I strolled along at half that speed.

This was Bob's second High Trip and Ken's third, so I was probably conservative in holding them back to 2.5 miles an hour that day. The year before, they climbed 2,500 feet to 12,000-foot Baxter Pass and descended 8,500 feet, covering 15.5 miles in all.

This I recite partly out of parental pride, but primarily to show what youngsters are capable of doing if their energies can be focused on the trail. It is well worth pointing out, if only to persuade hesitant parents how much children can do. Bob, who was only six years old at the time, had had no mountain experience; yet he pushed along tirelessly and happily.

Our path lay along a plateau fascinating to geologists. Before the Sierra block was tilted an uplift caused most of the streams to change their north-south flow and cut westward into San Joaquin Valley. The Kern River, however, entrenched itself in its original bed and continued to run south. With the aid of glaciers it excavated the deep U-shaped canyon it now occupies; yet many of the old, broad valley's features are still preserved.

The boys pushed me along at a good clip. We soon rounded one of the lateral moraines of the ancient glacier that crept down to the Kern from Mount Whitney. From here we dropped into Crabtree Meadow, a garden spot with views of Whitney framed through lodgepole pines, only to find that we must still climb 1,000 feet in three miles.

This would have seemed a simple task early in the morning. But in midafternoon, at the end of a long trek, it was not exactly inspiring. I expected Ken and Bob to voice a protest or two. They fooled me, however. Beyond a few questions about how much ground they had covered, they plugged up that trail as if their legs were built for that purpose alone.

We topped the ridge at last and ambled down the slope to Timberline Lake. Rounding its grassy shore, we trudged up to its eastern end, where Bruce Morgan had told us to camp.

We found a somewhat worried Al Carpenter surveying the layout. "It looks rugged," he said. "Wood's really scarce, and there aren't many bed sites. A good place for commissary would be over behind that big rock."

Rains Wash Away Sleeping Places

Pickings were thin indeed. If there had once been bed sites, the heavy rains had washed most of them out. Even lumpy benches of gravel were sparse.

"I'm going down to the lower end of the lake to see if it's any better there," I said.

Up on a granite ridge just to the north of Timberline Lake I found a series of broad ledges with scattered trees. On the crest itself bed sites abounded. Still farther stretched a broad verdant meadow watered by springs. If we could spread out more than we usually did, I decided, this might prove to be one of the best campsites of all.

And it did. Our campfire we put on the topmost ridge, giving us an expansive, heart-lifting view toward the west. Distant storms staged an everchanging drama before us, with full lighting and sound effects. My eldest was impressed enough to write his mother:

"Up on Mount Whitney the clouds are smoke. Down at camp the reflection shows everything. It rained and hailed. I saw a clap of lightning a little bit away."

The smoke on Whitney cleared at the last possible moment, giving the sun just time to come in beneath the spectacular overcast and show fire burning on the peaks. Timberline Lake faithfully repeated much of what it saw.

Up on the ridges our amateur photographers dashed over granite slopes, trying to capture for a lifetime a moment of mountain magic.

The Crabtree layover day gave us a chance to fish, botanize, and swim. In addition, some 50 people, well distributed below granite cliffs near the men's camp, participated in quite a show—the Polemonium Club in action. This club, named for the handsome flower of the highest peaks, teaches rock climbing and rope management to beginners.

"We don't expect to teach you enough about mountaineering to get you up the Lost Arrow or Mount Everest," Phil Berry announced, "but we do expect you to learn enough to make it safer for you to explore a bit on the High Trip. We can show fishermen, for instance, enough about balance climbing to help them on slippery rocks."

For all his youth—he is a Berkeley high school senior—Phil has learned a lot about mountaineering, and about teaching it, too.

Polemonium antics appear inane—people all over the cliffs with ropes in every direction, struggling to climb to places they could easily walk to. But it all has its purpose. Just such practice as this, held on High Trips and in rocky parks around San Francisco, led to the first ascent of such frightening spires as Yosemite's Lost Arrow.

This achievement required five days and four nights of extremely difficult climbing and bivouacking on tiny ledges. Since the total height attacked was only 1,200 feet and climbing time was 103 hours, that meant an average upward speed of only 11.5 agonizing feet per hour.

Mount Whitney has only two things in common with Lost Arrow. It is built of granite, and its top is higher than its base. Otherwise, it holds no terrors. A horse trail leads up the western slope to the 14,495-foot summit.

We couldn't agree on the best time of the day to be on top. I had thought that watching dawn from the pinnacle of the United States would be the most dramatic experience. Cedric Wright drew on his years of work as a photographer to proclaim that sunset had it all over sunrise.

