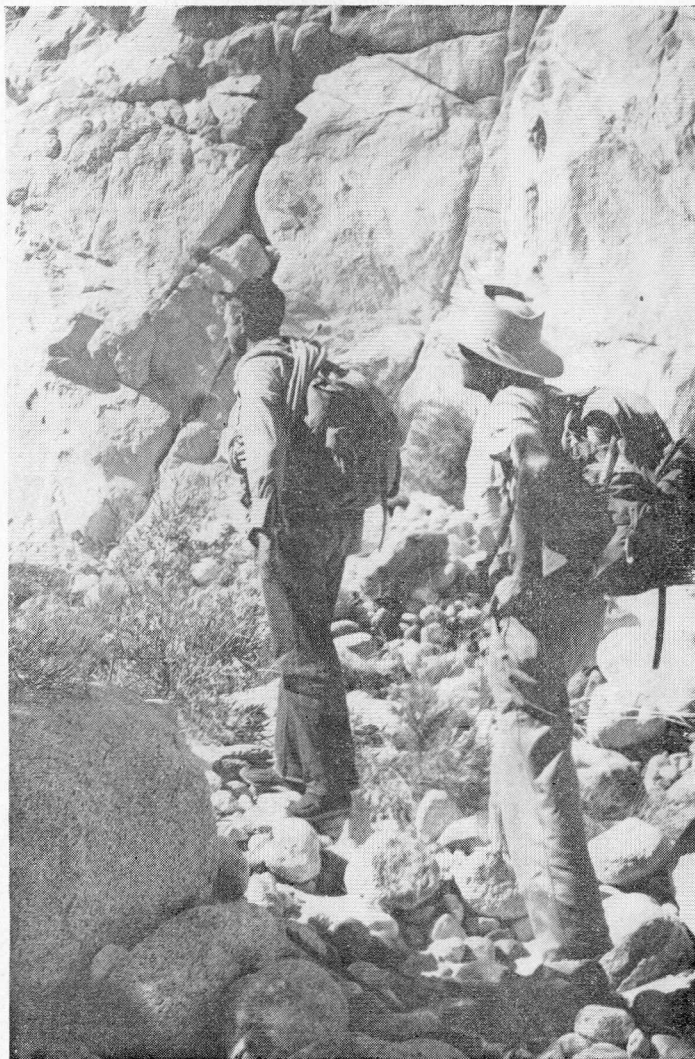


Sometimes it was necessary to strip and wade to keep the packs and camera equipment dry.



There was no trail—just rocks, and occasionally heavy brush. The rope was used many times.

Three Days in Devil's Canyon

Slashing through the heart of the San Pedro Martyr Mountains in Lower California is the Devil's Canyon—Canyon del Diablo, the Mexicans call it. Curious to know why the padres, the prospectors and the cattlemen have all by-passed this canyon down through the years, Randall Henderson and two companions spent three days traversing the 22-mile bottom of the chasm—and this is the story of what they found there.

By RANDALL HENDERSON
Map by Norton Allen

LATE ONE April afternoon in 1937 Norman Clyde and I stood on the 10,136-foot summit of Picacho del Diablo, highest peak on the Baja California peninsula (*Desert Magazine*, Jan. '53). To the east we could see across the Gulf of California to the Sonora coastline, and to the west the sun was just dipping below the horizon where the sky meets the Pacific Ocean.

Starting from the floor of San Felipe

Valley on the desert side of the San Pedro Martyr Range, we had been scaling rocks and fighting our way through thickets of catsclaw, agave and manzanita for three days to reach this peak.

While there was good visibility for 75 miles in every direction, my interest was attracted to the deep gorge immediately below us on the west side of the San Pedro Martyrs—Canyon del Diablo. This great gorge drains

the western slope of the upper Martyrs and then cuts a great semi-circular gash through the range and dumps its flood waters—when there are cloudbursts—into the San Felipe Valley on the desert side. The mouth of the canyon is only 12 miles north of Providencia Canyon up which Norman Clyde and I had climbed to the summit of El Diablo peak.

It is a magnificent canyon—and I resolved that some day I would traverse its depths. Perhaps there was a good reason why the Mexicans had named it El Diablo—The Devil.

It was 17 years before I went back to Canyon del Diablo. Arles Adams and Bill Sherrill and I had sat around our campfires on desert exploring trips and many times discussed plans for the descent of this canyon, but it was not until October, 1954, that the trip was scheduled. Arles secured a week's

leave of absence from the hemp straw processing mill in El Centro where he is superintendent, and Bill wrangled a week's vacation from the U. S. Border Patrol at Calexico where he was chief—and we took off for the San Pedro Martyrs.

