

The Sierra Club of California has established a pattern for those who love exploration and adventure in the great outdoor world. Here is the story of a two day outing in which members of the organization founded many years ago by John Muir achieved the feat of scaling two of the desert's most rugged mountain peaks during a recent weekend excursion.

We Scaled El Picacho

By RANDALL HENDERSON

Photos by Wm. G. Johnson and
the author

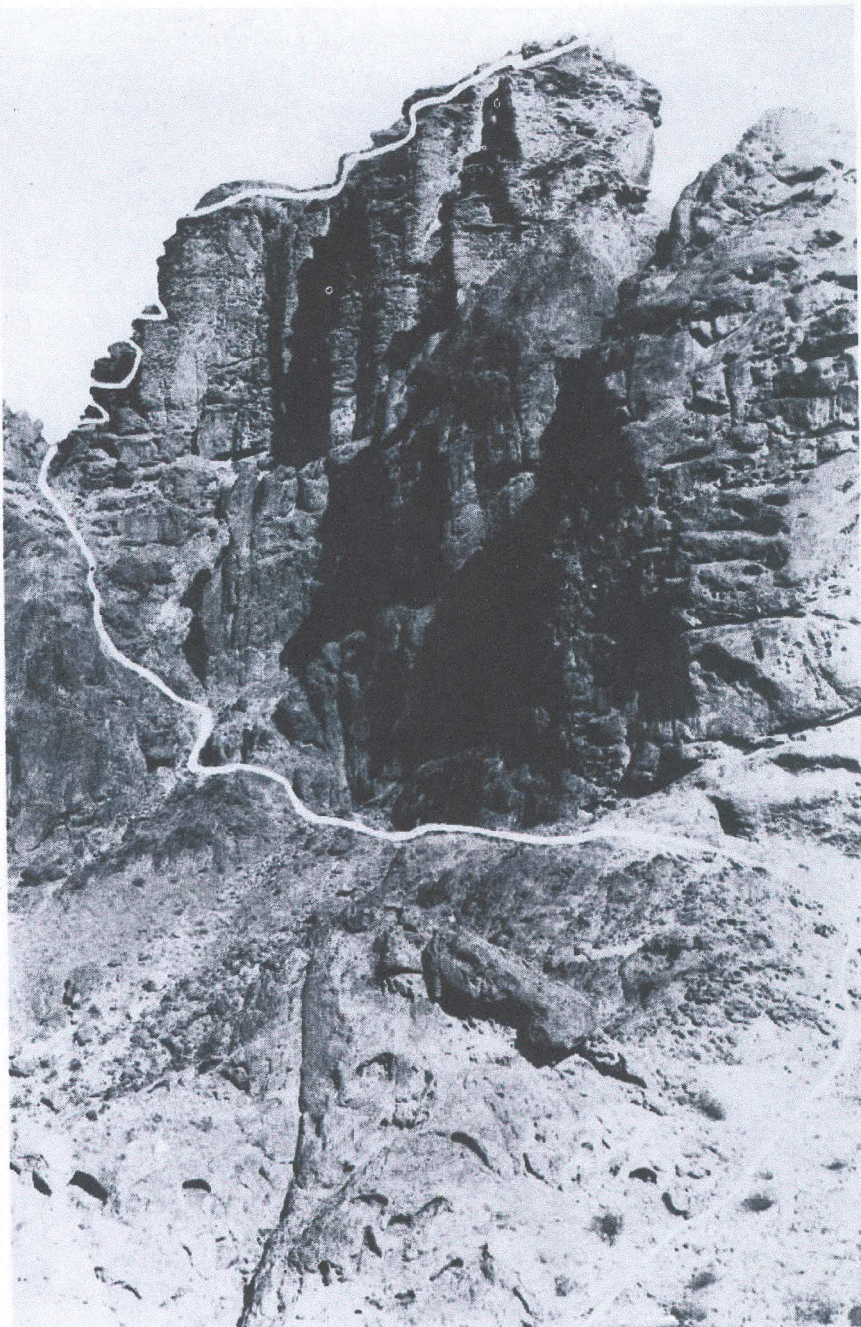
WHEN Father Pedro Font looked over the Yuma landscape in 1775, seeking a site for a mission to serve the heathen tribesmen of the Colorado river valley, he saw a conspicuous pinnacle several miles to the northwest and recorded it in his diary. Being a missionary, it was only natural he should observe its resemblance to a mission bell, and he called it *La Campana*.

