

# Trail to Keynot Summit

Keynot is an honest mountain. It rises openly above California's Inyo range, offering a single canyon route to its summit. Here was an easy, pleasant, uncomplicated Memorial Day weekend climb for Desert Peaks members of Southern California Sierra Club. Louise Werner writes of another adventure of this energetic mountain climbing group.

By LOUISE TOP WERNER

Photos by Niles Werner

Map by Norton Allen

**F**ROM THE Owens Valley highway we could see Mt. Keynot's 11,101-foot summit looming up out of the middle of the Inyo Range in eastern California. A single canyon cut its western slope, opening over an alluvial fan into the valley. Here was an individual among mountains. No

hiding behind false summits, no baffling the climber with route-finding problems—Mt. Keynot laid its cards on the table, face up.

Its originality went further. Instead of thinning its vegetation to a bald dome, Keynot had bared its midriff and covered its upper slopes with

pinus. Dwellers in the valley call it "the upside-down mountain."

This was the peak 22 of us—members of the Desert Peaks section of the Sierra Club of California—had selected for our Memorial Day weekend climb last year. We had not been able to get much advance information about Keynot—and that fact merely added to the challenge of our adventure.

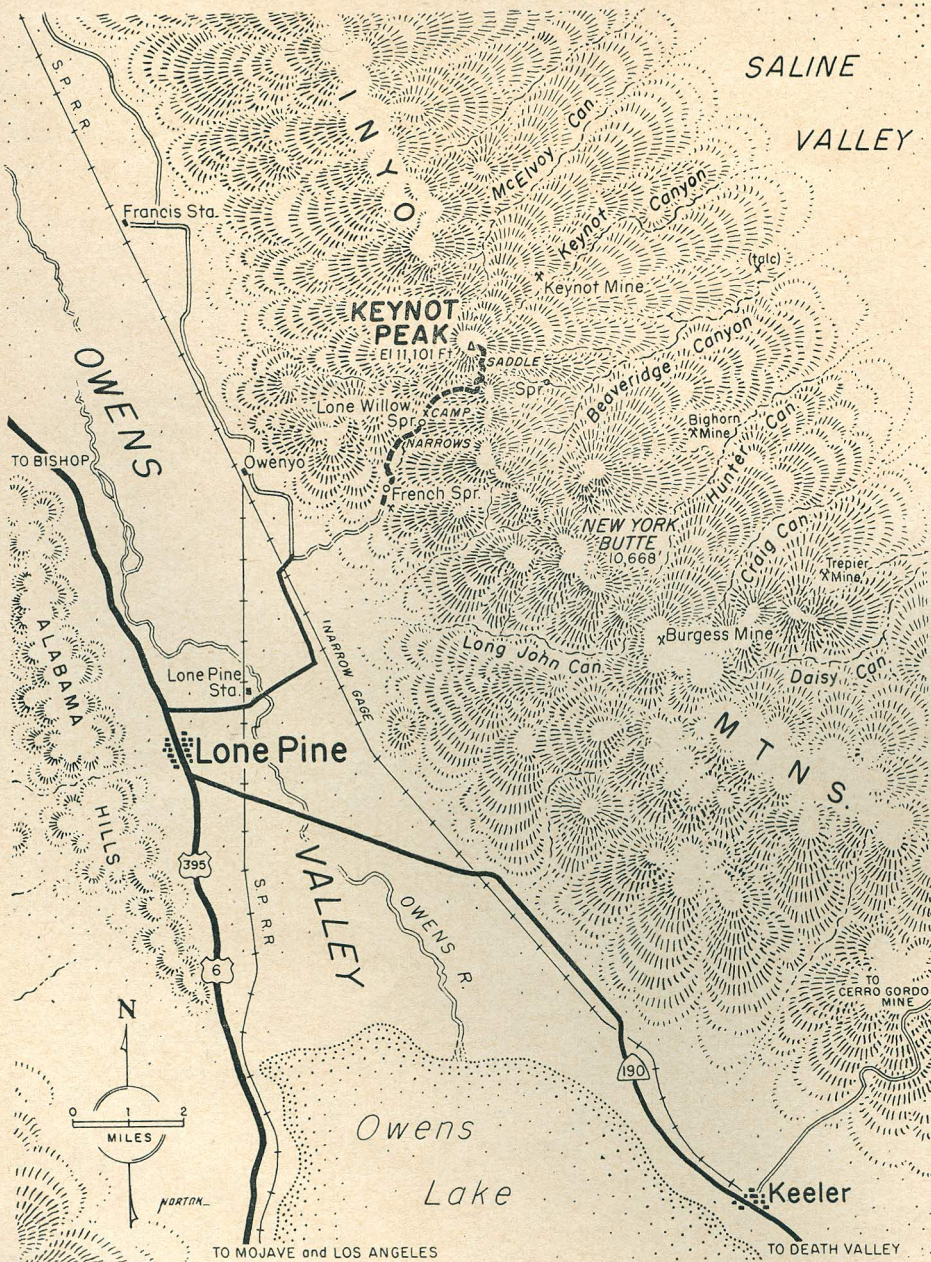
Just north of Lone Pine our caravan turned to the right off Highway 6-395. At the narrow gauge railroad east of the Lone Pine station we left the pavement for two miles of steep rough driving up the canyon.

