



Knapsacking

EASTWARD FROM THE CREST. "We looked beyond broken ridges and plunging rock faces to the soft browns and greys of the San Felipe Desert, with the distant glimmer of the Sea of Cortez as nature's backdrop." Photo by Al Schmitz



*SAN FELIPE
DESERT, EASTERN
SCARP OF SAN
PEDRO MARTIR.
"Tall, spiny
Ocotillo, lofty, rugged
peaks."
Photo by John Robinson*

in Baja's High Country

by Arnold Yukelson and John Robinson

The Desert Peaks Section of the Angeles Chapter, Sierra Club, consists of an unusual group of people bent upon an avocation which startles the sensibilities of Mr. and Mrs. Average U.S.A. These hardy mountaineers delight in climbing seemingly inhospitable desert mountains and exploring the dun-colored desert landscape, all for the sheer joy of experiencing this kind of wilderness. In truth many of these desert ranges aren't as unfriendly as they appear from a distance. Often, stark foothills conceal pleasant evergreen surprises behind and above their barren ramparts. It is the search for these hidden Shangri-las, as well as the sheer enjoyment of the desert that stimulates these desert climbers.

It was such a group that gathered at the north edge of San Felipe, a small fishing village on the gulf coast of Baja California, one morning in April. Twenty-seven of us "Desert Peakers" planned to spend a good part of our Spring Vacation exploring a little-known and seldom-visited section of this sun-scorched peninsula. Our destination was the rugged Sierra de San Pedro Mar-

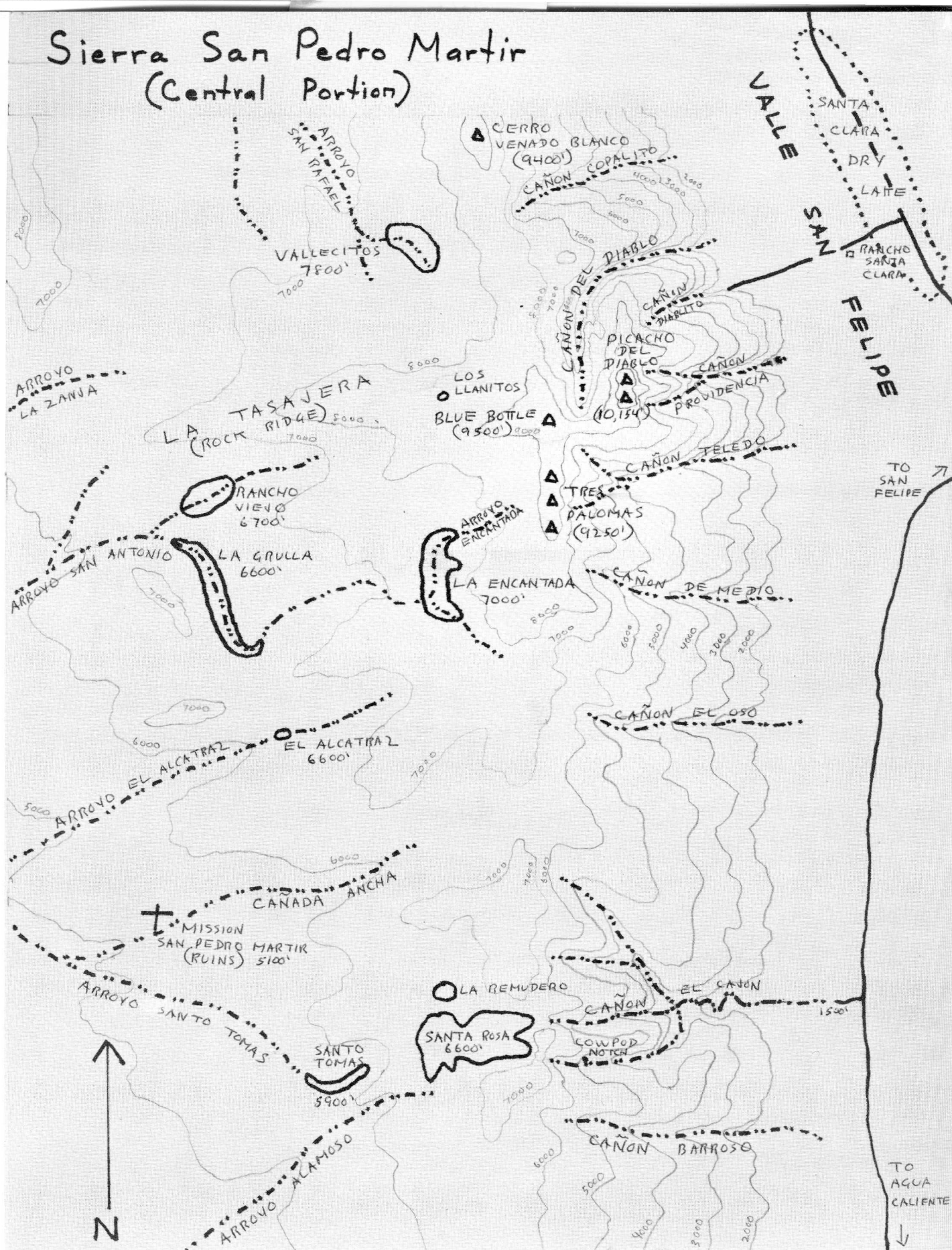
tir, apex of Baja's long mountain backbone. Specifically, we hoped for a first ascent of "Tres Paloma's" three 9000-foot granite peaks on the main crest of the range.