Eighty-three years later, in 1858, Lieut. Joseph C. Ives steamed up the Colorado in his stern-wheeler, the *Explorer*. Twenty miles above Yuma he rounded a bend and came in full view of this same pinnacle. He called it Chimney Peak, his selection of the name perhaps being suggested by the great stack on the deck beside him belching mesquite wood smoke from the fire beneath the steamer's boiler. He so entered it in his diary.

Not many maps were published in those days. And when gold was discovered near the base of the pinnacle in 1862 the Mexican miners who swarmed into the new camp had no knowledge of the records of Father Font and Lieut. Ives. They simply referred to the monolith as *El Picacho*, The Peak. And that is the name the map-makers of today have adopted.

From a distance you would guess that Picacho is too precipitous to be scaled. Rising 1945 feet from a jumble of lesser peaks like a great volcanic plug—which some geologists say it is and others deny—its sheer thousand foot walls appear to offer no footholds for human ascent.

But Picacho can be climbed, with the help of some rope—and this is the story of



Showing the route followed by the Sierrans to the top of Picacho. The difficult climbing is above the saddle at the top of the couloir.

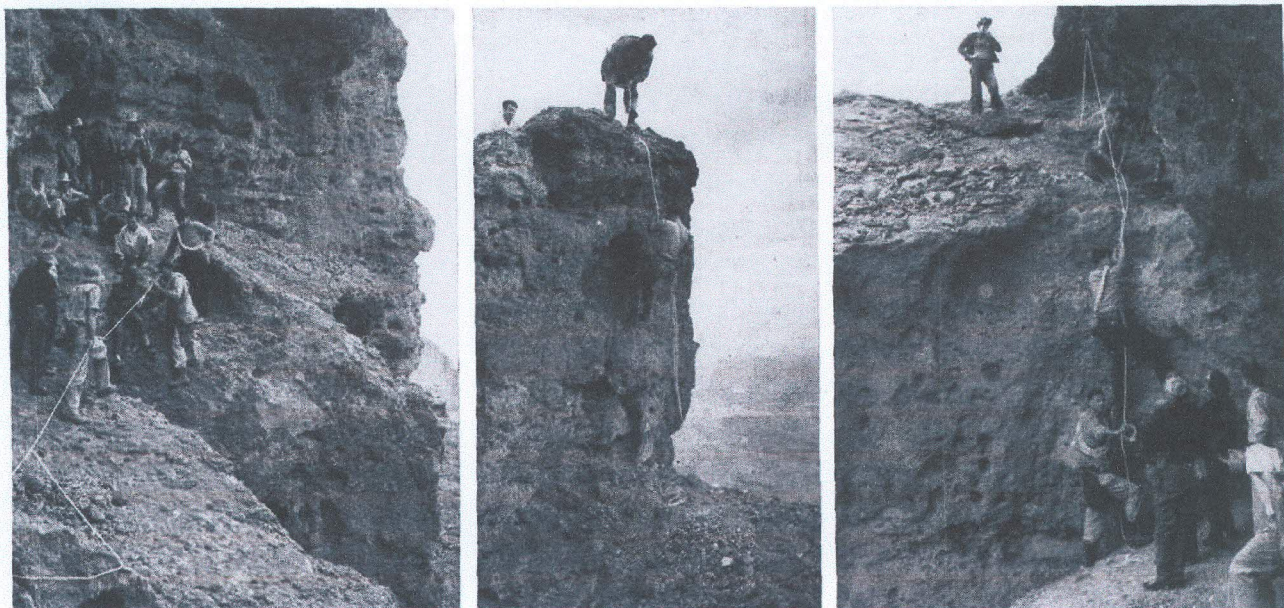
its most recent ascent, by the largest climbing party ever to attempt the feat.

Members of the Desert Peaks section of the Sierra Club of California have scaled most of the summits in the Mojave desert. They decided this season to extend their climbing activities to the Colorado desert—and selected the Thanksgiving weekend in November for a double-barreled assault on Picacho and Castle Dome, which is across the river on the Arizona side. Since I had made three previous ascents of both these desert mountains, they asked me to go along in the role of guide.

