

From the north, the 4650-foot peak of Kofa mountain in western Arizona is a comparatively easy climb. But until the past year there was no record of any of the mountaineering fraternity having scaled the precipitous west face of the great massif. Using a 130-foot rope for safety on the difficult pitches, Ruth and John Mendenhall and their companions made the ascent without serious difficulty—but had some uncomfortable moments when darkness overtook them on the way down. Here is the story of a mountain adventure in a region where cholla cactus and catsclaw are among the hazards of travel.

John Mendenhall led up the precipitous faces, and then belayed the other members of the party with a rope from above.

Up the West Face of Kofa Mountain

By RUTH DYAR MENDENHALL

THE solid block of Kofa mountain, as purple in the early November morning as it had been by moonlight, rose from the desert flatness with the characteristic abruptness of the desert ranges. The main massif tapered off to the north in a long line of sharp, imposing pinnacles and aiguilles. The usual route to the summit is by easy northern slopes. My husband John, Randall Henderson and his son Rand, and I, hoped to make the first ascent by Kofa's steep, forbidding west face that Saturday.

The wide desert sky bloomed in a canopy of small, bright cloud-roses that faded to grey as, inside our sleeping-bags, we struggled into overalls and plaid shirts. Our campsite had been a broad wash 17 miles south of Quartzsite, Arizona, where a diminutive, rickety sign pointed from the Quartzsite-Yuma highway up a tiny, rocky road to "Palm Canyon." A hurried breakfast was followed by a rocky, bumpy ride in the cars along the Palm canyon road for eight miles eastward.

At 8 a. m. we left the cars, shouldered knapsacks and rope, and tramped across gently rising land toward the bajada spreading from the deep, tremendous gap in the west face of Kofa, which split the mountain from skyline to desert floor in one precipice-walled "V." The rock's rich purple changed to brown as we neared it.

The name "Kofa" I had thought to be a fine Indian word, but learned that it was a contraction of "King of Arizona," a mine on its south side. The mountain rises from an elevation of 1800 feet at the canyon mouth to 4650 feet. Crossing the desert, we managed to disregard the majestic hulk before us long enough to inspect the desert plants, all neatly spaced as in a frugal garden: dark green, fine-foliaged creosote, smooth leaved goat nut, gray small burro weed, innocuous-looking loco weed; desert trees—ironwood, catsclaw, and green-stemmed palo verde; weird and peculiar cacti—high cylindrical saguaro, exquisitely pale green and deceptively fluffy-looking cholla, and ocotillo clusters of long wiry arms.