From the highway a few miles north of town, the Sierra was visible on the western skyline, a foreboding rampart of spiny peaks and ridges. To reach its portals required a 45-mile drive across the sand hills and plains of the San Felipe Desert, using a network of poor but passable dirt roads that criss-cross much of Baja's arid lowlands.

The pine-clad ridgeline of the San Pedro Martir loomed higher and higher as our nine-car caravan weaved its way westward across the desert. Near the mountains, benefiting from the infrequent flash floods that emit from the high country, we passed through a veritable desert garden of tall, spiny Ocotillo, needle-spiked Cholla, green-barked Palo Verde, and shady Ironwood. In spots, multi-colored wildflowers painted the desert floor. The Baja desert may be arid, but it is no wasteland.

Our sandy ruts finally terminated at the broad entrance to Canyon El Cajon, just below the steep

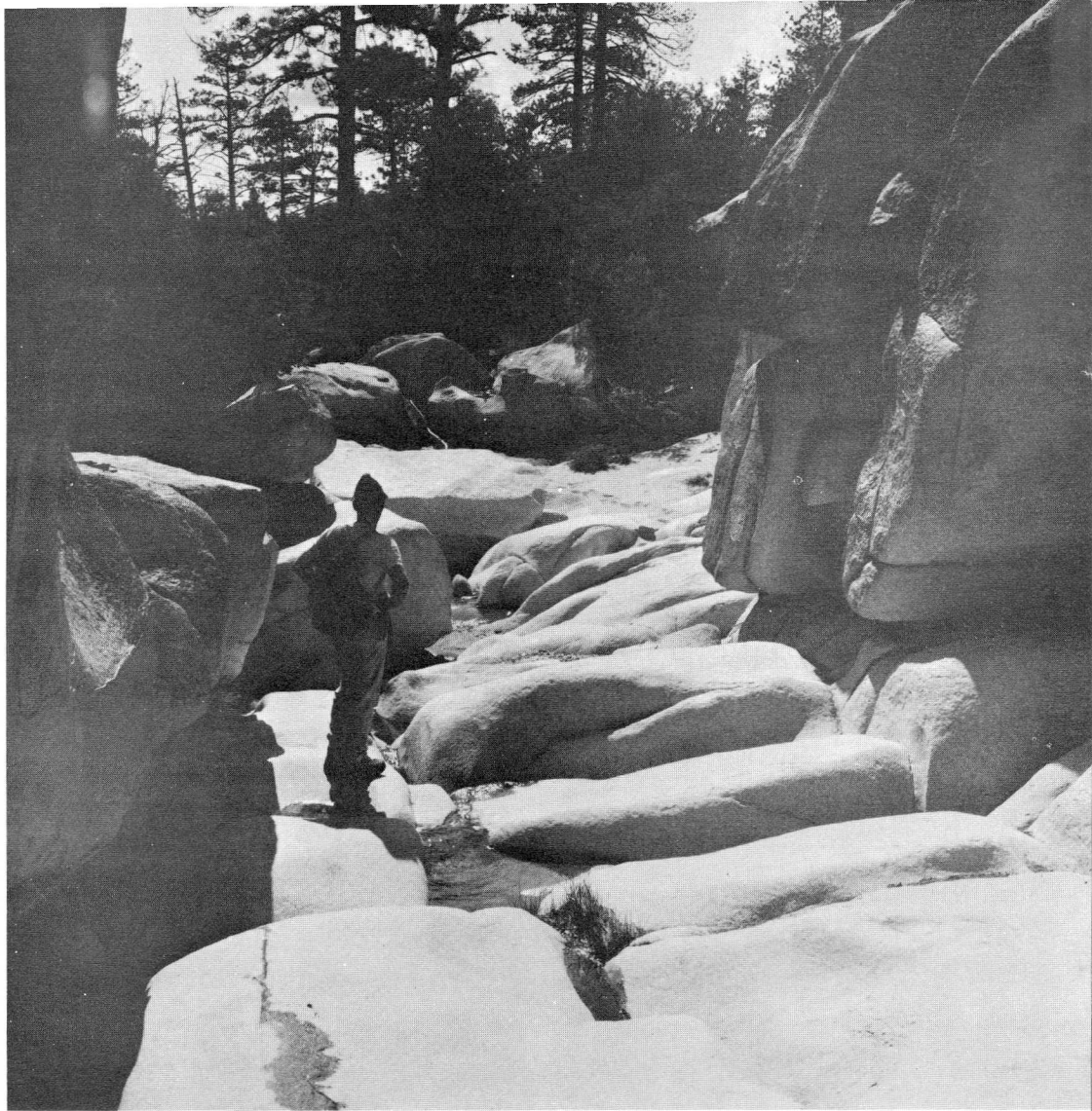
Sierra San Pedro Martir (Central Portion)