Our rendezvous was a little mesa close

by the old Picacho mine, three miles from the base of the peak. The mine has not been active for many years, but the owners believe there is valuable ore yet to be recovered from the old workings, and a watchman remains on duty to protect the shaft and what is left of the equipment.

Forty-two of us gathered around the campfire in a sheltered niche in the hills Friday night, November 28. Most of our party members were from the Los Angeles area. To reach the spot we had left U. S. Highway 80 at the underpass just west of the California inspection station on the western bank of the Colorado. From the



Left—The 10-foot gap, the first climbing obstacle to be overcome on the route up Picacho.

Center—To reach the highest point it is necessary to rope down this pitch and then return hand over hand.

Right—This was the No. 2 roping problem on the way up. Roy Gorin at the bottom of the rope gives the climbers a boost.

paved highway we drove directly north, the first five miles through the cultivated area in Bard valley. Then the dirt road crossed the All-American canal and climbed to a long mesa and eventually to a summit overlooking the highly mineralized Picacho mining district.

At the summit we paused to pay homage to the departed spirit of the mythical Indian princess E-vee-Taw-Ash. I have long suspected that E-vee-Taw-Ash was created by Ed Rochester, mayor of the old ghost town of Picacho and well known among desert rats of Southern California. But it is a good yarn, and since there no longer is mineral wealth to lure visitors to Picacho I think Ed's effort to create romance as a bait for tourists is entirely commendable.

Where the road climbs over the ridge and starts down the grade to the old townsite on the bank of the river, Ed has erected a shrine to E-vee Taw-Ash. A book is there where visitors may register, and a receptacle for the donation of small coins to be used to maintain the shrine. If you would have a safe journey in the land of the legendary Indian princess you must deposit a coin in the box.

And so we signed our names and put our nickles and pennies in the box—for it might be well to have the magic of the departed princess on our side when we tackled the precarious sidewalls of Picacho next day.

As we sang our campfire songs that evening a lone coyote howled back at us from across the gully. It was a delightful night for camping—just cool enough to be snug

inside a sleeping bag. We turned in early, for the three mile hike from the mine to the base of the pinnacle would start early next morning.

Breakfast was over at 6:30 and ten minutes later we started single file up the arroyo that leads south from the mine. The hills on both sides were pecked with the coyote holes of prospectors who have sought wealth in this area for nearly a century. Occasionally we saw rusty steel rails protruding from the sandy floor of the wash—relics of the narrow gauge railroad which once brought ore down the canyon to the mill on the bank of the river seven miles from the mine.

There is no well defined trail to the base of the pinnacle. One simply follows the easiest route over the intervening ridges and arroyos—with the chimney-like massif always directly ahead.

For those who would reach the top there is but one approach—from the southwest side of the thousand foot turret. I explored other possible routes many years ago, and always was turned back by impassable rock faces until I discovered a chute or couloir on the side opposite the mine. This couloir, with a gradient of about 40 per cent, provides a safe route half way up to the summit.

The chute ends in a narrow saddle, and 26 of us reached this point at 8:15 and stopped for a breather before tackling the more difficult climbing above. From this point to the top we zig-zagged up a series of ledges to the summit—but it was not quite as simple as that.

Our first serious obstacle was a 10-foot crevice that cut across a ledge. One can jump across, but the mental hazard is bad, for a slip means a 300-foot fall into the depths below. There were women in our party and we played safe by extending a rope across the gap with loops for hand holds.

At this point in the ascent Roy Gorin and Bill Henderson assumed the leadership in the climb. They are experts in the roping technique of the rock climbing fraternity and we had need for both skill and caution as we advanced up the hazardous route above. The fact that so large a group of hikers with comparatively little knowledge of scaling technique made the ascent without mishap is to the credit of Roy and Bill.

While the rear section of the climbing party was spanning the gap, the rest of us pushed on to where the ledge ended in a 15-foot vertical pitch, the next obstacle to be overcome.

Here one of the party with the help of a shoulder-stand scaled the wall and attached a rope above for direct help to those who were to come. One at a time, with the help of Gorin, members of the party climbed hand over hand up the rope to the ledge above.

From this point it was a steep but easy walk to the summit ridge of the massif. This ridge is about 20 feet wide and 300 feet long, with sheer walls dropping away on all sides except the route of our approach.

We were on top of the pinnacle—22 of



On the summit of Picacho where a cairn contains the names of those who have reached the top.

us—but not yet at the highest point on that narrow ridge. For Nature had placed two more barriers in the way of those who would scale the last 40 feet to the high point where the summit cairn has been erected.