The upshot was that for the next two days the Whitney trail was as busy as a highway. Several strings of mules went over Trail Crest, the pass south of Whitney, and dropped down into Lone Pine Creek to bring in more provisions. A few hardy souls started out at night so they could see the first streaks of red dawn from the summit. One large group left camp at 4 in the morning, others early enough in the afternoon to reach the peak by sunset. They came down by moonlight.

Phil Berry persuaded me that we, too, should take in Mount Whitney while scouting a cross-country route to our next camp. We started at a lazy 9 in the morning. As we crossed the final crest, we decided to detour over to the 14,025-foot summit of Mount Muir just north of Trail Crest. This peak was named in honor of John Muir, who, more than any other man, awakened Americans to the importance of preserving in national parks such natural wonders as Yosemite and the Sequoia High Sierra.

Teetering on the Top of a Spire

Phil and I dropped back to the trail and took a second side trip to a rakishly overhanging spire on Muir Crest that had caught his fancy. The final pinnacle, which seemed to project by about 1,500 feet from the top of the eastern escarpment, was more than I cared to tackle. Phil, however, was all for standing on it—there was just room for his feet—and he did so in spite of a high wind.

I was content to assume the more conservative role of a married man with four children, and settled back to a secure anchor position. I wanted to let youth have its fling—but to make sure, with a good belay, it wasn't flung too far.

Phil's pinnacle may have been a trifle constricted. But the top of Whitney has all the space one could desire. Indeed, it was so spacious as to deceive Clarence King when he first saw it in 1864. King had his glimpse from the top of Mount Tyndall while serving with the California Geological Survey. The Survey was then exploring the Sierra under the direction of Josiah Dwight Whitney, whose name our highest mountain bears.

Glaciers Carved Whitney's Walls

Upon seeing the broad plateau of Whitney's summit, and other summits in the High Sierra not unlike it, the geologists decided that at one time the peaks must have been 1,500 feet higher and that some unknown force had sheared them off. We know now that these plateaus are merely remnants of ancestral rolling hills, deeply sculptured by glaciers.

From the top we could look down the terrifying east face of Whitney, the rock climbers' route pioneered in 1931. Here, as from few other places in the Sierra, we could see not only where we were going but where we had been. One dominant peak was Mount Brewer. Another was Mount Tyndall, to which Clarence King traveled in one of the most dramatic of early Sierra exploration trips, described in *his Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada*.

On Mount Whitney we could stand, if we stood with care, on the boundary between Sequoia National Park and the High Sierra Primitive Area of Inyo National Forest. We could be thankful the Sierra's explorers had determined that this climax of California's scenic resources should not be destroyed by the wave of exploitation that swept westward in a day when the wilderness was something to destroy, simply because it was an obstacle.

But Phil and I had work to do. Checking the *Climber's Guide to the High Sierra*, we learned approximately at what point we should leave the summit to descend the north face, the mountaineers' route. From its base we could explore the headwaters of the stream leading back to camp for our cross-country route into Wallace Creek, to the north.

We soon wished the Guide had been more explicit, for we discovered in our exploration that there were in reality several chutes down the north face, and all were worn too smooth by the avalanches of centuries to look very inviting from above. We worked westward, hoping other chutes or ridges between them would look more tempting. Finally, with no more to choose from, we started down.

A slip could cause embarrassment and no little pain. But we could see no reason to slip. The holds were all there, even if we did have to look hard to find them. All we had to do was stand up straight and rely upon the friction of our rubber-soled sneakers, aided now and then by a handhold. The one requirement was that each movement be precise. There was no opportunity to relax as one does on the trail. It was a matter of knowing exactly where a foot was going.

Once down at the level of Russell Creek, we spent an exhilarating but unsuccessful two hours of searching for a cross-country route across a notch that looked good on the map. The south side of the notch had been difficult going, but the north was just one horrible precipice. Retreating, we stopped for a drink at one of the high, partly frozen lakes and walked on down toward camp. Several times flurries of hail overtook us.

At our next camp, on Wright Creek, northern branch of Wallace Creek, we built our campfire on top of a little knoll just above camp, about three minutes' walk from the serving line.

Not all our group were gathered around the fire. One party of intrepid souls had struck out for Milestone Creek, northwestern source of the Kern River.

Collecting an assortment of dehydrated food at commissary, they added a few lightweight pots and cans, sleeping bags, cameras, fishing equipment, first-aid kits, a flashlight or two, and set out for two days along the west side of the Kern River. They were headed, as I well knew, for some of the pleasantest scenery in the Sierra: Milestone Bench is set in a meadow, near a meandering stream and a timberline forest, with jagged peaks as a backdrop and a matchless view of the range's crest.

