

We Climbed Glass Mountain

At some ancient period in geological history, there was an inferno of volcanic eruption in what is now known as the Mono Lake region of east central California. Evidence of the prehistoric upheaval is found today in the presence of numerous craters — and in Glass Mountain. Intrigued by the name, a group of Sierra Club mountaineers climbed the peak — and this is what they found.

Above—Late snow still lay on the north slopes of the upper ridge.

Below—Looking across the summit mesa. The buff-colored pumice is streaked with obsidian dust.



By LOUISE T. WERNER
Photos by Niles Werner
Map by Norton Allen

AMONG THE Desert Peakers of the Sierra Club there are some who enjoy poring over maps in search of new desert mountains to explore. Lloyd Balsam, a young man who between weekends of hiking and skiing supervises the testing of new equipment at Northrop Aircraft, came across the name "Glass Mountain" on a map of Mono County, California. The name intrigued him. Its proximity to the Mono Craters suggested that "glass" might refer to the volcanic glass, obsidian.

The position of the mountain in the north end of Owens Valley, between the Sierra Nevada Range on the west and the White Mountains on the east suggested that its 11,127-foot summit might prove an exceptionally fine vantage point from which to view that part of the country. He offered to lead a trip there over a three-day Memorial holiday.

After the word had gone out via the printed schedule, it turned out that the idea interested a good many others too. Fifty-six people met on Saturday noon at Tom's Place on Highway 395 in upper Owens Valley, to caravan to the campsite on Glass Mountain.

We left Tom's Place, 14 cars of us, and continued up Highway 395 to a sign reading "Whitmore Tubs." We turned right onto a black-top road to Benton Crossing, eight miles, there turning left on a dirt road that followed up the Owens River for about two miles and then cut across the desert to the mouth of a canyon on the southwest slope of Glass Mountain, five and one-half miles of dirt road.

The road ended in the mouth of the canyon at a large clearing under Jeffrey pines and quaking aspen. The elevation was about 7500 feet. Former campers had left the clearing strewn with debris. Leader Balsam went to work with his shovel and others joined him in digging a pit which a dozen young people filled with tin cans and bottles. Old socks, paper cartons and a ragged shirt were piled up to be burned. It was like having to clean the tub before one's bath as well as after, but what a difference it made!

We filled our eyes with the natural beauty of the place—the shimmer of restless aspen leaves as the sun sifted through, tall Jeffrey pines hung with

fat, handsome cones, wild roses straggling around the edges of the clearing as if to fence it in. A path led back through dense woods to a little stream rippling over a mosaic of granite pebbles and black bits of obsidian. Clumps of golden birches crowded the stream, their yellow catkins drooping, pendant-like, over the water. Wild iris bloomed beside budding columbine.

