

Walter A. Starr, Jr.

(1903 – 1933)

By Vincent Butler

WALTER AUGUSTUS STARR, JR., was born in Oakland, May 29, 1903, the first son of Walter A. Starr and Carmen Moore Starr. He came of stern stuff on all sides, the pioneer stock that had to prove its worth to get here when California was young. Not only were his ancestors among the first settlers in California, but theirs in turn were prerevolutionary pioneers in America. The spirit of adventure, exploration and original individual effort was strong in all of them, and these inherited traits found no diminution in him.

His maternal grandfather, A. A. Moore, who came to California across the plains from Illinois in 1853 when a boy aged twelve, will be remembered as one of the most colorful and militant leaders of the State Bar for several decades. One of his paternal great-grandfathers, Milo Calkin, after an adventurous life at sea, trading between the New England coast and the Pacific, was United States Consul in the Hawaiian Islands during the 1840's and came to California in 1849. His father, Walter A. Starr, to whose part in the publication of this Guide proper reference has been made, completed with Allen L. Chickering in 1896, while they were undergraduates in the University of California, the first continuous trip to be made through the High Sierra from Yosemite to Rings River Canyon. In the following year he left college on graduation to join the Klondike Argonauts, and drove by dog-team one of the first United States mails the length of the Yukon from Skagway through Dawson to Tanana.



"Pete" Starr, as known to his friends, did his preparatory educational work in the public schools of Piedmont and in Oakland Technical High School. When a youngster he spent his holiday time at his grandfather's ranch, on Mission Peak, and on trips into the mountains with his father. Very early he showed unusual aptitude in finding his way about, and he quickly developed a passionate love of Nature and her finest scenes.

He entered Stanford University in 1921, graduating in 1924, and from Stanford Law School in 1926, completing the usual seven years of work in five. His record was brilliant. He then spent a year abroad, with several months in the Swiss Alps, where he climbed Mont Blanc.

On his return to California he passed the State Bar examinations and commenced active practice late in 1927. A short time after he became my junior in his professional work. In it he displayed the integrity and brilliance that one was encouraged to expect from his proud heritage and loyal endeavor. He was ever enthusiastic, resourceful, imaginative, indefatigable. So was he in his Sierra work which has made this unique

contribution to mountain lore.

He spent all of his vacations and many of his holiday week-ends in the High Sierra. Although he was rich in social grace and charm, and thoroughly enjoyed people, he shared with John Muir the love of solitude in the high mountains. In 1929 he conceived the idea of a comprehensive Guide to the High Sierra, and he set about compiling data for it in a studious and well-ordered way, doing the job himself. There was no thought of glory or personal prestige in his concept or in his work. He knew the need and he wanted others to share his enjoyment of the great range that was his second home. His plan was to give the Guide to the Sierra Club, of which he was a life member.

In his short span, he climbed forty-two main peaks between Yosemite Park and Sequoia Park, and covered at least two thousand miles of trails and knapsack routes, some of them several times. His endurance and enthusiasm were almost without parallel. A remarkable example is given in his diary of a holiday week end knapsack trip in the Yosemite region in 1930. He left the valley at noon, Saturday, September 6, 1930, and returned the following Wednesday morning at six. In the interval he had traveled alone, with his pack on his back, taking notes, distances, altitudes, and observations, over one hundred and forty-three miles of mountain trails and passes. His route led via Merced Lake over Isberg Pass to the Middle Fork of the San Joaquin, and thence to the Devils Postpile under Mammoth Pass. He came back via Thousand Island Lake, Island Pass, Donohue Pass, Tuolumne Meadows, and Lake Tenaya to Yosemite. Some of the travel was at night under a full moon. The return from the Devils Postpile to below Tenaya, forty-eight miles, was made between 1:30 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. of the same day. The finish of ten miles to Yosemite was made by 6:00 a.m. the following morning.

WHEN the word went out in August, 1933, that Peter was missing in The Minarets, many heroic companions, whose names are first in California mountaineering, responded to lead the search. Among them were Norman Clyde, Jules Eichorn, Glen Dawson, Oliver Kehrlein, and Dick Jones. The President of the Sierra Club, Francis Farquhar, made the search from the air, and later wrote a letter in which Peter's name is given the place that is his due:

"It is a grand company, those who have not come back. There are the Englishmen — Mummery, of Nanga Parbat, Mallory and Irvine, of Everest; and the Americans — Allen Carpe and Theodore Koven, of Mount McKinley, Newman Waffl, of Robson, and now, Pete Starr, of The Minarets. The young men of today know them, and the young men of tomorrow will not forget them. We all salute them!"

There was something of true genius in "Peter" Starr. This book gives evidence of it, and there were other signs. Peter was a poet in his heart and in his music as well as in his mountains. He found solace in solitude and he often attained the heights — where he now rests.

When Peter, as often as the chance offered, would go into the high mountain area, where he found "springtime in my strip of blue lakes, through which winds the Muir trail," there was no boast from him that this rich work was in the making. For us who loved him and knew what he was about, there was no apprehension that his Guide would come to us — as his legacy.

Mountaineers recognize that Peter was a really great one among them, whose physical capacity was matched only by his spiritual sense. It is deep tragedy that this volume should appear as his posthumous work.

It is none the less a part of the permanent record of California that this is the enduring gift of a young man who gave his life at the age of thirty in completing the first Guide to the High Sierra.

There is special meaning in the name of Peter Starr. He chose "Peter" himself for reasons of his own. His patronym suggests his scintillating radiance and his home in high places. His adoptive name is from the classic word for rock.

If Peter were to have chosen his resting-place, he would have asked for his present one. He is untimely there, but he is eternally embraced by his youthful love, and the two have become one.

When the traveler, following this Guide, comes to Peter's last camp at Lake Ediza and surveys The Minarets, he will be reverent, in his reverie. He will not forget that Peter's radiant soul went heavenward from there, and he will recall the last lines of his last verse,

"Defiant mountains beckon me
To glory and dream in their Paradise."

And remembering that The Minarets take their name from the towers of the temples of old with projecting balconies, from which the people were called to prayer, the traveler will pause to answer in memory of the brave spirit there.

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