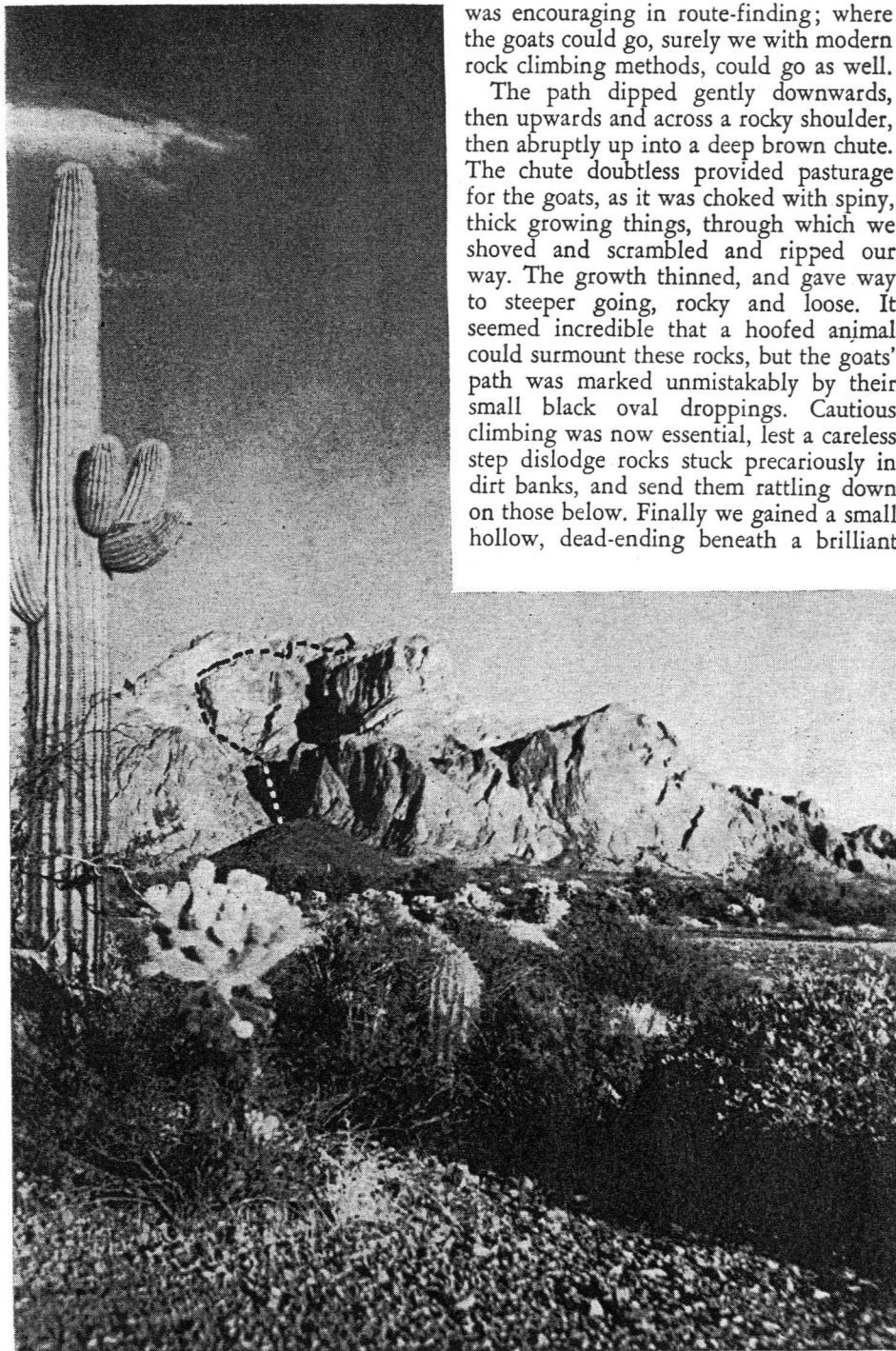
Our party entered the canyon and followed the broad wash between rapidly rising walls of volcanic rock, yellow as ochre and rivalling the Sierras for spectacular sheerness. Small side canyons on either side cut the cliffs. High in one of them nestled palms, said to be the only wild palms in Arizona. In this and a few of the other small canyons, 52 palms have been counted. A scramble up a loose chute gave a better view of the bright green, feathery trees that waved with a mirage-like quality between the brown, close walls. There was none of the surface water usual where wild palms grow.

After this detour, we continued at a leisurely pace up the narrowing watercourse, over boulders increasingly large and



steep, some of them a peculiar pink conglomerate. The high walls of the canyon and of the mountain's west face shot upwards in tremendous, castle-crowned cliffs. In a great golden amphitheater well up the canyon, we sat down to debate the best route. The canyon divided into several high steep chimneys, any one of which might provide a route to the top. The most northerly of these seemed to offer an encouraging way. Eventually the parley rejected the gullies, and selected a route to our left over scree slopes broken with sparse vegetation, toward a saddle to the left of serrated brown teeth jaggling the skyline.

After much upward toil over unsteady scree, in vigorous sunshine, we attained the saddle and peered eagerly over it—only to find that the way did not open up behind the teeth in a practicable route to the summit, as we had expected. Meager shade behind some rocks, and cogitation over a sandwich, followed. John decided to investigate a traverse beneath the teeth to our right, back to the easterly canyon we had noted from the amphitheater below. He disappeared among rocks and



Dotted line shows the route taken by the climbers up Cliff canyon and thence by a precipitous chute to a wide ledge which led almost to the summit. Much evidence of mountain goats, and one rattlesnake, were encountered along the way.

brush, and after a time called back to us. His voice came, a tangled thing of intermingling echoes, the words indistinguishable in the medley of overlapping sound that was like a musical round. Finally, when he shouted with long pauses between words, we could understand—not the original shout—but the first echo of each word. The message was for us to come.