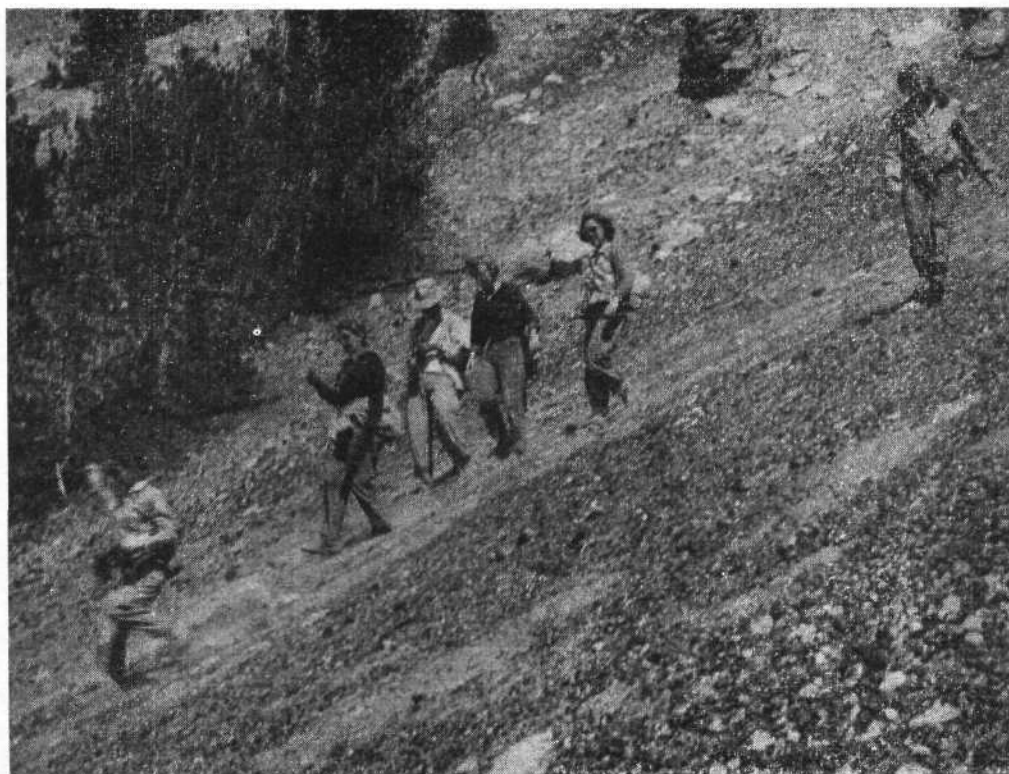
The 56 people who settled themselves to camp around the edges of the clearing and in little bays bulging from it, ranged in age from 5 months to 64 years, including half a dozen children under five. Cooking fires soon were burning, the smell of woodsmoke blending with the aromas of brewing coffee, broiling steaks and canned stew. Eric Kent built a central warming fire while his daughter Kathy, not quite two, watched him, big-eyed with the fascination of it. Parker Severson came back from reconnoitering in the woods round about and reported flushing two deer.

Even the 5-month-old son of the Garver Lights of Long Beach enjoyed the evening campfire, cooing from the depths of a snug blanket. "He's being socialized," his mother explained with a smile. It seemed unusually balmy for an elevation of 7500 feet. Marion Dean led "Home on the Range," "There's a Long, Long Trail" and a dozen other favorite campfire songs. Lloyd Balsam's announcement that the climb to the summit of Glass Mountain would begin at eight on Sunday morning brought exclamations of satisfaction from some who remembered desert peak climbs that began at three a.m. Forty-one of us would climb.

Climbing from this campsite to the 11,127-foot summit, 3500 feet of elevation is gained in about six miles. There was no official trail, but the impression which we made on the deer trails Leader Lloyd chose to follow will probably mark the route for a long time.

We contoured up the west slope of the canyon under the Jeffrey pines until a rocky buttress barred our way. Zigzagging up beside the buttress we were soon high enough on the slope to look back over the canyon's mouth and see the road trailing out over the sage flat toward the Owens River. A continuous line of snowy Sierra peaks stood against the sky.

On the opposite side of the canyon the slope, supporting a dense stand of pines, culminated in a rocky pinnacle. Bits of obsidian tinkled in the mixture of sand and pumice that slid underfoot. Bitterbrush, covered with yellow blooms, filled the air with the scent of honey and attracted bees, butterflies and hummingbirds. The leaves of



Focus hasn't a chance when both camera and subjects are skidding down scree. The long pumice slopes made the descent of Glass Mountain easy, fast and fun.

the mountain mahogany bristled dark evergreens continued to the summit in green against silver bark. A tiny rosy trumpet with yellow veins in its throat grew close to the ground, one of the less common species of *mimulus*.

"See that long slide over there?" asked Lloyd, pointing to a steep scree-run of buff-colored pumice with bits of obsidian sparkling in it. "What do you say we try coming down that way?" From across the canyon it looked smooth and boulder-free, promising a safe and fast descent.