ALONG
ENCHANTED CREEK.

"The route to the peaks took us along Arroyo Encantada (Enchanted Creek), a playful, idyllic stream tumbling down a narrow, block-strewn granite gorge, replete with waterfalls and deep, limpid pools."

Photo by Gene Gail



lower spurs of the range. Canyon El Cajon is a deep, rocky chasm with numerous forks, penetrating well back into the eastern escarpment. Petroglyphs adorning its sidewalls reveal that ancient Indian peoples once frequented the gorge. Deeper, more spectacular canyons descend from higher parts of the range further north, but only El Cajon possesses a trail into the high country from the eastern desert side. The trail was built by the padres of Mission San Pedro Martir and their Indian neophytes almost two centuries ago, and is today used to herd cattle to high pasture.

By midmorning we were plodding up canyon, perspiring under the strain of overweight packs. Lower Canyon El Cajon is essentially a broad, sandy wash, punctuated on occasion by low gran-

ite cascades and waterfalls. The stream whimsically disappears and reappears in the sand, performing the trick as if by magic. The trail in this part of the canyon is not obvious; it becomes distinct only in the upper, steeper part of the gorge. The crucial point in route-finding is reached two and a half miles from the entrance, where the canyon forks. The route follows the less obvious left branch, going south, then southwest, noticeably steepening after five miles.

After knapsacking some eight miles and 3500 feet by late afternoon, we came upon a flat pinyon-shaded area on the side of the mountain, with water trickling from a small spring. It was a fine campspot, but unfortunately cattle had previously thought so too. After spending some time clearing



PARK-LIKE
FORESTS OF JEFFREY.
*"Once in the high
country, nature's contrast
is startling."*

Photo by Gene Gail

away the cattle feces to make way for our sleeping bags, one wag dubbed the spot "Cowpod Notch" (to paraphrase the true designation).

Next morning we knapsacked the remaining 2000 feet of steep trail onto the pine plateau. Once in the high country, nature's contrast is startling. The thick, nearly-impenetrable tangle of Chaparral, Scrub-oak, and Pinyon that blankets the higher slopes abruptly gives way to open, park-like forests of Jeffrey Pine, supplemented here and there by stands of Sugar Pine and Cedar.

A short downhill hike through the tall pines brought us, quite suddenly, to spacious, serene Santa Rosa Meadow. This huge clearing is one of several on the San Pedro Martir plateau that have been utilized for summer grazing since mission days. The cattle are seasonally driven up steep

trails from ranches below the western slopes. We stopped for lunch beside a cool, trickling stream near the southwestern edge of the meadow. Here, at almost 7000 feet, the air was crisp and refreshing. The evergreens, the sound of gently-flowing water, the rustling of pine needles produced by soft breezes—it all seemed strangely out of place in the arid Baja California of which we have become accustomed to reading.