The dim path beneath the great yellow walls led cleverly among rocks and shrubs. Here, on the unclimbed, barren west face of Kofa mountain, we were following the trail of mountain goats. The knowledge

was encouraging in route-finding; where the goats could go, surely we with modern rock climbing methods, could go as well.

The path dipped gently downwards, then upwards and across a rocky shoulder, then abruptly up into a deep brown chute. The chute doubtless provided pasturage for the goats, as it was choked with spiny, thick growing things, through which we shoved and scrambled and ripped our way. The growth thinned, and gave way to steeper going, rocky and loose. It seemed incredible that a hoofed animal could surmount these rocks, but the goats' path was marked unmistakably by their small black oval droppings. Cautious climbing was now essential, lest a careless step dislodge rocks stuck precariously in dirt banks, and send them rattling down on those below. Finally we gained a small hollow, dead-ending beneath a brilliant

yellow, overhanging wall. Scrambling had ended, and any further progress would entail rock climbing.

John uncoiled the 130 feet of manila rope, changed from hiking shoes to crepe soled tennis shoes, and tied one end of the rope around his waist. Sitting in the hollow, I braced myself in a belay with the rope about my hips, to protect the climber, and paid the hemp out cautiously as John traversed on small rounded holds across the canyon's north wall. Careful climbing, upward and across the exposed face, took him over the skyline. A moment later, he called "Up!" and one by one the rest of

us followed, John belaying us from above.

We were now on a broad shelf, a sloping ledge that followed the base of the mountain's great brown crown southward, to our right. Evidence of the goats was plentiful, and again encouraged us. If the goats had been here, there must be a way to the top, a way men could follow. Close to the wall, the ledge was well-worn, chalky-grey rock; it dropped toward the cliff edge, grey-green with grass; it flattened out, and shrubs covered it more thickly.

I was third in the procession of four when I suddenly heard a soft, chirring whisper from the ground. I had often wondered if I would know a rattlesnake if I should come face to face with one. I did. The rattle was a familiar sound even before the thick green body was seen looped and vibrant in the grass a few feet away. We were all rather startled, as it was late in the year for a rattler to be seen on the desert—probably the heat of the southwest exposure kept him out of hibernation. The inaccessibility of his home and the peculiar pale green color of his skin added to the snake's unusual character.

The ledge now broke up into a white rocky shoulder, which we traversed cautiously, protected by the rope, till it merged again into a brush-grown and commodious shelf that continued south beneath the high grown wall. A climb up a short chimney at the end of the wall, brought us abruptly out on an open shoulder of the mountain. Across the head of a deep gully, a long ridge led east to a cluster of humps, two farther chocolate-colored rises and a nearer pale one, one of which must be the highest point. Some delicate but easy rock work, in and out of the head of the great main canyon that dropped down the west face, deposited us on the ridge. We trudged up a small stair-cased watercourse, speculating that doubtless the nearest hump was not the highest, a thing which wouldn't be natural.

Our concentrated interest in reaching the peak was diverted by the remarkable formations of chalcedony, beautifully crystallized "roses," which lay everywhere among the gravel, waiting to be plucked. These chalcedony formations, as big as one's fist, are generally found worn and battered at the bottom of canyons, washed down by streams. Those on Kofa's peak lie waxy and white, some streaked with pink carnelian or a rich blue, their petals curling as if in full bloom, fresh from their natural mold.

At three o'clock the pale rise was gained, and proved after all to be the highest point. We had climbed 2800 feet above the desert, and sank down tiredly on the summit rocks to finish our lunches and reduce the few drops of "precious fluid" in our canteens. A rather ill-kempt heap of planks, ancient dry-cells, and a

bench mark distinguished the exact top, a triangulation point.

Almost 3000 feet beneath, the wonderful openness of the desert stretched smoothly off in every direction to a skyline ring of mountains. Kofa's northern pinnacles, which had looked so important that morning, had diminished to a far line of lowly needles. Small black buttes, possibly ancient volcanoes, studded the near desert. Eastward an impressive sea of sharp peaks churned up like waves. To the west an elbow of the Colorado river bent into view.