My brother Carl drove us down the coastal highway from Tijuana through Ensenada to the end of the 142-mile paved road which follows the Pacific shoreline, and then another 36 miles over hard but rough dirt and gravel road to the San Jose Ranch of Alberta and Salvador Meling which was to be the starting point for our trip across the peninsula by way of the Devil's Canyon.

For years I have looked forward to meeting the Melings. I wondered why they had chosen to spend their lives—they are both past 60—in this remote semi-arid wilderness of Baja California. Neither of them is of Mexican descent.

Harry Johnson, Mrs. Meling's father, brought his family from Texas to Baja California in 1899 when Alberta was a small girl. Johnson was a frontiersman of the finest type. At first he had a ranch near the coast at which is now San Antonio del Mar, 150 miles south of San Diego.

Then he became interested in the rich placer diggings at Socorro near the base of the San Pedro Martyr Range, 40 miles inland from his ranch. Gold had been discovered there in 1874, and the gravel was worked intermittently until Johnson acquired the ground. He operated the mines 15 years, until they were worked out.

Salvador Meling came to Lower California from Norway with his parents and eight brothers in 1908. They were miners, and worked for Johnson at the placer field. Eventually Salvador married the boss' daughter—and they have made their home in the vicinity ever since. They have four grown children and 12 grandchildren. One of the daughters, Ada Barre, manages the guest accommodations at the San Jose ranch.

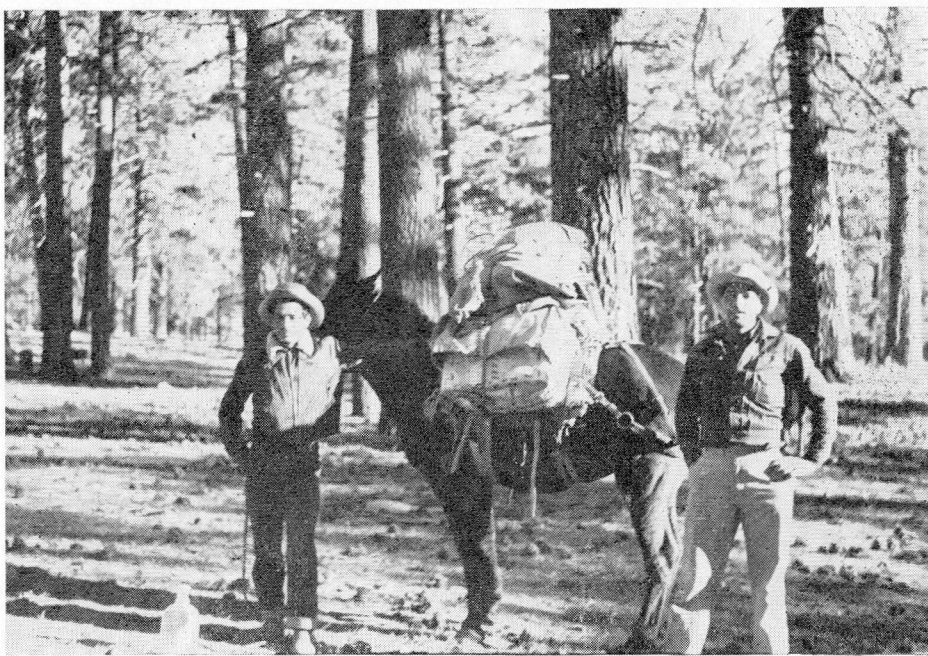
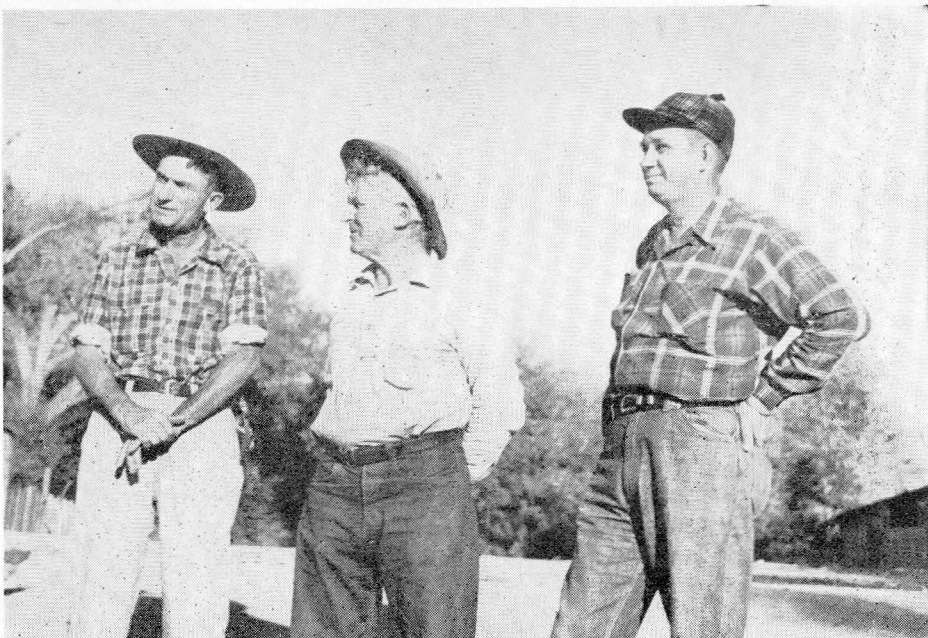
The Melings run between 400 and 500 head of cattle on their range, and have a crew of Mexican cowboys who also serve as dude wranglers when there are guests at the ranch.