The blue of Crowley Lake came into view at the foot of the Sierra Nevada. Overhead a mountain bluebird chased a hawk. Some granite boulders along the trail looked worm-eaten where foreign particles had weathered out. We passed a strange mushroom, table-high, made up of alternate layers of obsidian and sandstone, and another that looked as if chunks of obsidian had been haphazardly cemented together to make a rough pedestal.

Lloyd led with an easy pace, allowing plenty of time for resting, catching up, identifying plants and rocks, admiring the views and taking pictures, and visiting. His pace encouraged people new to mountain climbing and was undoubtedly responsible for the fact that all made the summit without difficulty.

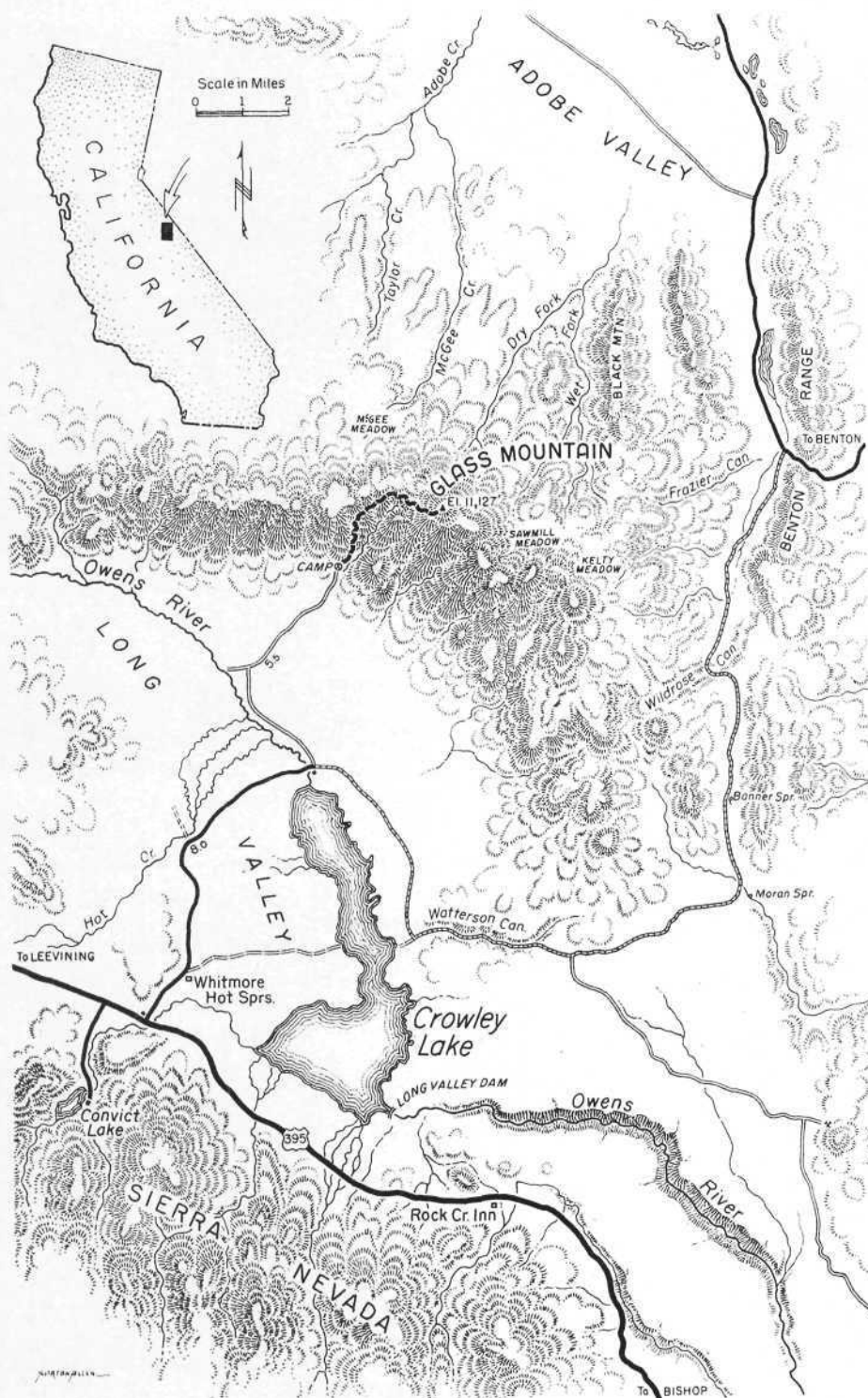
A lava flow capped the top of the ridge. The taller pines had all been left behind but smaller, more limber