A cold wind and the late hour urged hasty speculation as to the fastest route down. The west side was decided on, with the realization that we would have a race with darkness and that, no doubt, darkness would win. After a detour back to the rattlesnake place to regain a forgotten camera, a hurried descent was begun directly into the main canyon which had been crossed to reach the summit, and which promised a direct, speedy, and easy route to the bajada. When the canyon fell away in steep waterfalls, we uncoiled the rope, doubled it about a convenient protuberance of rock, and after passing it about our bodies in such a way as to provide friction, "roped down." After two or three rope-downs, the angle of the canyon eased off, and we went hurrying downwards, scrambling over rocks, swinging down big boulders, sprinting to reach easier going before the early night. The darkness seemed to increase by perceptible jumps, as if between winks.



Left to right—John and Ruth Mendenhall and Rand Henderson at their base camp following the ascent of Kofa peak.

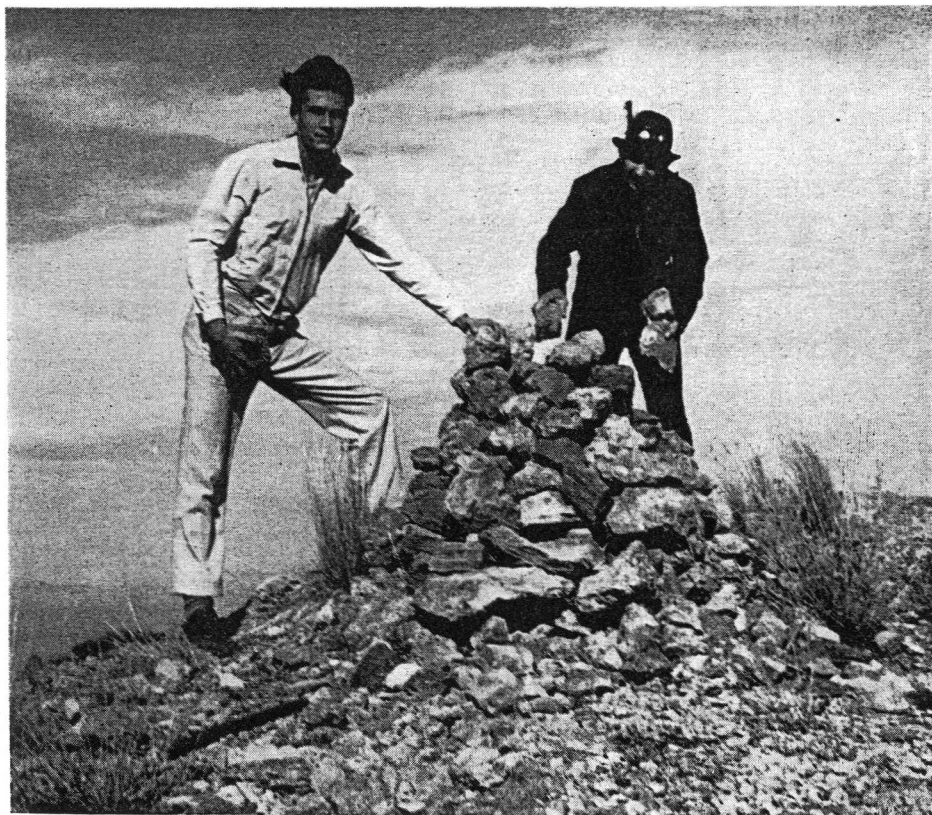
The day had been warm and our canteens inadequate, so everyone was quite dehydrated though pretending not to notice.

All the way up there hadn't been a drop of water; on the way down a single threadlike trickle had been very bitter. We were running down glowingly white, scoured granite slabs when Randy suddenly came to a tiny "tank" of water in a hollow of rock. The thirsty climbers sniffed it suspiciously, then in turns, lying prone, drank eagerly. It was clean, sweet water left from the late October rains. There wasn't very much—but it was wonderful.