The first of these barriers is a 20-foot pitch where the rope is needed mainly for security, since a fall would end at the base of the pinnacle nearly 1000 feet below. With hard rock for hand and foot holds this pitch would be a comparatively easy ascent. But Picacho is not good climbing rock. Much of it is a conglomerate that breaks away under pressure, and the climber has to test each grip as he proceeds up the wall.

Having reached the top of this knob on the ridge, we were but 20 feet below the cairn—but the last 20 feet is the hardest test of the entire ascent. It is necessary to drop down over an overhang with a rope sling, and then walk up a gentle grade to the cairn which contains the names of the few who have reached the summit. That part is easy. But the return from the cairn requires a 20-foot hand-over-hand climb up that last overhang. Only hardened muscles can make such a climb. The alternative is to assemble enough hands on the rope above to lift the climbers bodily to the top. Since we lacked the time for such a procedure, the final scaling party was limited to 10 members of the group. The names of the 10 who placed their names in the cairn were: Roy Gorin, Bill Henderson, Wm. G. Johnson, A. D. Hamilton, Jack Adams (aged 12), Louis B. Mousley, Bradley and Roger Janetzky, Bill Yinger, and the writer.

Expert rock climbers might scale Pica-

cho, and have done so, with less roping than we did. But the Desert Peaks section is a hiking rather than a scaling organization. They are great mountain hikers, but generally they leave the more hazardous ascents to the Rock Climbing section of the Club, which goes in for more adventurous mountaineering.

The return to the base was over the same route we had followed to the top, and by three o'clock we were off the mountain and packing our camp equipment for the 60-mile drive by way of Yuma bridge to Castle Dome range on the Arizona side of the river.

Castle Dome peak, with an elevation of 3660 feet, is a more conspicuous landmark even than Picacho. Father Font saw it in 1775 and named it *Cabeza del Gigante*, Giant's Head. He reports that the Indians called it *Bauquiburi*. Lieut. Ives named it Dome Rock. It is believed the present name was given in 1875 when William P. Miller established a postoffice in the mining camp at the base of the Castle Dome range.

From Yuma to Castle Dome mining camp the road is paved much of the way. The camp, like Picacho, is a mere ghost of the days when the mining boom was on. The mines were discovered in 1863, and were reported to be immensely rich. But most of the ore turned out to be lead, and gold and silver miners turned away in disgust. Six years later it became a profitable lead producing camp. But the best of the lead veins were worked out and the camp lay dormant for many years until World War II when the Holmes brothers, George and Kenneth, reopened them under government subsidy to take out fluorite. Un-

der normal marketing conditions the mines are not profitable and Castle Dome's population today consists mainly of claim owners doing their assessment work and more or less transient prospectors who persist in their efforts to find new pay ledges.