From the end of the road the trail zigzagged toward a twisted pillar of basalt 400 feet up the slope. The desert had stained the boulders along the way a rich mahogany. To the right, in the canyon bottom, a tangle of Virgin's Bower hid the trickle of French's Spring where quail scurried under arroyo willows and an ash-throated flycatcher dived, clicking its beak on an insect in midair.

Niles Werner, leader, hitched up the felt pads that kept his 30-pound pack from cutting his shoulders, and began wearing down the zigzags with his slow, seemingly effortless pace. Apricot mallow growing out of the shale looked surprised at 22 pairs of boots plodding by. Traffic on the Keynot trail is light these days.

Between 1878 and 1894 mule hoofs rang almost incessantly on the shale, their pack saddles loaded with gold from the Keynot Mine, half a million dollars' worth. From an 8000-foot ridge on the other side of the 11,000 foot saddle they came, clattering down the 12-mile trail to French's Spring, there to be relieved of their loads and to drink from the trough, now a pile of planks rotting under a rusted pipe.

The gold was relayed to the 20-mule teams which hauled it 225 miles to Los Angeles. Bev Hunter of Olancho remembers the big barns spaced about 20 miles apart up and down the valley, housing up to 80 mules, the relay stations for the teams. Bev was born and raised in Owens Valley in the days when eggs were a dime a dozen and a good team of horses sold for \$600. "I would have called anyone crazy who said I'd see that day when cars would roll along the Owens Valley lakebed," says Bev. When he was six it took the family five days to drive 125 miles from their ranch near Independence to the railroad at Mojave.





*Desert Peaks members of the Southern California Sierra Club on the top of Mt. Keynot in the Inyo Range of eastern California. Front row, left to right, are Bob Schmelzer, Margaret Jones, Lorraine Ogg, Louise Werner; middle row, Joe Frischen, Roland Kent, Virgil Sisson, Connie Jarabin, Art Widmer, Ed Burnop; rear, Frank Sanborn, John Nienhuis, Dick Kenyon, John Robinson, Jill Johnson, John Wedberg and Ken Rich.*

An up-canyon breeze cooled our backs, perspiring under the packs. Niles paused to look back across the valley at the Sierra Nevada where six peaks over 14,000 feet high paraded their snowy headresses among their less lofty fellows.

"Which is Mt. Whitney?" asked Roland Kent, 14, our youngest knapsacker. Niles pointed out the needle which, though it marks the highest point in the U.S., stood back, overshadowed at this elevation by lesser peaks in the foreground.

At the top of the mahogany staircase we rounded a band of basaltic cliffs. The packs lightened when we saw the trail leveling off over a shale terrace patterned with bunches of yellow grass and gray-green sage. To our left a fault cut off the terrace. Here Nature had, in one of her convulsive moods, taken the stratum in her hands and twisted it, then brushed over the contorted surfaces with a rich brown varnish.

"What's holding up Assistant Leader

Walt Collins?" wondered Niles during a pause on the second terrace.

"Birds," said Frank Sanborn, "I passed him back at French's Spring, stalking birds with his binoculars."

No wonder. Walt had never before spotted the Lutescent and Macgillivray's warblers. Mary DeDecker, a mountaineer-naturalist who lives at the foot of these mountains, was of the opinion that the warblers had sought shelter in the desert from a recent storm in the Sierra. Especially interested in the plants of the Inyos, Mary had already listed under "Plants Along the Keynot Trail," peppergrass, buckwheat, wishbone bush, wild tobacco, peach thorn, squaw currant and a small fern found under the shady side of rocks. "And they call the Inyos barren," she laughed.

On another terrace climbing back toward the main canyon on our right, the shale took on a grapejuice hue. Connie Jarabin, a big fellow with a ready laugh, picked a leaf from the base of a Panamint Plume. "Tastes

like cabbage," he said, offering it to Roland. Roland tasted it, screwed up his face, spat it out and reached for his canteen.

Lunch time—a chance to throw off the packs, stretch out in the sunshine, and after a while revive enough to nibble a carrot, admire a coronet of buds on a prickly pear cactus and inspect Jill Johnson's new Kelty pack. Nylon on an aluminum frame it weighs only two pounds empty. With sleeping bag, ground cloth, a gallon of water, dinner, breakfast and two lunches, sweater, parka, flashlight, toothbrush and matches, the pack weighed 24 pounds.

Connie pointed to a scarlet loco weed and grinned at Roland. "They're good in sandwiches."

"Yeah?" Roland grinned back, "You eat it."

After lunch we climbed toward a bluish-gray streak that followed down the left slope into the canyon narrows. The trail began dropping into the narrows too.