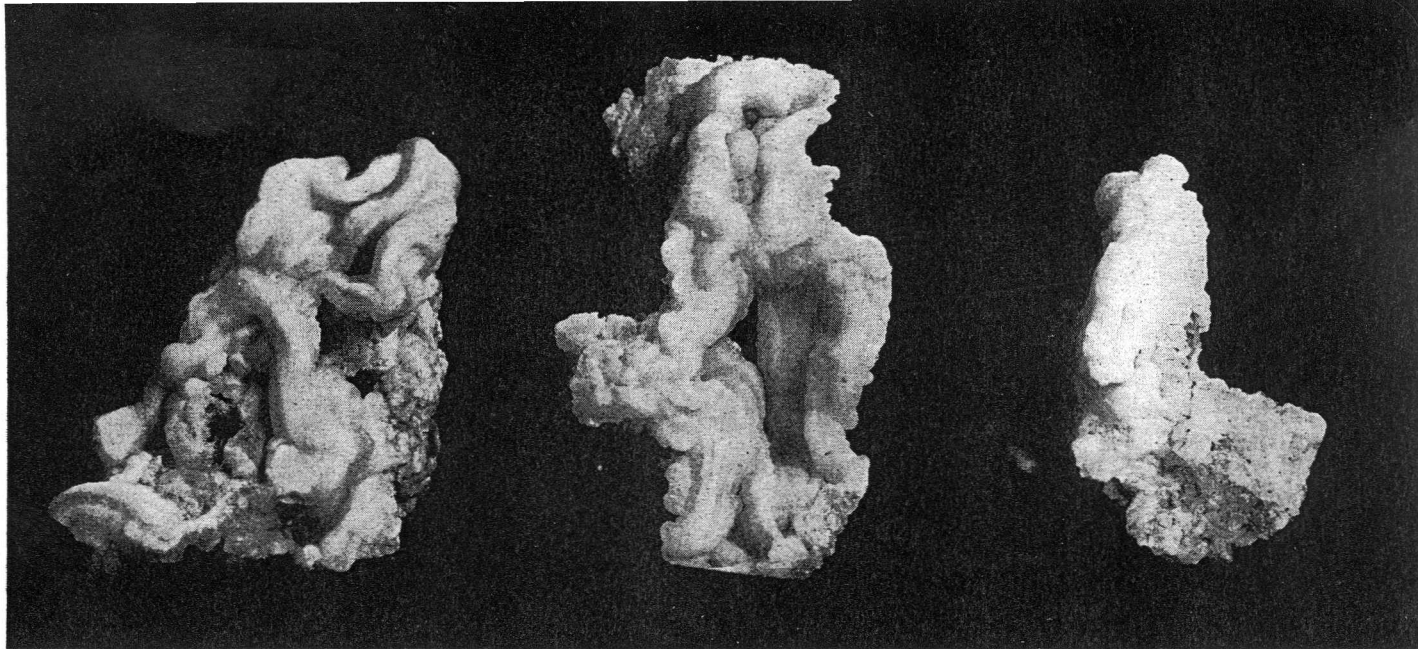
Then we dashed on down the canyon, now surrounded by a tangible cottony dusk. Just as the light failed altogether, the canyon dropped away—the steep staircase simply fell away into a well like an elevator shaft, black with depth and night.

John prowled to the brink and tossed experimental rocks into the emptiness. The sound of their striking came only after seconds of silence. Just how far the drop was it was impossible to tell, but it was far enough so we could by no means be sure that if we roped down, the doubled rope would reach the bottom. That method of descent could not be chanced.

It was now as completely dark as it ever gets outdoors. Thick clouds were massed over the stars. A flashlight had not been included in the rucksacks, as we had expected to be back at the cars early. A bivouac, hungry and thirsty as everyone felt, had no appeal if it could safely be avoided. We now thought that a traverse,



Rand Henderson (left) and Arthur Johnson erected a cairn at the top of Kofa on a trip subsequent to the one described in this story.



Specimens of chalcedony "roses" brought back by the climbers as souvenirs of the trip. These weird formations of white agate are weathering out of the mother rock at the summit.

upward and northward across the mountainside toward our morning's route, might lead to another canyon providing a means of descent. Going entirely "by feel," we started the climbing traverse. In the blackness I walked into a cholla. The fiendish plants seem to be put together very carelessly, and a burr sprang eagerly off its stem, and fastened its wicked spines in my leg like teeth. John felt around for a couple of rocks, and with these implements as pliers, he jerked the burr loose. In the darkness I yanked out all the remaining spines I could seize.

