

# Norman Clyde - Mountaineer

By Walt Wheelock

**N**ORMAN CLYDE, a name as legendary as that of Fremont or Muir. Norman Clyde, a man to whom the entire High Sierra is as familiar as one's own backyard. Norman Clyde, whose own life is much less known than that of the Greek heroes whose sagas he packs in his rucksack.

And how did this come about? For Norman is a quiet, often taciturn man. He has often failed to leave a record of his achievements, has never been heard to boast of his fabulous ascents. Yet, since he made his first trip to the top of Mt. Whitney, almost a half century ago, climbers have been finding his records on remote summits. A strong team of skilled rockclimbers will conquer a lonely spire, using the most modern of climbing gear and techniques and win through with well co-ordinated teamwork to find on a faded Kodak box the record of a solo climb of three decades ago. Or, at the high point of a distant ridge will be found a small cairn, but no written record. Obviously the work of man, and one mountaineer will turn to his companion with, "Well, it looks like a first ascent, except for Norman Clyde." Later, discussing the route with him, Clyde will Ponder a bit, ask a couple of questions about some difficult pitch encountered on the ascent, then admit he had been there a score of years ago.



Clyde has never been one to bring up these mountaineering achievements; will often sidestep them, or give a facetious answer, such as telling that he is 11350 years old", but never has Clyde been known to make a false statement when talking seriously. And it is easy to tell the difference between his banter and his true accounts of his life and his work. Research uniformly verifies the data and dates that he supplies.

Norman's father, Charles Clyde was born in Antrim County in the north of Ireland in 1854. He migrated to this country at the age of seven. His mother, born Belle (Isabel) Purvis, was a native of Butler, a small city about thirty miles north of Pittsburgh. Charles and Belle were married at Butler and took up residence in Philadelphia, where Norman Asa, the first of nine children, was born the following year, on April 8, 1885. His father was a self-taught clergyman of the Covenanter sect of the Presbyterian faith.

**W**hen Norman was three, the family moved to Ohio. Here, his father served at a number of small churches, seldom staying more than a year at any one parsonage. Apparently the independence of thought that was later to dictate Norman's flight to the mountains was honestly inherited. Eventually, the family moved to Glengarry County, near Ottawa. Norman remembers arriving there on the Queen's Jubilee Day (May 24, 1897).

Here Norman lived from the time he was twelve until he was seventeen. Fishing and hunting were available, almost in the Clyde's backyard, and he soon became expert in both. Clyde's father, being self-taught, took care of his son's schooling at home. His father was

*an avid student of the classics and the boy was learning to read Latin and Greek almost as early as he did his native tongue.*

*His father was stricken with pneumonia and passed away at the age of 46. His mother gathered up her flock and returned to western Pennsylvania. Norman enrolled in Geneva College at Beaver Falls, but as he had had no formal schooling, he had several deficiencies to make up at the prep level. Graduating in the classics from Geneva in June, 1909 he immediately started west. He taught at several small rural schools across the country, including Fargo, North Dakota, and Mt. Pleasant, Utah. One summer was spent at the University of Wisconsin, John Muir's alma mater; another on a cattle spread in Utah.*

*Deciding that he needed more education to progress in the teaching field, he enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley in 1911. Summers were spent in the mountains. and in teaching at summer schools. One was at Elko, Nevada, where he spent his spare time climbing in the Humboldt Range.*

*At the end of two years at the university, Clyde found that he still lacked one course in Romance Drama and his thesis. He balked at the drama course, maintaining that Italian plays should be read in Italian, French dramas in French; neither in English. He could see no sense in struggling with a thesis that nobody would ever read after he received his degree, so he quietly left the university without his master's degree.*

**D***uring the next dozen years, the details of Clyde's life are rather sketchy, both in and out of the mountains. We learn that he taught in a number of small schools in central and northern California. He remembers teaching near Stockton and spent a year each at Mt. Shasta and Weaverville. From his mountaineering notes, he must have spent some time in Arizona. Sometime during this period he married a young lady from Pasadena. This is one part of his life that Norman refuses to discuss. It is known that they lived together for three years, and that she passed away from tuberculosis. It is apparent that he felt a deep love for his bride, and undoubtedly her passing was a strong factor in shaping his character.*

*In the field of mountaineering, we have a few more records. He was in Yosemite in 1914, where he first met up with the Sierra Club, joining with them on a trip to Tuolumne. Clyde became a member of the club that year. After leaving the club outing, he travelled south along the backbone of the Sierra with a packtrain run by Charley Robinson, oldtime Sierra packer. The trip ended at Lone Pine, and Clyde made the first of his fifty ascents of Mt. Whitney at this time. Records show twelve ascents of Mt. Shasta, including three in four days. On one of these he set a record that only has been broken once since that time. Another page of his notes lists seven ascents of Weaver Bally in the Trinity country.*