After lunch, most of our group began the long cross-country hike to La Encantada (The Enchanted), another large clearing ten miles north, our base camp for the ascent of Tres Palomas. Part of the way we followed faint trails leading in our desired direction, but invariably these indistinct paths would turn away or simply disappear, and we would again be beating a virgin course



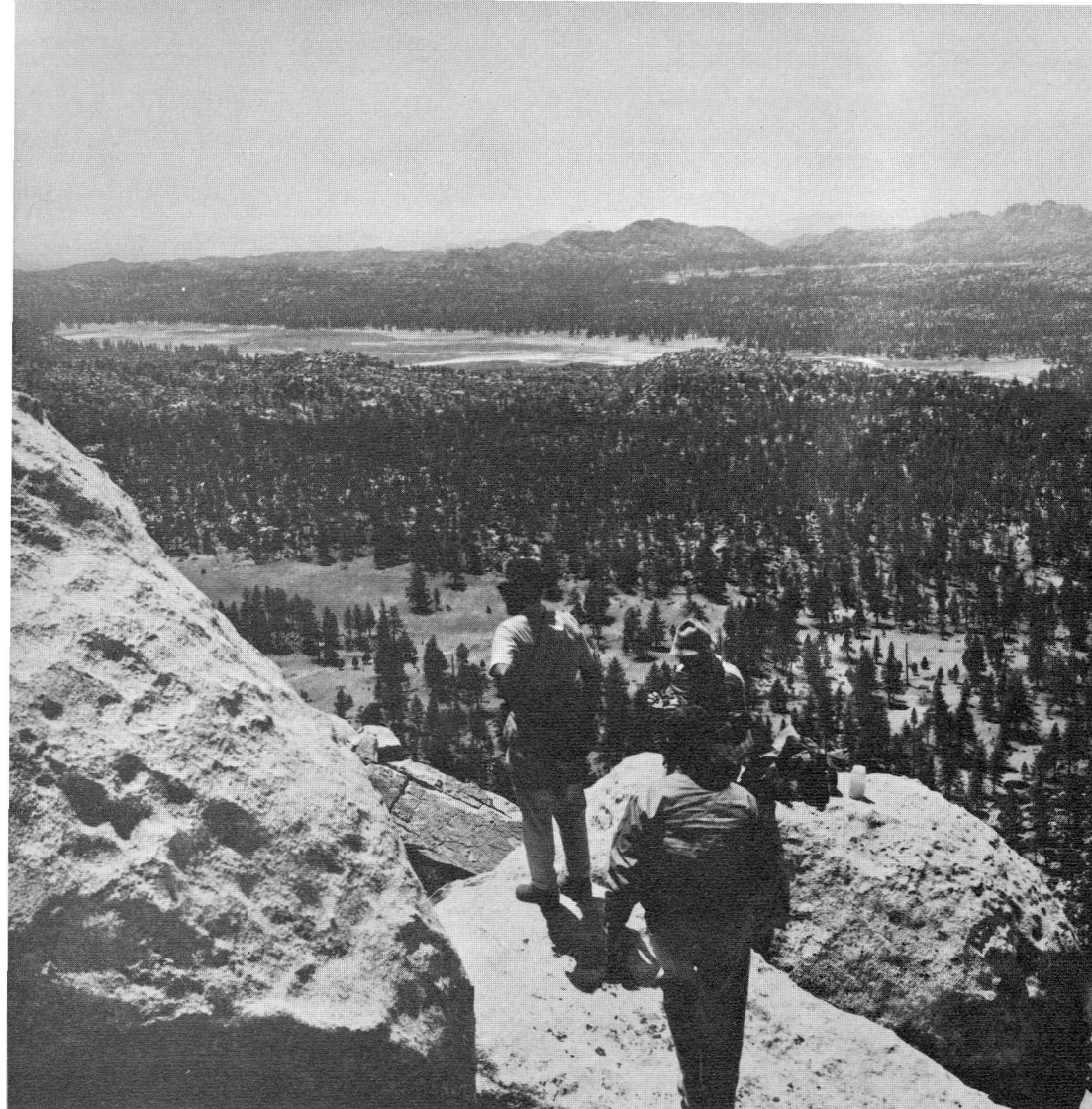
LA ENCANTADA (ENCHANTED MEADOW) from the southeast. "Just before sunset, we spied sprawling La Encantada just ahead."
Photo by John Robinson

through the forest, relying on compass bearing. The San Pedro Martir is criss-crossed by trails, a few of them distinct, most of them barely discernable. Travellers in this high country must know where they are going, how far it is, and most important, the true compass direction. Those who rely too heavily on trails are bound to get lost.