ever thinning groups, their branches blown leeward. We walked over mounds of coarsely broken obsidian that resembled heaps of broken bottles which, to our surprise, did not cut into our boots as badly as had the commoner type of lava we had encountered on other volcanic mountains, the iron-like masses pitted with airholes.

When one sees, side by side, the smooth, glossy black of obsidian and the grainy gray of granite, it is hard to believe that they are made up of essentially the same elements. Obsidian pushes up out of a volcano in a mass too viscous to crystallize and cools rapidly with a minimum of airholes. Granite also begins as hot magma but cools slowly, underground, and crystallizes.

Since obsidian was a valuable raw material to the early Indians for arrowheads, spear points, knives and hide scrapers, we kept scanning the ground for "worked" pieces. Ken Rich found a flake that showed signs of working but further search yielded no others. Others found pieces with gray bandings and some of mottled red.

The Paiute Indians who used to inhabit Owens Valley in large numbers and whose descendants still live there, traded obsidian with coastal tribes for shells, and with inland tribes for hides. When an Indian found a new source of obsidian he didn't stake a personal claim to it. It belonged to the tribe as



a whole. Obsidian quarries sometimes belonged to a number of tribes; even enemy tribes might meet there under truce, to gather materials for their weapons.

Obsidian played such an important part in the lives of the Indians that in some tribes it came to have a religious significance. The craftsman who could turn out exceptionally fine implements found himself in a position to influence the minds of others. He would inspect each flake as it fell. His fellow tribesmen believed him if he declared that a certain flake had curative powers; they would keep that flake as a charm

against disease. He might pronounce one flake poisonous and the next one non-poisonous even when they came from the same piece. Many believed him without question when he said solemnly, "This point is for bear, this one for deer, this one for coyote and this for a human enemy."

According to Samuel Alfred Barrett, the Pomo Indians of Lake County, California, accounted for the obsidian they found on the slopes of Mt. Konokti by creating "Obsidian Man," a mythical character they could call on in time of need. Obsidian Man saved them time after time from their ene-

mies, wild beasts and foul weather. One day when he was walking near the top of Mt. Konokti he tripped in the weeds and fell, breaking into a thousand pieces. That's why the south slope of Mt. Konokti is covered with obsidian.

In Peru and Yucatan archeologists have uncovered mirrors of obsidian that were used by the ancient Mayans. In 1942, when black glass for sun reflectors became unobtainable, Dr. G. Dallas Hanna of the California Academy of Sciences conceived the idea of using obsidian to make mirrors for naval instruments. His experiments proved successful and such mirrors are in use today. Obsidian conducts heat at a rapid rate, is harder than pyrex and lens grinders today consider it superior to some forms of artificial glass.

Over a saddle we looked down the pine-covered slopes of McGee Canyon to meadows on the edge of the Adobe Valley in whose bowl two lakes sparkled. The topographic map of the Mt. Morris Quadrangle showed ranches in the Adobe Valley. Roads etched the valley floor. Beyond a low ridge to the east the highway trailed up over Montgomery Pass into Nevada.

Snow patches still lay on the north side of the ridge we were traveling. The ridge led us up on a rolling mesa which had two high points, one to our left and one to our right, about half a mile apart. The mesa looked like an old crater filled in with powdered pumice streaked with obsidian dust.