*We know that Clyde accompanied the Sierra Club on their trip from Yosemite through Evolution Valley in 1920, during which time he made several first ascents. It was on this trip that he carried the first of his famous big packs. Leaving the Valley a couple of days behind the Sierra Club and not knowing for sure whether he could catch up with the club, he took along sufficient food. As he swung by Camp Curry, noticing a platform scale, he weighed the pack at seventy-five pounds. The next night was spent with a survey crew that he had met on the trail. They seemed amazed at the size of the pack (at that time Clyde weighed but 140 pounds) and kept commenting about it. In the morning, one of the crew*

suggested that Norman might have trouble finding the packtrain and suggested that he take along a few extra cans of food that they had. Another offered a couple of other items. As later companions were to find out, Norman never turns down free supplies, and the group kept offering him more, telling of the dangers of being caught in the wilderness without food. After they had loaded him down with an additional twenty pounds, he was allowed to go his way. It was not until the next day that Clyde realized it had all been a gag to see how much he could carry, but it is still a question as to which side came out ahead with the gag.

In the fall of 1924, Clyde was appointed principal of the high school at Independence in Owens Valley. Situated at the foot of Mt. Williamson, probably the most magnificent of all of the 14,000-footers, it was within easy driving distance of most of the approaches to the High Sierra. Every weekend, he would lock up his school and dash off for the peaks. The record for 1925 shows that he logged 48 climbs, of which exactly half were first ascents. Only on six of the total number did he have a climbing companion. The following year, the number of ascents was boosted to sixty, that is sixty that have been recorded. Norman was exploring the range at a rate that far surpassed the records of Brewer, Clarence King or John Muir.

However a number of the townspeople were not so impressed by this record. Certainly Clyde was an excellent instructor and he controlled the wild youths of this mountain valley like they had never been controlled before. But a school teacher, especially a principal, was supposed to be an important man in the social and cultural life of the community. On Sunday, he should be attending one of the local churches. On Friday night, if there were a school social function, the principal was an honored, if captive, guest. Many of the neighbors were openly stating that Independence High needed a principal that would act as a principal should, rather than a crazy mountain climber.

Then came Halloween of 1927. Rumor had it that the boys were going to play many a prank on the school facilities and it seemed that these were not to be harmless pranks. Norman stationed himself nearby, armed with a .38-cal revolver. As a carload of youths drove onto the school grounds, he challenged them. They refused to stop, so he fired a warning shot. Apparently the rowdies believed that Clyde could be bluffed and kept on. He fired a second shot, which ricocheted fragments of lead onto the car. The hoodlums left and soon were telling the story all over the town, taking the whole thing as a huge joke.

**N**ot so their parents - they waited upon the sheriff and demanded a warrant for attempted murder. The sheriff turned down this request, saying that if Clyde had attempted murder, it would have been murder, as he was the best pistol shot in the county. Next a request was made for a complaint charging illegal use of firearms. After a few days, Clyde resigned; all charges were dropped and Independence had traded its most colorful principal for a teacher that would act as a teacher should act.

No longer tied to regular employment, he plunged into a fulltime study of the High Sierra. Within the next year a large number of articles poured from his pen, including the well-known series "Close Ups" of our High Sierra that appeared in *Touring Topics* (now *Westways*) in the spring and summer of 1928.

Summers were spent in climbing in the back country. At times Clyde would guide parties to the summits of difficult peaks, and it made no difference if the climbers were a USGS party attempting to place a bench mark on an "unscalable" summit or a lady peak-bagger; they made their peaks with Norman Clyde.

Winters were usually spent serving as a caretaker at a mountain resort. Thus he was able to hole-in at such places as Glacier Point at Yosemite, Giant Forest at Sequoia, Parcher and Andrews camps on Bishop Creek, Glacier Lodge above Big Pine, and at Whitney Portal. Many were the times that Clyde rescued lost or snowbound climbers, or if not called in time, located their bodies. His locating of wrecked planes has been the subject of numerous magazine stories.

In 1939, his alma mater, Geneva College, awarded him a degree of Doctor of Science in appreciation of his mountain writings.

**D**uring the past few years, [circa 1966] Clyde has lived at the old Baker Ranch - on Baker Creek, near Big Pine, California. He has a primitive three-room ranch house, using kerosene lanterns and having running water because a stream flows through the spring house. His home and the adjoining arbor are covered with a canopy of grapevines and climbing roses.

At seventy-six, [this was in 1966] Clyde still spends his summers acting as a guide on Sierra Club Base Camp trips and will consent to lead private parties into his beloved Sierra. Much of the gruffness of his earlier years has disappeared, and his clear light blue eyes and pink freshly shaven face give him the appearance of an alpine gnome. He says that he will continue to climb the Sierra until one day he will just forget to come back. But much younger men who have attempted to keep up with Norman are sure that this will be many a year in the future.

Short biography by Walt Wheelock, illustration by Ruth Daly,  
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