

The Gentle Side of Norman Clyde

By Lisa Carson

My mother first met Norman Clyde in 1946, while climbing in the Sierras with her father and Norman. She was only 10 years old, yet Norman made a unique impression on her with his tall, gruff, mountain man physique. He led the trail and took care of the Sierra Club hikers. Time went by without much contact, as he was in California and she remained in Ohio with her father.

Sixteen years later, the relationship was rekindled. Now the young girl was a woman with five children and a husband who loved to hike. My parents, Bob and Elaine Parker, quickly contacted Norman Clyde upon their moving to the Owens Valley. Norman, quite an introvert and isolated man, quickly embraced this new family. He first arrived at our little trailer, where my father was determined to camp out for a year, shortly after my birth in 1962. He would visit us once a week for a hot meal, tracking us down via the lady at the post office. Our camp sights varied from Taboose Creek to Big Pine Canyon. After we moved to a tract home in 1963, he would always show up with firewood. While most guests might bring flowers, it was very fitting that our gift was logs.

My earliest memories of Norman Clyde were rather distinct and embarrassing. I must have been around three or four years old. My sister and I would routinely use Norman as a climbing apparatus. He would sit in the big, overstuffed chair and allow us to bounce on his robust belly and climb up on his broad shoulders. I remember the strong, musty smell of leather and pine that greeted me as I would climb up over his roughly textured shirt. The awkward part came when I decided to try out my artistic skills. My parents were busy preparing dinner one night, unaware of their youngest child's activities. With an ink pen in hand, I climbed up on the back rest behind Norman, took off his old leather hat, and began to create a masterpiece in my own mind. Some might describe it as scribbling, but that's just semantics. My canvas was Norman Clyde's bald head. This seemed like the perfect place to design as I had a stationary object, who was very tolerant, not uttering a word in protest, and who seemed to enjoy the pen-on-scalp massage. Everything was fine until my climbing partner sister, just one year older, tattled to my parents. I was sent to my room feeling very betrayed by sister Cris. She got to scrub away my art work with a wet towel, while seated on the shoulder throne. I am sure Norman considered this experience one of the more unique family dinners. Years later as an adult, I tried to vindicate myself by drawing a portrait of Norman, which now hangs in my dining room.

Norman was quiet and calm when he wanted to be, but could transform into a strong, protective "grandfather" when the situation called for it. On one beautiful, sunny afternoon at his Baker Creek Ranch, we were enjoying a picnic lunch. We were relaxing and climbing on Norman as usual when a bull Strayed onto the property. The bull began to snort and act aggressively. Little did the bull know, but he had more than met his match in the frame of a 78-year-old man. Norman Clyde leaped to the challenge like a superhero, grabbing a big log and snorting back at the bull. Apparently the bull concluded that he wanted nothing to do with this crazy looking man, for he quickly ran away.

Norman was patient in many ways as he taught my mother to drive. I must have been four years old and very bored as I had to ride in the back seat of an old grey Rambler, witnessing this frightening yet monotonous task. I remember whining in my captive state, so Norman would feed me caramel candies to keep me happy. He had quite the sweet tooth. One day, my Mother crashed into a curb in front of J.C. Penney's. Norman just kept his cool and said quietly, "You're doing just fine." I needed another caramel.

My brother Steve said Norman Clyde was the first one to teach him to shoot a gun at the age of seven or eight. Up at the ranch where Norman lived above Big Pine, he let my brother shoot a 22 caliber pistol. My brother asked him why he had an unsnapped holster with a packed pistol and he said that was for the Bazerooskuses. He spoke a lot of the Ring Tailed Bazerooskus, a critter that lived only in Norman's vivid imagination and the Parker kids' captive eyes. He loved to tell us stories about Side Hilled Gaugers. They were the cows that grazed around the top of a hill, and they could only go in one direction since their legs grew shorter over time. They would fall over and roll down the mountain if they tried to turn around. As gullible children, we hung on every word he spoke. I sometimes still have fears of running into a Bazerooskus.

Our family had to move up North to Chico in 1968, and so the last time I saw Norman, he was in the bed of a nursing home. Fully textured by life, he now lay weakened by time. His face still portrayed the strong character that I remembered, and from his eyes twinkled forth the loving man who bounced me on his knee. I will always cherish this authentic soul, whom so many knew as a gruff, mountain man. I remember Norman Clyde as a gentle giant, who not only put up with a little girl's misguided creativity, but also one who knew how to teach, love and protect.

About the author: Lisa Carson graduated from California State University, Chico, with a B.A. in Social Science and went on to get her teaching credential in 1985. After serving in the Peace Corps, she has worked with mostly At-Risk Teens. Lisa became a New Thought minister, in 2004. She works with both teens and adults as a workshop facilitator. Lisa can be reached at lisa4life@surewest.net



Norman Clyde with Christie (left) and Lisa (right).



Norman Clyde sharing a meal with the Parkers



Norman Clyde with Angela (left) and Lisa (right) Parker.