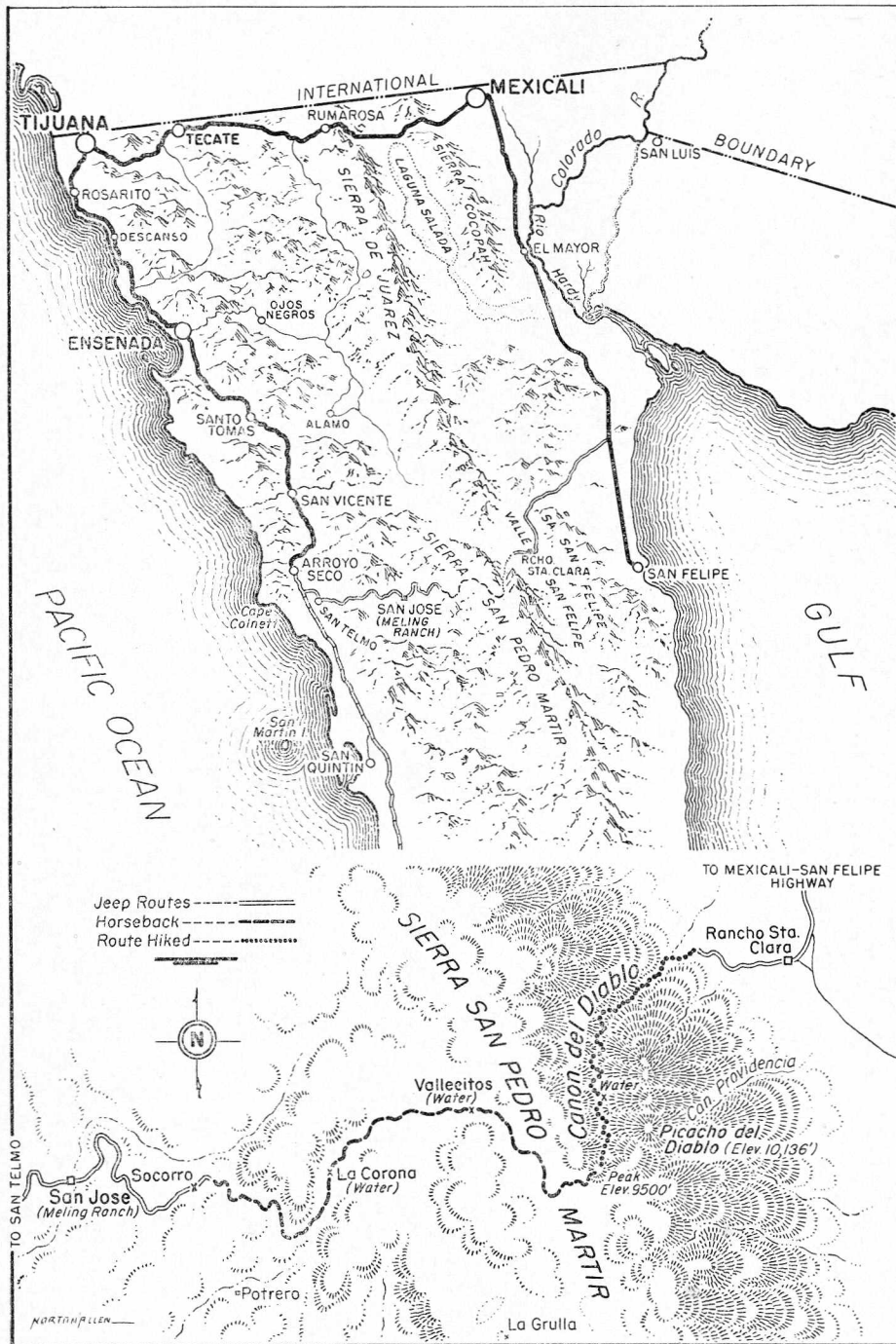
They drive 112 miles to Ensenada

Above — Arles Adams, Salvador Meling and Bill Sherrill at the San Jose Ranch.

