

Some Sierra Superlatives

Mount Whitney – or Fisherman’s Peak?

By Oscar Lewis

At the eastern edge of the Sequoia National Park, in the upended country that forms the headwaters of the Kings and Kern rivers, looms Mount Whitney, the highest point in the continental United States, having an elevation of 14,495 feet. It was, however, not until some twenty years after California came under the American flag that Whitney's pre-eminence in that respect was generally recognized. In the meantime, the perpetually snow-capped bulk of Mount Shasta, standing athwart the northern end of the Sacramento Valley, had been accorded that distinction.

The reason why Shasta's claim went so long unchallenged is easily understood. For from whatever direction it was viewed, its lofty 14,161-foot cone stood out in lonely grandeur, shouldering high above its neighbors. Thus inevitably it became a landmark familiar to all who passed that way, being plainly visible to pioneers following the main-traveled routes over the Sierra, and directly in the path of those journeying between California and Oregon.

Whitney, on the other hand, was in a region little frequented during the early days. Located well beyond the then so remote that throughout the pioneer era few indeed ventured to penetrate far into its maze of lofty peaks and deep canyons. It was, in fact, not until 1864 that the outer world gained its first detailed knowledge of the topography and spectacular scenery of the Kings-Kern district.

In the summer of that year, a field party of the California State Geographical Survey, the chief of which was Josiah Dwight Whitney, made its way from the San Joaquin Valley up the course of the South Fork of the Kings, and, in early July, found itself at altitudes far greater than its members had expected. "We were not on the highest peak," wrote William H. Brewer, leader of the party, "although we were a thousand feet higher than we anticipated any peaks were. We had not supposed there were any over 12,000 or 12,500 feet, while we were actually up over 13,600, and there were a dozen peaks in sight beyond as high or higher!"

One member of the group, twenty-two-year-old Clarence King, got Brewer's permission to climb one of the most lofty of these neighboring peaks. With a single companion, King set off from the main camp and during the six days that followed, the pair made their way to the top of the one they had selected - only to find on reaching its summit that several higher peaks were visible just beyond, the tallest of which they christened Mount Whitney in honor of the chief of the survey.

King -who later gave a detailed account of the climb in his book, *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevadas*, published in the early 1870's- stated that on returning to the base camp he urged Brewer to allow him to climb that peak too. Permission being granted, he - this time with two soldiers, members of a troop of cavalry stationed in a San Joaquin Valley town-set off in mid-July, choosing a route that took them to the southeastern side of the mountain of their choice, only to find the ascent so precipitous that they were forced to abandon the attempt while still several hundred feet from its crest.

This failure, however, was far from discouraging the persistent King. Some half-dozen years later - he having meantime been placed in charge of a party sent out by the U.S. Geological Survey to run the line of the fortieth parallel - the opportunity came to make a new try. Setting off from Lone Pine in Inyo County at the eastern base of the range he, in company with a French packer named Pinson, made his way up the intervening canyons, "keeping to the granite as much as possible," and eventually came out on the crest of what he assumed to be the goal he had been aiming at so long. "I dared not think it the summit till we stood there," he concluded, "and Mount Whitney was under our feet."

It presently developed, however, that it was not Whitney that he and his companion had climbed with such effort but a considerably lower peak, then called "Sheep Rock" and later "Mount Langley." But it was several years before the mistake became known, and in the meantime King's published account of the perils he and Pinson had overcome to gain the mountain's "terrible crest" had had a wide reading. Hence, King - and the rest of the world - had no doubt that he had in truth stood on the apex of the nation's highest mountain that summer afternoon in 1871

Then, in August, 1873, he learned that, because of storm clouds that had obscured his vision during the ascent, he had mistaken the lower peak for Whitney and had climbed that instead. Far worse was the revelation that the summit he had reached with so much effort was in fact not at all hard to climb; that if, instead of scaling its clifflike southeastern face, he had approached it from any other direction, he would have had little difficulty.

This last was made abundantly clear by two parties that made the ascent of the pseudo Mount Whitney subsequent to King's climb in 1871. Both groups - the first in 1872 and the second the following year - reached the supposedly "terrible crest" after a quite easy climb, both making the entire trip without once having to dismount from their horses. One of the parties, that of Sheriff Mulkey of Inyo County, had included two women, the sheriff's wife and daughter. On gaining the summit the Mulkey group had been puzzled by the fact that off to the northeast, distant some five or six miles, loomed a peak that to them appeared far higher than the one on which they stood. However, since the latter had been officially designated the loftiest point in the area - and indeed in the entire United States - they doubted the evidence of their own eyes.