Sierra Bighorns Now Number 400

Yet I could not truly envy them. From our own camp on Wright Creek, east of Bighorn Plateau, we could look up at Whitney, Russell, Barnard, Tyndall, and Williamson, all the fourteen-thousanders. They towered above the open Kern basin, down which Wright Creek made its musical way from snow-bordered lakes.

The sharp peaks of the Great Western Divide punctuated the far sky, bathing their shadows in deep purple. This range divides the Sequoia National Park at its narrow waist. The sky itself reflected the scene below, if not too accurately, with range upon range of cloud mountains.

But long after these distant vistas had lost recognizable detail in the dusk, Bighorn Plateau still held our fancy. It would have been nice to see a band of Sierra bighorn, but there are only about 400 of the animals left in all the range. The few roving bands must have detected the presence of our group long before we arrived. By now they would be on the high crags or over the Sierra crest. We could console ourselves with the thought that these great sheep, protected from man's depredations, are apparently slowly increasing.

Silhouetted on top of Bighorn Plateau was the frontier forest of the Kern River. North of the Sequoia Park boundary the whitebark pine, *Pinus albicaulis*, holds the forest outpost of the Arctic-Alpine zone.

Centuries-old Pines Three Feet Tall

In its lower reaches this pine grows in clumps 30 feet high. In its uppermost range, where the snows lie longest and deepest and winds blow practically all the time, the trees are forced into low-lying thickets to protect themselves. They may be hundreds of years old, yet no more than three to six feet high, their mat of needles so dense that you could walk over the tops.

But in the Kern River area below the whitebark pine it is the lodgepole pine that dominates the scene, and there is no gradation from big trees to small. They advance, full size, to their upper limit, then stop short.

We could see this on Bighorn Plateau, and we could also see, quite detached from the others, the still more rugged pioneers which had succumbed during the ages. These trees had been struck dead but not down. Some of course, had fallen, but whether fallen or defiantly upright, they were perfectly preserved by dry, sterile air and were beautiful things to contemplate.

I made a quick count of the rings in a weathered piece of root eight inches through. It was just a few years short of 1,000 years old!

Finally, all that could be seen was the fire itself, flickering on the faces of the campers. The "program" was relaxed, informal. Someone spoke on wildlife; another filled in the history of the region. Music from an accordion sounded, and we sang: first, rollicking marching songs; then, as the fire died, the haunting melodies of the mountains. Finally we trailed away to our sleeping bags beneath the stars. Still another beautiful campsite awaited us across the most spectacular of the park's passes—Forester Pass, 13,200 feet high. There a bubbling stream, circled by great crags and buttresses, cascaded merrily past the scene of our last layover and our last campfire.

Then our two short weeks were over, and we stood on Kearsarge Pass looking out, envying the second two-weeks group which would soon stand there looking in. In taking leave of the Sierra, we felt we were parting with a friend. For that is the impact of this approachable range. Its peaks stand close. Its forests are open and

parklike. Its only troublesome reptile, the rattler, stays away from the high ranges. Only an occasional pioneering bear ever perturbs the camper.

And the Sierra's weather—this is the most friendly aspect of all. For the Sierra invites one out of doors to enjoy wild things in weather that is not wild at all.

Thinking of why I had come, and the thousands before me, I knew it was not for the fishing (though it can be good) nor for the hunting (which in season is superb) nor for the lure of unclimbed peaks (no major ones remained unscaled). Rather, it was to renew myself in the wilderness, to lift up my eyes to the timeless hills, and to sense again what John Muir meant when he wrote:

"The last days of this glacial winter are not yet past, so young is our world. I used to envy the father of our race, dwelling as he did in contact with the new-made fields and plants of Eden; but I do so no more, because I have discovered that I also live in 'creation's dawn.' The morning stars still sing together, and the world, not yet half made, becomes more beautiful every day."

The Author

David R. Brower was (at the time of the writing of this article) executive director of the Sierra Club, founded in 1892 "to explore, enjoy, and protect the natural mountain scene." A member of the Club since 1933, he has been on its Board of Directors since 1941 and manager of its High Trips since 1947. He also has edited the Sierra Club Bulletin and three of its books, *Manual of Ski Mountaineering*, the *Sierra Club Handbook*, and *Going Light—With Backpack or Burro*. During World War II Mr. Brower saw combat service with United States mountain troops in Italy and is now a major in the Army Reserve.

[Excerpt from the July 1954 edition of the *National Geographic Magazine*.]