Center—Juanito and Adolfo, guides and packers for the expedition.

Below—Home of the Melings—the San Jose Ranch near the base of the San Pedro Martyr Mountains.





twice a month for mail and for such essential supplies as sugar, coffee, salt, flour, fuel oil and tank gas. Most of their food comes from the ranch. A fine spring equipped with a jet pump supplies irrigation water for an orchard of apples, peaches, pears, plums and grapes, and for their garden. They raise their own meat and vegetables. Mrs. Meling took me into the store-room where the shelves were stacked with 600 jars of fruit, jam, jelly and vegetables which she and her Mexican maids had canned. They have a smoke house to cure their meat, and Mrs. Meling bakes from 40 to 50 loaves of bread a week to supply the ranch crew and guests.

Salvador manages the ranch and

orchards and gardens. San Jose is a quiet retreat shaded by huge cottonwood trees, with limited guest accommodations. The family style meals are homegrown and homemade, and the platters are filled high with food that has never been inside of a cannery or processing factory.

We reached the Meling ranch late in the afternoon and arranged for packers and saddle horses for the 42-mile ride to upper Diablo Canyon, to start the next morning.

Talking with Alberta by the huge fireplace that evening I began to understand why they had chosen to remain at this isolated Baja California oasis. What I learned merely confirmed what Arthur W. North had written

about her in *Camp and Camino in Lower California* (now out of print) when he knew her there as a girl 50 years ago. He referred to her as Miss Bertie, for that was the name by which she has always been known among friends and neighbors. Quoting from one of Miss Bertie's neighbors, North wrote:

"She's the most interesting personality in all this countryside—and yet I can't describe her. Though she has lived in these wilds since babyhood, she has the gentle traits you may find in the girls at home. And I must tell you about her pluck. Once during the absence of her men folks, she heard that some marauding Indians and Mexicans were about to take off with a bunch of her father's range cattle. Without pausing for rest or giving thought to the risk, she rode 13 hours; indeed, using up two saddle horses, the range riding was so rough. She saved the cattle. Another time she was in San Diego with her father. A man of considerable means, he pointed out a magnificent eastern-style residence to her, saying, 'Bertie, you girls mustn't remain Amazons. I think I'll buy that place for you.' She knew he might be in earnest. 'Oh, you wouldn't make us live in the city,' she cried. 'Town life must be so crowded. Can't we live always in the sierras? There we can breathe.'"

For 17 years I have been trying to gain information about Canyon del Diablo. Members of the Sierra Club had climbed down into the gorge and out again, on their way to the top of Diablo peak. They had found water there, but knew nothing about the canyon below. At Mexicali and San Felipe and Ensenada I had made inquiries about El Diablo—and the answer invariably was shrug and "*Quien Sabe.*" No one at San Jose ranch had ever been through the canyon. Alberta Meling said: "I've never known anyone who went down the canyon. I've always wanted to make the trip, but it is too rough for the horses, and we never seemed to have time for it. I have been told there are Indian petroglyphs and a waterfall at the San Felipe Valley entrance, but that is all I know about it."

A rough road continues 11 miles beyond the ranch to the old Socorro placer field, and since it would be possible to drive the jeep station wagon to that point, we arranged for the packers to meet us there with the horses the following morning. We had estimated the ride from San Jose to Diablo at two days, and the distance down the canyon to its portal on the desert at from 20 to 25 miles. We had allowed for three days in the gorge.

San Jose ranch is at an elevation of

2200 feet, and the mine road climbed another 2000 feet to a point just beyond Socorro where the going became too rough even for the jeep. We were on an old road bulldozed several years ago by a group of men who thought they had a concession to cut big timber up on the San Pedro Martyrs. But the Mexican government never actually issued the permit, and flood water has now cut great gullies in the road.

Nothing remains at the old placer camp today except heaps of adobe partly concealed by the desert shrubbery—marking the sites of the houses once occupied by Johnson's miners.

It was nearly noon when Juanito and Adolfo, the packers, caught up with us. In the meantime Carl had deposited us along the old road, and with his ferry job completed he returned over the coast highway to California.