Not so the second party, however. For one of its members, W. A. Goodyear, was an experienced mountaineer and a former employee of the State Geographical Survey, and he was not so easily deceived. On his return from the crest of this obviously lower peak he addressed a letter to the California Academy of Sciences at San Francisco. This read in part:

On the 27th day of July, 1873, Mr. W. W. Belshaw, of Cerro Gordo, and myself, rode our mules to the peak southwest of Lone Pine, which, for over three years now, has been known by the name of Mount Whitney, and which was ascended and measured as such by Mr. Clarence King, in the summer of 1871.... It is by no means the highest among the grand cluster of peaks which form this culminating portion of the Sierra Nevada; nor is it the peak which was by Professor W. H. Brewer and party, in 1864, and then originally named by them Mount Whitney.

On learning that the mountain he had climbed with so much difficulty three years earlier was not "the" Mount Whitney, but one of its lesser neighbors, King lost no time. He promptly made his way back into the region, determined to scale the right mountain. This time he was successful, reaching his goal in mid-September of 1873. However, if, as seems probable, he had hoped to be the first to stand on its lofty summit, he

was doomed to disappointment. For on the crest he found unmistakable evidence that others had been there before him; namely, a pyramid of stones within which were written records making it clear that at least two parties had preceded him. These were, he wrote, "save for Indian hunters, the first, so far as we know, who achieved this dominating summit."

To whom rightfully belongs the distinction of having first stood on this loftiest spot within the confines of the fortyeight states has long been a matter of doubt. During the mid-1870's, a number of candidates for the honor appeared, and their respective claims were hotly debated in the newspapers of the area, notably in the Inyo Independent. Its editor, in the issue of September 13, 1873, set off the hassel by announcing that three residents of Lone Pine-A. H. Johnson, C. D. Begole, and John Lucas -had made the pioneer ascent, his account going on to state that the trio, having reached the top of the pseudo Mount Whitney on August 17 and spied the higher peak to the northwest, had resolved to climb that too. "The next day they started," the editor continued, "and passing over two deep canyons, spending the entire day in the labor, they finally succeeded in reaching its highest point, and have the honor of being the first to stand on the greatest elevation in the United States."

This claim was promptly challenged by a member of a rival group. The next issue of the little weekly printed a letter from one Tom McDonough in which he declared flatly that Johnson, Begole, and Lucas had never climbed the peak, and that his own party-whose names King later found in the little cairn on its crest - were the true discoverers. In the same issue, however, was a second letter upholding the claims of the Johnson-Begole-Lucas contingent. which stated that the three had been members of a party of fishermen encamped high on the Kern River and that while there they "took a trip to the summit of the highest mountain in the range and christened it 'Fisherman's Peak.' "

This writer, who signed himself "Fisherman," continued thus:

Some people are now trying to take the credit of their being the first there away from them, but they won't succeed. Prof. Whitney's agent has just returned from the mountain, and finds fault with the people here for their lack of romance in calling it "Fisherman's Peak." Ain't it as romantic as "Whitney"? The fishermen who found it looked mighty romantic on their return. . . . Wonder who the old earthquake sharp thinks is running this country, anyhow? [This last was a reference to the fact that Professor Whitney had recently been in the area tracing an earthquake fault.]

During the next several months the wordy battle continued, with, of course, neither faction succeeding in convincing the other. In the end, however, both sides scored a partial victory: the peak retained its name of Mount Whitney, and the party of fishermen were quite generally accorded the honor of having been first to climb it. Not until some years later, however, did the fishermen give up their efforts to have their name conferred on the peak. In the spring of 1878 the state assemblyman from Inyo County introduced into the lower house of the California legislature a bill providing that the mountain "shall be known as Fisherman's Peak, and the same is hereby declared to be the official name of the said peak, and the only name to be rewarded as legal in official documents, maps, or other instructions in writing, to be placed on State or county records, or used in reports made by State, county, or municipal officers."

The assembly unanimously passed the bill on March 28, and three days later it came up before the upper house. There the state senators, having due regard for the date - April 1 -voted to amend the document, substituting for Fisherman's Peak the name of the senator from the district where the mountain was located, rechrist-

tening it Fowler's Peak. In this form the bill was duly passed by that body; however, when it came before the governor, he-feeling that the joke had gone far enough-refused to sign it. Thus the country's highest mountain today bears the name of Whitney rather than that of the Lone Pine fishermen or of the latters' champion, Senator Fowler.

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