

# Home on the Range

## High Trip, Burro Trip, Knapsack Trip

By Oscar Lewis

**A**lthough, during its first California incarnation, the activities of the Ancient and Benevolent Order of E Clampus Vitus were mainly confined to the towns and camps of the Sierra, it cannot properly be termed an association of mountaineers. That distinction, in so far as these mountains are concerned, belongs to another organization - the Sierra Club - and the story of how it came into being is an interesting one.

As has been indicated, the Californian's attitude toward the great range that parallels the eastern border of his state has over the years undergone a series of changes. During the gold rush and for some years thereafter it was looked on as a bulky, awkward, and inconveniently high barrier shutting off the state from the rest of the nation, over which one could make one's way only with the expenditure of much time and effort and, not infrequently, with a certain degree of peril. Later, safe and reasonably speedy means of trans-mountain travel having been provided, first by wagon roads and then by the railroad, the public came to look on the range from a new viewpoint; that is, as an area possessing certain resources useful to the economy of the rapidly growing state. Thus was ushered in a period lasting several decades during which these resources were exploited to the full, with little thought being given to what the ultimate result might be.

To be sure there were a far-sighted few who, as early as the 1860's, deplored this reckless waste and urged that steps be taken to withhold certain areas from spoliation by private interests and so preserve them in their natural state for the enjoyment of future generations. Accordingly, the first step in that direction was taken in 1864 when a bill, introduced by California's Senator Conness, was passed by Congress transferring title to the Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of Big Trees to the state, with the proviso that they be held in perpetuity for the use of the public.

After that beginning, however, for more than a quarter century, little further was accomplished in the way of setting aside other scenic areas of the range. It was not until 1890 that, as we have seen, Congress passed an act creating the Yosemite National Park, an area of lofty peaks and picturesque mountain lakes and canyons embracing some 12,000 square miles and completely surrounding the state-owned Yosemite Valley. The passage of that bill caused concern to many Californians, particularly to sheep owners, lumbermen, and miners, and considerable pressure was brought to bear on Congress to repeal the act, or, failing that to make drastic reductions in the size of the park. By then, however, a movement looking toward the preservation of the nation's natural resources had gained adherents all over the country, and in California members of that group were considering plans of how best to combat efforts to have the act rescinded or modified.

The result was the organization in the spring of 1890 of the Sierra Club, with John Muir serving as its first president. Its purposes, according to its Articles of Incorporation, were: "To explore, enjoy and render accessible the mountain regions of the Pacific Coast; to publish authentic information concerning them; to enlist the support and co-operation of the people and the Government in preserving the forests and other natural features of the Sierra Nevada." The club's first act was to wage a vigorous and ultimately successful campaign to defeat the bill then before Congress that would have reduced the area of the Yosemite National Park by more than half. Next it undertook to bring about the formation of other national parks and forest reserves, and in this it was so

successful that during the next few years a number of other large areas were set aside, both in the Sierra and elsewhere on the Pacific Coast.

During its first few years, another of the club's prime objectives was to make the scenic attractions of the range more widely known, and to that end steps were taken to encourage the building of roads and trails by which the public could reach great areas of the back country that had previously been closed to all but the hardiest mountaineers. In order to further that aim, the club in 1901 inaugurated what has ever since been its best-known and most widely popular activity; that is, its sponsorship each year of summer camping trips into the high Sierra. During the first few seasons base camps were set up at spots within easy reach of existing roads, and from such points parties visited places of interest in the areas, scaling the neighboring peaks or setting off on two- or three-day camping trips.

Presently, however, this plan was modified, the annual outings becoming itinerant pilgrimages during which the parties made extensive tours of the remote upper sections of the range, establishing new camps each night. Such trips, lasting a month or longer, served to introduce the wonders of the high Sierra to thousands and, in nearly every case, made ardent mountain-lovers of them. The annual excursions took in many points of interest in the most rugged and picturesque parts of the range; that is, the area that lies between Mount Whitney on the south and the Yosemite National Park, including the lofty peaks and chains of mountain lakes and meadows in the upper reaches of the Kings and Kern rivers, as well as numerous other spots equally spectacular.