The western approach to the San Pedro Martyrs is over rolling hills covered with ribbon wood, juniper, manzanita, mountain mahogany, laurel and sage. At the higher levels are ferns and coniferous trees including fine stands of Ponderosa pine.

At three o'clock our little pack train had reached big timber, and a half hour later we camped at the edge of a lovely pine-fringed mountain meadow with three springs close by. This is La Corona—at an elevation of 7100 feet.

That evening at La Corona camp I had my first Kamp-Pack meal. The Kamp-Pack brand covers a wide range of dehydrated and seasoned food products made by the Bernard Food Industries at 1208 E. San Antonio St., San Jose, California, for camping and back-packing trips. "Nothing to add but water," is the slogan on each package.

Ground or powdered meats, fruits and vegetables come in moisture proof envelopes of metal foil. They are packaged in 4-man and 8-man portions. For this trip I ordered 4-man portions to last five days—60 meals. The total weight was 11 pounds, and the cost \$17.79. Our camp menu included such items as chicken pot pie with biscuits, chicken stew, cheese-egg omelette, hamburger steak and meat loaf, mashed potatoes with chicken gravy, Boston baked beans, scrambled eggs and buttermilk pancakes—with coffee, chocolate and powdered milk, and applesauce or pudding for dessert.

It was necessary only for each of us to carry a small kit of aluminum utensils for cooking and eating—and at mealtime we enjoyed all the luxuries of home. It was surprising how those small crumbs of dehydrated chicken became tender and delicious morsels of meat after the proper cooking and heating. That really is camping deluxe.



Alberta Meling of San Jose Ranch in Baja California. Her postoffice is 112 miles away at Ensenada—and the road is not all paved.

We spread our sleeping bags on beds of pine needles that night. We carried no firearms, but Bill Sherrill had brought along one of those wild animal calls. It is a tin gadget like a whistle which sounds like a beast in great distress—I was never able to figure out just which beast. The theory is that if you make a noise like a wounded fawn or baby eagle, the carnivorous animals of the forest will all come in for a meal. So, after dark we went out in the forest and made some hideous

noises. It wasn't a big success. Bill and Arles were sure they saw a fox lurking among the trees, and once there was an answering call which could have been a cougar. A prolonged drouth has left San Pedro Martyrs very dry, and the Mexican boys said most of the deer and other animals had gone elsewhere.

We were away at 7:30 in the morning. Our trail led through a silent forest of conifers, ascending and descending the easy slopes of a high plateau,

always gaining altitude. Once the solitude was broken by a cracking and splintering sound, and we turned in our saddles to see an aged Ponderosa giant topple to the ground. A cloud of dust filled the air—and that was all. We had witnessed the final passing of a tree which probably was in its prime when the Jesuit padres were building their missions on the Baja California peninsula.

It is at the base and in the canyons of the San Pedro Martyrs that treasure hunters for many years have been seeking the fabled lost gold and silver of the Santa Ysabel mission—a cache which is said to have been concealed by the Jesuit Black Robes when they were expelled from New Spain in 1767.

Occasionally through the pine trees we would get a glimpse of the white granite peak of Picacho del Diablo far to the east, the landmark toward which we were traveling.

At 11 o'clock we reached Vallecitos, a series of high mountain meadows. Our trail ended at an old log cabin which Juanito told us was used occasionally by cowboys and sheep herders. Our guide said there was a spring a half mile off the trail, but the rim of Diablo Canyon is but three or four miles from this point and we felt we had ample water to complete the journey.

At Vallecitos, Juanito turned toward the south and we rode for six miles in a southerly direction parallel to Diablo Canyon. We had told the Melings we wanted to go to the rim of upper Diablo Canyon by the most direct route, and we assumed Juanito understood this. But either he misunderstood his directions, or was not familiar with the terrain, for he finally brought us to the summit of an unnamed peak at the head of the canyon—at an elevation of 9510 feet. We were on a saddle where the timbered slopes to the north of us drained down into Diablo gorge, and the arid canyon on the other side drained into the desert below San Felipe. The blue waters of the gulf were only a few miles away.

After leaving Vallecitos, instead of going to the rim of the canyon at its nearest point, Juanito had taken us perhaps ten miles further in a southeasterly direction to the very head of the canyon. All of which would not have been disturbing were it not for the fact that we had used the last of our water when we stopped for a trail-side lunch — and we now faced the prospect of working our way down precipitous slopes to an elevation perhaps 2500 feet below, before we could quench our thirst in Diablo Creek. Since Juanito understood no English, we waved him farewell and he turned

back over the trail with his pack train toward the San Jose ranch.