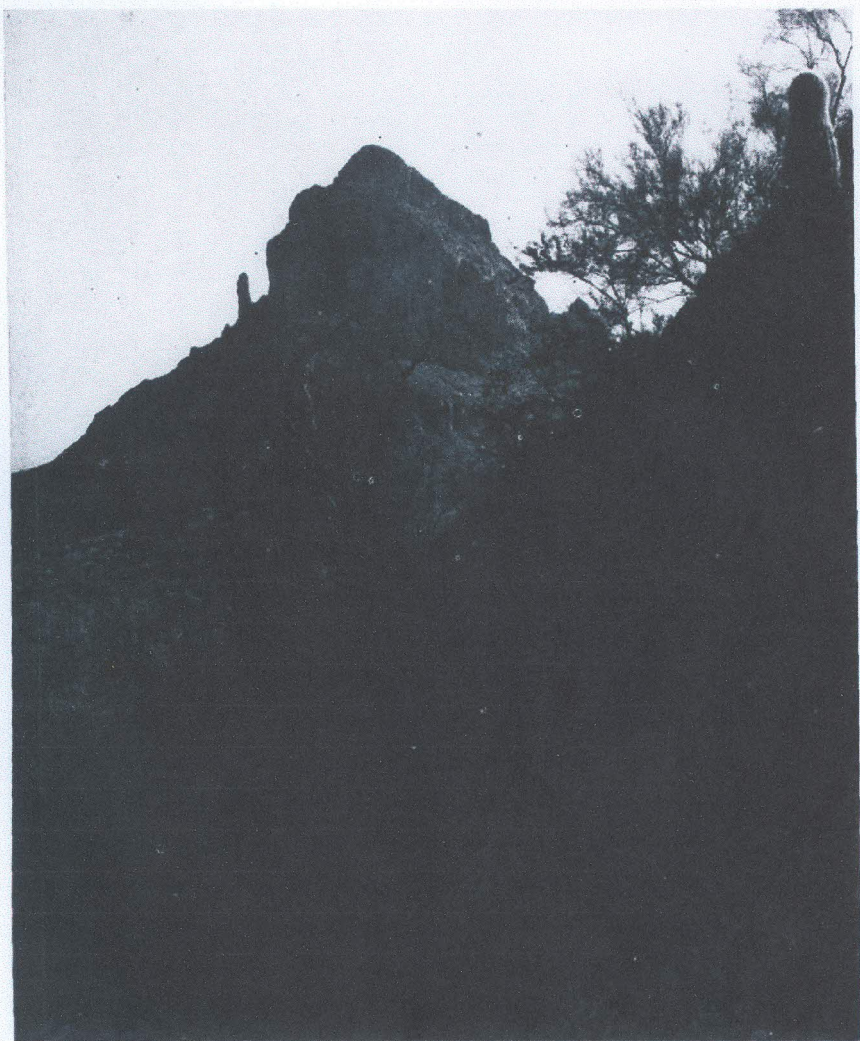
We camped that night five miles north of the old ghost town, along a wadi where dense ironwood and palo verde growth provides a generous supply of firewood. The desert there is clean and vital and undisturbed. This is the land of the saguaro cactus—the giant species that grows so widely over Arizona. We were less than 20 miles from the Colorado river which at this point marks the boundary between Arizona and California. For reasons known only to the gods of Nature, few of these cacti have ever crossed over to the California side. But on the Castle Dome desert plain they grow abundantly. Silhouetted against the western sky at sunset they suggest gendarmes stationed here to guard and preserve the serenity of this remote Arizona desert. They are friendly custodians, and you do not have to be a mountain climber to enjoy this spot.

As ironwood trees attain old age they discard some of their branches to make way for new growth. Thus, in a desert where the arroyos are lined with ironwood the problem of firewood is easily solved.

That evening around the campfire there was singing and impromptu entertainment. But the party broke up early for the

Mary Liggett stops to sign the register and pay her tribute to the legendary princess, E-vee-Taw-Ash.





Castle Dome, showing the gendarme which marks the route of ascent.

9-mile round trip hike to the summit of the Dome the next day called for a good night's rest—and we wanted to start before sun-up and return to base camp by noon if possible.

Castle Dome does not offer serious climbing difficulties from the north side, and we carried no ropes when we left camp at five in the morning.

The most accessible route is up Ladder Tanks canyon near where we camped. A half mile back in the range the canyon splits into three tributaries. The natural tanks which gave the canyon its name are in the south branch. In years past there was a fine water supply here, in a series of rock cavities one above the other. But today, due partly to deterioration of the rock and partly to the prolonged drouth in western Arizona, they are dry.

The north branch of the canyon leads directly to the base of the Dome. It is easy hiking along the floor of the canyon for 2½ miles, and then a steep but not hazardous ascent to the summit.

Ladder Tanks canyon brought us to the north base of the massif. Half way up the

steep slope to the top a great splinter of rock stands like a granite statue and our route was around the base of this pinnacle to a ladder-like pitch directly behind it.

When I first climbed Castle Dome in 1931 the tobacco can in the cairn at the summit contained 34 cents in nickles and pennies, and a note inviting all climbers to add to the fund. There was no suggestion as to the purpose of the contribution. Perhaps that was another tribute for E-vee Taw-Ash. No doubt Ed Rochester could clear up the mystery.

The original can and its money have long since disappeared. But the Sierrans rather liked the idea, and they started a new bank account for the Indian princess.

Two desert peaks in two days is rather strenuous for folks who spend their work days in offices and class rooms—but the Sierrans are sturdy mountaineers, and we were all back at base camp by one o'clock. The pennies we put in the can really were a very insignificant tribute to pay for the security and pleasure we enjoyed during two days of glorious adventure in the domain of E-vee Taw-Ash.