So popular did these mountain treks become that by the late 1930's they had grown to an unwieldy size and a new policy had to be adopted. Accordingly, now three separate excursions are offered each summer; namely, the High Trip, the Burro Trip, and the Knapsack Trip. These still visit different areas of the mountains and, as

their names indicate, different modes of travel. On the High Trip, pack animals carry food and supplies to one or another of a series of camping grounds, at each of which stops of from two to five days are made, the members proceeding from one camp site to the next at whatever pace suits their fancy and, on arriving, finding their meals prepared for them by commissary crews. These are commonly the most numerous groups – some joining up for a two-week period, others remaining four or six weeks -but in recent years a limit placed on the number of High Trippers to avoid grazing facilities by too many pack animals.

On the Burro Trips - normally limited to twenty members -the campers for the most part shift for themselves, learning the art of loading the little beasts that carry their supplies, and each in turn taking a hand at preparing meals for the group. These excursionists maintain a far less rigid schedule than those who take the High Trips, for both the route followed and the camping places are chosen by the members themselves, the only restriction being that, because of the burros, they must stay on or near the established mountain trails.

So far as freedom of movement is concerned, however, the third of the series, the Knapsack Trip, is supreme. For on these the members dispense with pack animals entirely, carrying their personal belongings - sleeping bag, extra clothing, toilet articles, and the like, to a limit of twenty or twenty-five pounds-strapped to their backs, and progressing by whatever routes they choose to the designated camping sites, at which caches of food have been deposited in advance. There the vacationists remain for some time, cooking their own meals and visiting points of interest in the vicinity until their food supply runs low, then moving on to the next cache, and so on to the end of their tour.



Both men and women take part in these annual Sierra trips, and of all ages from high school youths to those of sixty or over. For the amount of energy expended is largely up to the individual, the less active spending his or her -time lounging about the camps or taking short rambles to nearby points while more strenuous members range farther afield, exploring the canyons or lakes of the area or scaling its lofty peaks. However because of the high altitudes encountered on all trips, those who take part are expected to be in sound health, and the club requires that applicants undergo a physical examination on joining up

During the more than six decades of the Sierra Club's existence the steadily growing popularity of the range as a recreation center has necessitated certain modifications of its original objectives. On its founding its announced purpose was, as stated, "to explore, enjoy and render accessible the mountain regions of the Pacific Coast" -and in particular the lofty Sierra Nevada Range, which was then terra incognita to all but a few Californians. With the passage of time, however, the entire area was thoroughly explored and mapped, while the building of roads and the advent of the automobile made easily accessible many districts that formerly could be reached only by those who traveled on foot, carrying supplies on their own backs or on those of pack animals.

While this steadily growing number of visitors at all seasons of the years - campers, fishermen, and mountain climbers during the summer months, and devotees of skiing and other winter sports when deep snows blanket the upper areas - is convincing evidence that the Sierra's facilities for recreation have come to be widely recognized, it has also posed serious problems. The chief of these, and one which "Sierra Club members view with growing concern, is that the, area of unspoiled wilderness grows smaller year by year. Thus during the past several decades the club's major effort 'has been directed toward discouraging the building of roads, inns, or like "improvements" in such districts, thereby keeping them in their natural state for the enjoyment of present and future visitors. To that end it has worked closely with the National Park Service, with the result that extensive areas in the most majestic parts of the range have been set aside, to be permanently preserved in their untouched, primeval state.

Text excerpt from the *High Sierra Country* by the Oscar Lewis, 1955.

- Photographs: 1. George Cosgrave – 1967 Sierra Club Handbook  
2. George Cosgrave – 1967 Sierra Club Handbook