Now we were on our own. Our packs were not excessive. We had weighed them at San Jose. Bill was carrying 31 pounds, Arles 28, and mine weighed 26. The difference was in the bedding, clothing and camera equipment. Bill carried a light plastic air mattress. We also carried 100 feet of half-inch Nylon rope which added four and one-half pounds. We took two-hour turns with the rope.

It was 2:45 Wednesday afternoon when we shouldered our packs and started down the steep slope, much of the time lowering ourselves with hand holds on trees and rocks. We welcomed the shade of the pine trees which grew on the mountainside. We were

FOOD FOR BACKPACKERS

For those who take long tramps on desert or mountains with their beds and grub in the packs on their backs, the advantage of dehydrated foods is well known. One pound of dried onions is equivalent to nine pounds of fresh onions. Other vegetables are about the same 9-to-1. The ratio is slightly lower for meats, and many times higher for drinks such as coffee, milk, fruit juices, malted milks, etc.

Whole milk powder serves for multiple purposes: For cereals, meat gravy, pancakes, hot chocolate, milk shakes and puddings.

While Kamp-Pack foods are offered in kits — the complete day's food — breakfast, lunch and dinner for four or eight men—there is considerable economy, and a more selective menu if ordered a la carte—that is four or eight-man packs of the items desired. If only two persons are on the trip the extra food need not be wasted, as the metal foil envelopes in which it comes may be closed and the extra portions readily carried over for a future meal.

Members of the Diablo Canyon expedition described the flavoring of the foods as "delicious." Their only suggestion was that some of the items were better if soaked in water somewhat longer than the directions required, before cooking.

thirsty and we had no way of reckoning the distance to water. Within an hour the sun disappeared over the west rim above and by five o'clock it was dusk and we made camp for the night. For sleeping quarters we scooped out little shelves between rocks on the side-hill—and went to bed without supper. Food that bore labels "Nothing to add but water" was of little use to us then.

We were away at five in the morning without breakfast—confident that before many hours we would come to water. At mid-morning we had to uncoil the rope to lower our packs over a 60-foot dry waterfall, and then followed them down hand and toe. We were feeling the effects of dehydration, and worked down the rock face with extra caution.

And then, just at 12, we arrived at the top of another dry fall and could hear the trickle of water at its base. Arles and Bill detoured the fall while I uncoiled the rope and rappelled down the 40-foot face to a spring of cold water. The elevation was 6700 feet.

One of the packages in the Kamp-Pack was labelled "Strawberry Milk Shake" and there was a combination measuring cup and shaker in the kit. What a feast we had there by that ice-cold spring—with milk shakes as rich and flavorful as you buy at any soda fountain. After a refreshing two hours there at the headwaters of Diablo Creek we had forgotten the discomfort of 24 hours without water and were eager to see what was ahead. From that point we tramped beside flowing water all the way down the canyon, crossing and re-crossing it a hundred times a day.

It was never smooth going, but we had rubber-soled shoes to insure good footing on the smooth granite. Many times we had to lower ourselves by hand and toe, but there were no difficult passages that afternoon.

A short distance below the spring we found the charred wood of a dead campfire, and a can of fuel oil for a primus stove. I assumed this was the place where one of the Sierra Club expeditions had camped when they found it necessary to drop down into Diablo Canyon as they climbed Picacho del Diablo from the west. The peak was directly above us, a 4000-foot climb from here.

Between 6500 and 6000 feet there were ducks on the rocks to mark a route along the floor of the gorge. Below that point we found no evidence of previous visitors, either Indians or whites, until we reached the 4000-foot level.

At four o'clock the canyon had widened somewhat and the floor was covered with a forest of oak trees. We found a comfortable campsite beside the stream with a cushion of oak leaves for our beds. For supper we had chicken stew and pan fried biscuits. The elevation was 5900 feet.

We were tired tonight, physically and mentally — physically, because none of us was conditioned for a long day with packs. Mentally because of the decisions — thousands of them. Traveling with packs over more or less loose boulders, every step calls for a decision, and when the descent is over vertical rock, every foot and handhold has to be tested and an instinctive decision made for every hold. The mind literally becomes weary making decisions. We were conscious always of the difficulties which would be entailed if a careless step on a loose rock

should result in a broken bone in this inaccessible place.

