

Mass on the Summit of Mt. Whitney

Sage and Tumbleweed

September 23, 1934.

by *Inyokel

The top of the United is disappointing to the tourist who has pictured this highest of our peaks as a solitary monarch, like Fujiyama or Shasta. Viewed from the east, and 'It can be seen from that direction only up the gorge of Lone Pine Creek, it appears lower than nearer neighbors. In fact it is but two-hundred-odd feet higher than Williamson, six miles north, and the ridge which it tops averages 13,000 feet in elevation. From the west, whence the trail ascends, Mt. Whitney rises in a gentle curve to a level summit, like a nun's veil. One lover of the Sierras has well likened them to a giant billow whose crest seems ready to crash into Owens Valley. This simile aptly describes Whitney's eastern wall, a sheer drop of 1,500 feet to the turquoise tarn below.

A 20-minute drive from Lone Pine, in which you climb 3,000 feet through the sageland that separates the Alabamas from the Sierras, brings you to the present terminus of the Whitney trail. A CCC project soon will carry the road to Hunter's Flat, a pine-clad bench at the 8,500-foot level. Thence,



afoot or on horseback, the mountaineer follows Lone Pine Creek from bench to bench, each tread of the giant staircase cradling a lonely lake or a brave little meadow, each riser sprayed with a brawling waterfall or swishing slide. At Ibex park, 'tis said they once found some ibex horns there, the mile-high tawny granite walls draw back to leave an emerald floor about as large as a football stadium. Here, at Outpost camp, you bid goodbye to such luxuries as beds and fire, for a forest service sign warns you that in another mile you will have passed above the timber line.

Suddenly you leave the last lodgpole behind. Even the sturdy stunted grass of the high country disappears and the snow-birds flitting from rock to rock bring home to you that here are the mountains unadorned. Your horse's hoofs ring on the naked granite while you shiver in the gusts that sweep from the ice-covered slopes beside the trail. Cupped in glacial cirques or lost in unlooked-for hollows, lapis-lazuli lakes look strangely out of place in their bare setting. One is reminded of the blue glasses set in topographical models in museums to represent water, or of precious stones just emerging from their matrix. If a piece of the sky had fallen into a crevice of these heaven-raking peaks it could not look bluer, nor more astray, than these mute mothers of our garrulous streams.

Zig-zagging upward on a talus of gray granite beneath beetling cliffs, the trail crosses the divide about three miles south of the great peak itself. From this point on even the most blase mountaineer

must stifle his yawns. The trail literally clings to the west face of the sawteeth that have given the Sierra its name and you grasp the reason that pack animals must reach the summit before noon and none may start back before one o'clock. The only manner in which two horses could pass on that ribbon would be for one to crawl over the other, which might be a little rough on the riders. The trail remains at the level of the notches between the pinnacles, here about two and a half miles in the air, and in several cases it has actually been buttressed with rocks so that the path itself is the veritable ridge of the range, and from this yard-wide vantage point you can gaze down 10,000 feet into Owens Valley on the east or a like distance into Kern River Canyon on the west. Provided, of course, that the wind sweeping through the gap, or your nerves, or mountain sickness, or all three have not rendered you immune to scenery.

The summit of Whitney is surprisingly flat. Over its several acres are strewn loose, flat rocks, showing unmistakably the work of wind and weather. A stone hut, erected by the Smithsonian Institute in 1909, provides emergency shelter for those unfortunate enough to be caught there in the sudden hail and snowstorms that enshroud this peak even in August. A cairn marks the eastern scarp, and close by are two U.S.G.S. plaques. The most recent figures indicate that Whitney is 14,496 feet above sea level. Former surveys set the figure slightly higher. I am sure it was not the traffic that wore it down.

As you have probably read elsewhere, the Padre celebrated Mass on Whitney last week, this being the first religious service ever held on top of the United States. Harry Clinch, a student for the priesthood in this diocese, served the Mass. The Padre told me that when he thumbed over the Sierra and Alpine clubs' registers on the top to record the event he found that not a few previous climbers had taken advantage of the books to set down, in blasphemous language, what they thought of the hardships of the ascent. Even physical proximity to heaven and the presence of the Creator's awe-inspiring handiwork do not prevent some creatures from breathing the language of hell.

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