The easterly summit broke off abruptly and the face of the resulting cliff looked like baked pumice mud, similar in appearance to adobe. Below the cliff a snow-etched ridge dropped to the low green hills of the Benton Range beyond which the White Mountains rose to over 14,000 feet. We picked out Boundary Peak where we had stood last Fourth of July looking across to Glass Mountain.

Sierra Nevada Peaks filled in the southwest 90 degrees of our horizon, Mounts Ritter, Banner and the Minarets occupying the center of the arc. The temperature was so agreeable that we basked two hours on the summit. An 11,000-foot summit is not always so hospitably balmy as Glass Mountain was Memorial Day. We congratulated Jocelyn Delmonte, 12, on being the youngest lady to qualify for membership in the Desert Peaks Section of the Sierra Club, Glass Mountain being her sixth peak from the approved list.

Most of the time a mountain climber plods. But down Glass Mountain we fairly flew. We found two long pumice slides and skated down, sliding three feet at every stroke. The prob-



Forty-one Sierrans reached the 11,127-foot summit of Glass Mountain, California, on a weekend hike last spring.

lem of avoiding boulders, usually present on scree slopes, was almost absent on this one. Even the sixty-year-olds in the party slid down with an abandon that belied their years. It was the most exciting scree-run we had ever encountered, losing over a thousand feet of elevation in 15 minutes. Obsidian chips rang like Chinese chimes as clouds of powder billowed about the hilarious queue. When Ken Merton, nine, finally ran out of slope he hol-lered, "Let's go up and do it again, Pop!"

Had time permitted, Pop and the rest of us would have agreed. It had been an easy climb up, a fast slide down Lloyd Balsam's intriguing Glass Mountain.

SEARCH OF CHAPEL RUIN MAY FIND KINO'S GRAVE

NOGALES—Just across the border from here, at Magdalena, Sonora, Mexico, archeologists are unearthing what they believe may be the grave of Father Eusebio Kino, builder of Spanish missions in the Southwest. The search is being conducted at a ruin believed by its discoveror, Col. Gil Proctor, U. S. Army, Ret., to be the chapel of San Francisco Xavier, where eighteenth century historians recorded the priest died and was buried in 1711. The ruin follows the floor plan of the usual religious center in the old South-west — chapel, vestry, priest's room and enclosed courtyard used as a cemetery.—*Phoenix Gazette*

Picture-of-the-month Contest . . .

Amateur and professional photographers have been recording the desert spring more thoroughly this year than ever before. Among those photos will be winners in solons and contests from one coast to another and from border to border. Some will also take prizes in the Desert Magazine Picture-of-the-month Contest. Is yours a prize-winner? As long as it is a picture of the desert Southwest—an unusual scene, a unique rock or tree formation, human interest, or perhaps an animal shot—it is eligible for the Desert contest.

Entries for the April contest must be sent to the Desert Magazine office, Palm Desert, California, and postmarked not later than April 18. Winning prints will appear in the June issue. Pictures which arrive too late for one contest are held over for the next month. First prize is \$10; second prize \$5. For non-winning pictures accepted for publication \$3 each will be paid.

HERE ARE THE RULES

- 1—Prints for monthly contests must be black and white, 5x7 or larger, printed on glossy paper.
- 2—Each photograph submitted should be fully labeled as to subject, time and place. Also technical data: camera, shutter speed, hour of day, etc.
- 3—PRINTS WILL BE RETURNED WHEN RETURN POSTAGE IS ENCLOSED.
- 4—All entries must be in the Desert Magazine office by the 20th of the contest month.
- 5—Contests are open to both amateur and professional photographers. Desert Magazine requires first publication rights only of prize winning pictures.
- 6—Time and place of photograph are immaterial, except that it must be from the desert Southwest.
- 7—Judges will be selected from Desert's editorial staff, and awards will be made immediately after the close of the contest each month.

Address All Entries to Photo Editor

The Desert Magazine

PALM DESERT, CALIFORNIA