Up to the point of extreme exhaustion, such hazards lend fascination to such a journey. There were compensations every moment of the day: Each turn in the winding canyon revealed a glorious new vista, and each portal was the gateway to a new adventure. Sometimes the leader, and we took turns, led us into an impenetrable thicket of mesquite or face to face with a wall of granite, and we had to retrace our steps. Once I thought I was smarter than the leader—and stayed on the right side of the stream instead of following Arles and Bill across to the other side. My folly led me into a little swamp where I spent 30 minutes clawing my way through fern fronds higher than my head.

Below the oak forest we encountered dense thickets of underbrush—agave, catsclaw, wild grape, scrub mesquite—and ferns.

The canyon became more precipitous and several times we lowered our packs with ropes. Twice we rappelled down over slick waterfalls.

At five o'clock we made camp at the 4300-foot level and slept on a sandbar that night. The walls of the gorge rose almost verticle on both sides of us. We had expected to be out of the canyon the following day, Saturday, but it seemed we were still in the heart of the range, and we were beginning to have doubts that we would make it on schedule.

We were up at five and had scrambled eggs for breakfast. The canyon was dropping rapidly and we constantly scrambled over and around huge boulders. However, we preferred the rocks to the thorny brush of the previous day, and made good time.

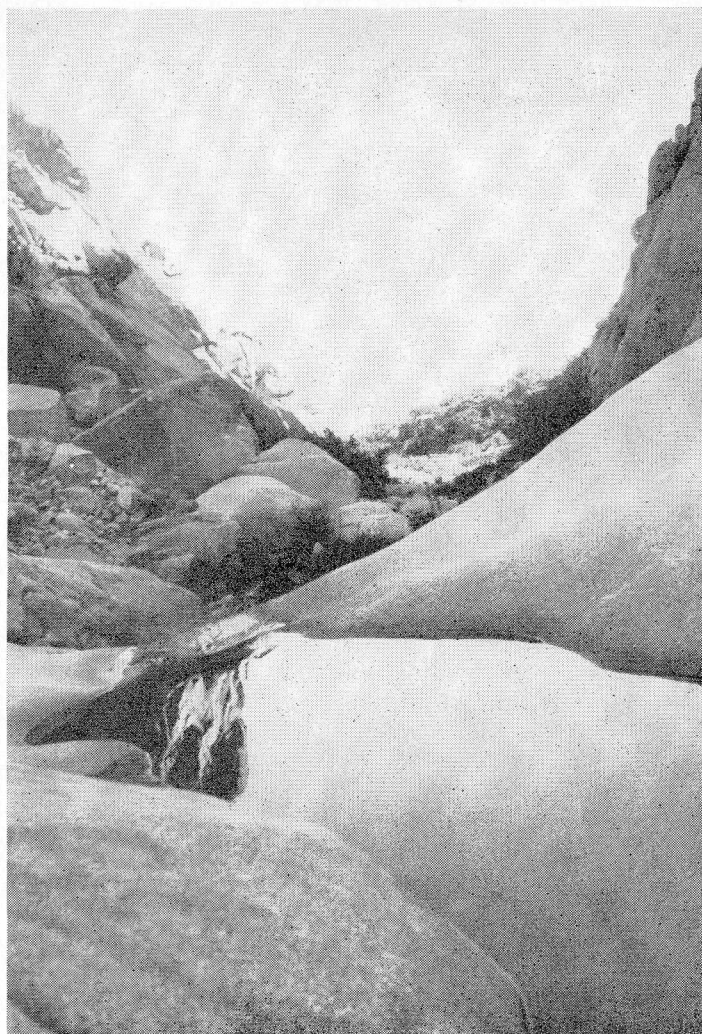
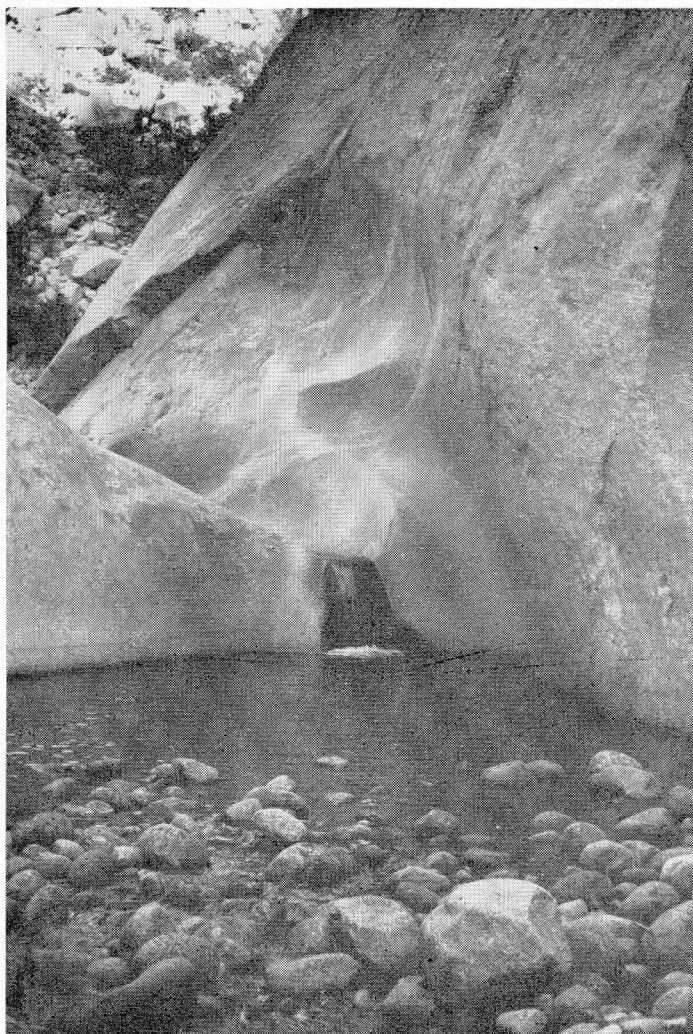
At noon the canyon had turned sharply to the east and was beginning to open up. We ate lunch at 3000 feet. The temperature was 82 degrees—we were getting close to the desert.