Our wary traverse indeed brought us into another canyon, which perhaps would descend with no impassable drop-offs. Our progress was still entirely by feel. Every step might have landed in a hole or on a hill. Another inspiration materialized. Anything that grows on the desert seems to burn well, dead or alive, yet the fire does not spread. Dredging matches from our pockets, and using tufts of soft dry grass for kindling, we soon had a fine series of bushes blazing enthusiastically and lighting up our immediate vicinity. It seemed a trifle incendiary to set fires so wantonly, but none the less the flames brightened spirits as well as the view. John climbed down cautiously. Randy and I spread little fires and hurled clumps of burning matter down to John, till we had a line of small blazes stretching 30 or 40 feet down the canyon. The ones behind us died out into handfuls of sparks, while we climbed cheerfully through our own walls of fire, and down the rocks dancing in light and shadow.

The fires all went out at once, as if by prearrangement, and as we were groveling about in the rocks feeling for kindling that wasn't too prickly, and wasting matches, our eyes reaccustomed them-

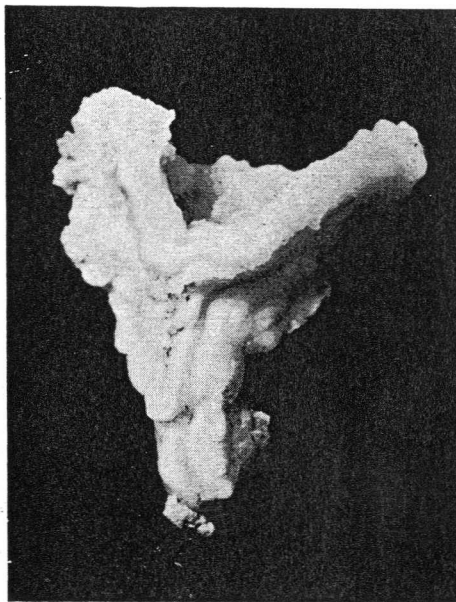
selves to darkness. The rocks which had hitherto been invisible, began to shimmer ever so faintly. At last the moon was rising—behind the eastern buttress of the mountain, shrouded heavily in clouds, but strong enough to light, a little, the deep canyon.

The water-scoured boulders now shone white, though the spaces between were grey and of indeterminate depth, so we had to feel our way gradually like blind persons, swinging down on our arms, reaching out in a measured and tentative way with our feet, carefully sliding and easing ourselves along as though crippled. The descent was slow and tedious, but no longer dangerous or impossible. The faint radiance on the rocks did not make visible

the sparse and spiny vegetation, and every bush pricked and grabbed and scratched us. Our hands felt full of thorns, but somewhat to our disappointment we couldn't find any later. Long since, all botanical exactitude had evaporated—everything in the canyon was catsclaw to us: that's the way it acted!

Gradually the canyon walls towered higher and higher to either side and behind. Almost imperceptibly the water-course flattened out. The way had seemed without end; but we knew we had rejoined the route of the morning, and were sure of getting out that night. At last we passed the palm canyon, tramped down the wash, over the bajada, and clambered out onto the desert floor.

Relieved though we were, a long trudge yet remained. From the summit John and Randy had picked out the approximate location of the cars in relation to a conical black butte which now loomed faintly perhaps a mile and a half to the west. From the mountain, the desert had looked flat and smooth with a close network of green watercourses traced gently on its surface; now the way lay across rough, rocky, gully-slashed, spine-infested land. The preceding night, the moon had shown with such brilliance that one could make out the color of the wild flowers; tonight it never broke through the clouds. At last, 13 hours after our start, we crossed the ruts of the road and with shouts discovered the grey shadows of the cars. Awaiting us were the delights of plentiful canteen water, a campfire, tinned food, and then the sleeping-bags spread out in a stone-hard, rocky gully—unexcelled in sheer luxury to the very weary. We fell instantly to sleep, while the purple-black bulk of Kofa stood strong and solid against the eastern sky.



Among the "roses" strewn over the top of the peak, one of the climbers found a "lily."