Six hours of up-and-down struggle finally brought us to a ridgetop from which, an hour before sunset, we spied sprawling La Encantada just ahead. A short downhill jaunt and we were there, muscles aching from a long day's workout.

As the rapidly sinking sun painted some nearby boulders a brilliant orange, we hurriedly made camp on a pine needle-covered flat beside the meadow. In the fading twilight, as we relaxed alongside our flickering campfire, a sense of isolation and remoteness grew. No marks of civilization here; only the soft murmuring of the brook, the faint night wind, the dim light of the stars. This was true primeval wildness, nature in its most natural element, as the San Jacinto and other California ranges must have appeared a century ago.

After a cold night, we arose early and started



WEST FROM
TRES PALOMAS.
*La Encantada in middle
distance, La Grulla
beyond.*
*"To the west sprawled the
vast evergreen tableland
of the San Pedro
Martir."*
Photo by Gene Gail

off for our main objective of the trip—the highest of the Tres Palomas (Three Doves), three white granite sisters projecting above the abrupt eastern escarpment of the range. It was a pleasure to travel without heavy packs. The route to the peaks took us along Arroyo Encantada (Enchanted Creek), a playful, idyllic stream tumbling down a narrow, block-strewn granite gorge, replete with waterfalls and deep, limpid pools. As we climbed higher, White Firs and Lodgepoles, harbingers of colder elevations, began to appear among the predominant Jeffreys. In two hours we reached a high meadow just below Middle Paloma, highest of the rocky triplets. A thousand feet of fairly difficult scrambling, first through underbrush, then over and around steeply inclined granite blocks, brought us to the 9250-foot

summit. A small piece of broken bottle betrayed our hopes for a first ascent.

The panorama from Tres Palomas was, to say the least, awe-inspiring. Two airline miles north loomed mighty Picacho del Diablo (10,154 feet), the monarch of all Baja California. Eastward, we looked down broken ridges and plunging rock faces to the dull browns and grays of the San Felipe Desert, and beyond, the hazy blue waters of the Sea of Cortez. To the west sprawled the vast evergreen tableland of the San Pedro Martir, twenty miles wide and forty miles long, with the distant glimmer of the Pacific as nature's backdrop.

Soon it was time to retreat. Down we scrambled, back into the silent forest of conifers, along Arroyo Encantada, where several hikers paused

INDIAN
PETROGLYPHS, CANYON EL CAJON.

*"Ancient Indian peoples once
frequented the gorge."*

Photo by John Robinson

to indulge in a much-needed bath in one of the larger pools. That night we camped by a hidden water source at the southeastern end of La Encantada, and the next morning began the long cross-country jaunt back. After a lunch stop at Santa Rosa, we bade goodbye to this magnificent pine-clad tableland and lunged down the steep El Cajon trail.

By late afternoon we reached familiar Cowpod Notch and began setting up our final night's camp. Soon we heard yells which we thought were greetings. Shortly afterwards the source of the sounds came into view—two Mexican cowpokes driving a small herd of cattle up the trail. One thought was uppermost in our minds as the cattle approached. Nightfall was not far off but the plateau was. We "Gringos" were squatting on the last water and therefore the most logical stopping place for the herd. Would the cattle join us for the night? Much to our relief the cowpokes continued driving the herd through the campsite and on up the trail. The crisis passed and we settled down for an uneventful night.

Next morning we moved rapidly down canyon, reaching the cars by noon. With a tinge of regret, we left this Range of the Martyred Saint Peter, vowing to return next year.

The usual approach to the San Pedro Martir high country is from the west, via the famed Meling Ranch. This is the easiest approach, providing you possess a hardy four-wheel drive vehicle capable of negotiating the steep, rocky, tortuous "road" from the ranch into the pines. For those with automobiles of a more common vintage, the east side of the range offers a closer approach, if you don't mind backpacking 5500 feet to reach the high country.