Above — During the 42-mile ride from San Jose Ranch to Canyon del Diablo we caught an occasional glimpse of El Picacho del Diablo through the trees. The right of the twin peaks is the highest—10,136 feet—Baja California's highest peak.

Center — The western slope of the San Pedro Martyrs is a land of rolling hills, big timber and mountain meadows. Pack train enroute to Canyon del Diablo.

Below — Bill Sherrill and Arles Adams stopped for a refreshing drink at one of the many pools in the bottom of the canyon.



"We swam the last 40 feet of the canyon" in the pool on the left. These pools at the desert mouth of the canyon, walled in by slick rock, have been an almost impassable barrier to those who would enter El Diablo from below.

Late in the afternoon we found more ducks on the rocks, and other evidence that some one had been up the canyon recently. Then we came to a pool with vertical slick rock walls and had to strip and wade breast deep in the water. Around the next bend was another pool at the foot of a 3-foot waterfall. The water was deep. A detour over the ridge on either side would have required hours of hard climbing. The sun was going down, and we were tired. Arles stripped and dived in and swam the 40 feet to the far side of the pool. To get our cameras and duffle across we rigged an overhead tramway with the rope and when everything was across Bill and I plunged in and swam.

A quarter of a mile below this point, just as it was getting dusk, we emerged suddenly from the walls of the gorge, and a few minutes later were met by Arles' son, Jack Adams and his friend Walker Woolever, who had brought a jeep down from El Centro to meet us. Jack and Walker had arrived earlier in the day, had driven their jeep as near the canyon entrance as possible and

then made their way up the canyon and left the ducks we had seen late in the afternoon. They had scaled that last waterfall by using a shoulder stand, one of them submerged in seven feet of water while the other climbed the fall from his shoulders, and then gave a helping hand from above. Only a couple of venturesome teen-agers would have attempted such a feat.

The deep pool and waterfall are barriers which probably more than any other factors have left Devil's Canyon virtually unexplored down through the years. There are petroglyphs on the rock walls below the pool, but in the 22-mile descent of the canyon we had seen no evidence that Indians had ever been there—no shards, no glyphs or metates, flint chips, sea shells or smoke-charred caves. Even more strange is the fact that although wild palms of the *Erythea armata* and *Washingtonia filifera* species grow in the desert canyons both in the Sierra Juarez range to the north and in the San Pedro Martyrs south of us, we found not a single palm tree along the way.

That waterfall barrier at the mouth of the canyon probably explains the lack of palm trees. Most of the wild palms in the canyons of the Southwest grew from seeds brought there by Indians, or in the dung of coyotes. Few Indians and no coyotes have ever surmounted that pool and waterfall I am sure.

From the mouth of the canyon we hiked a mile to the jeep and then followed a rough road across San Felipe Valley and through a pass at the north end of Sierra San Felipe and home over the paved road that extends from Mexicali to the fishing village of San Felipe on the gulf.

Why did they name it Canyon del Diablo? I do not know for sure, but I can bear witness that we were as dry as the furnaces of Hades going in, and as wet as if we had swam the River Styx coming out.

It is one of those expeditions I would not want to repeat—and will always be glad I did it once.