

Norton Allen's map shows the two routes by which the climbing expeditions reached the base of the San Pedro Martir mountains from the Mexicali-San Felipe road.

# We Climbed El Diablo From the Desert Side . . .

The Mexicans call it "The Devil's Peak" and perhaps there is good reason why they have given such a forbidding name to the highest mountain on the Lower California peninsula. Anyway, here is the story of an ascent of the peak from the desert side, and a description of some of the obstacles that had to be overcome by the mountaineers who reached the top.

By RANDALL HENDERSON  
Map by Norton Allen

**7**WICE I tried to climb El Picacho del Diablo—and failed. Then on the third attempt I reached the summit. My companion on the final ascent was Norman Clyde, well known mountaineer of the High Sierra.

It is only 15 miles from the floor of San Felipe Valley to the summit of El Diablo, elevation 10,136 feet, highest peak on the Lower California peninsula. But the terrain is so rugged it required three days of grueling work to make the ascent.

El Picacho del Diablo is in the San Pedro Martir Range 125 miles south

of the California border. It has been climbed several times by parties approaching from the Pacific coast. But there was no record of anyone having scaled the mountain from the floor of the San Felipe Valley on the desert side.

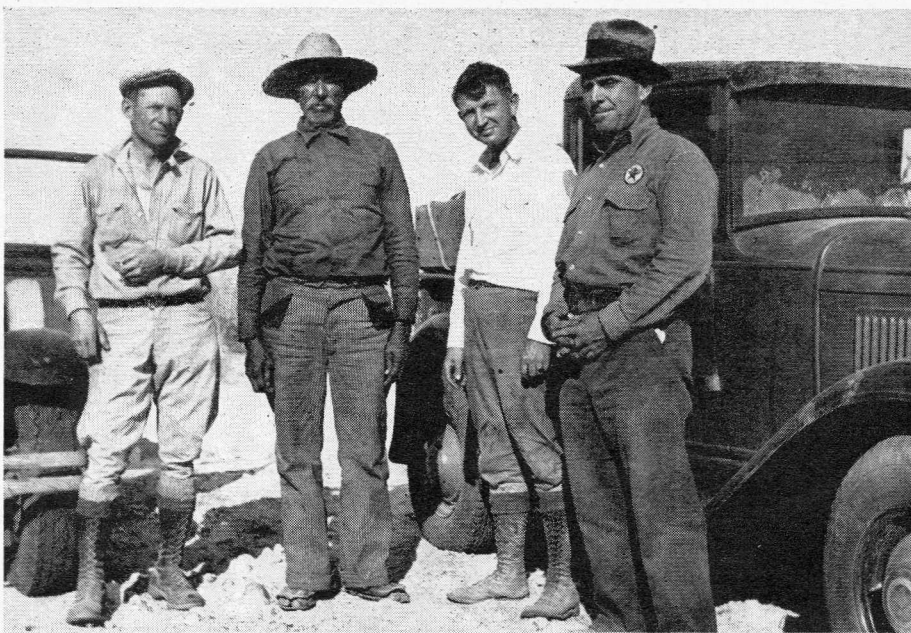
Malcolm Huey suggested that we attempt to make the desert ascent. That was in the early 1930s when Malcolm and I were on a fishing trip to the little Mexican village of San Felipe on the gulf coast 140 miles south of Mexicali.

We could see the great white gran-

ite range of the San Pedro Martir mountains 25 miles inland, with the cap of El Diablo rising a little above the level of the long ridge. It looked like an easy climb, after we reached the base of the range. The major difficulty appeared to be the 25 miles of sand and rocks between San Felipe and the base of the mountain. No passable road crossed this terrain.

In 1934 we organized our climbing party. Early one March morning in that year our two cars crossed through the Calexico-Mexicali port of entry with San Felipe as our immediate goal. Harry Horton, El Centro attorney who had done considerable exploring on the Baja California peninsula, was driving his desert jalopy, with W. J. McClelland, Imperial county clerk, as his companion. I was riding with Huey in his Ford pickup. Both cars had big tires for sand travel.

Today gulf-bound fishermen roll



along the paved road to San Felipe at 60 and 70 miles an hour. But in 1934 the road was a rutty 15-miles-an-hour trail when it was passable. After heavy rains the great salt plain at the head of the gulf became a bottomless quagmire of mud and there were intervals of several days when no motor vehicle could cross it.

We had been told that at San Felipe we could find an old Indian who knew a passable route from the coast to the base of the San Pedro Martirs. It was said there had once been a road for freight wagons connecting the upper gulf with Ensenada on the west coast.

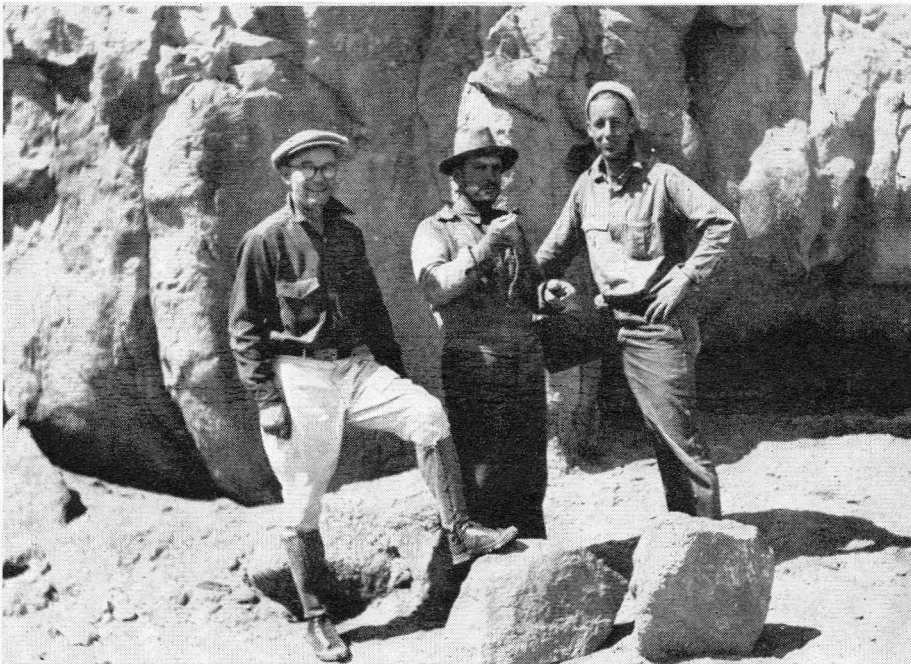
We found our guide, and he was quite willing to go with us. His name was Juan, and he had spent most of his life in that region. Yes, he knew about the old road, but there wasn't much of it left. He would take us to it, and show us the best route to the base of the San Pedro Martirs.

We camped that night on the outskirts of San Felipe, then a settlement of less than 200 people, and next morning with Juan showing the way, we turned inland toward the range which was our goal.

Juan was right. There wasn't much of a road, but we followed the route where it had been, and it led through a pass in the low coastal range of hills, across the floor of San Felipe Valley's dry lakebed, and thence up the bajada to the base of the San Pedros.

Juan was a fine companion as well as a competent guide. At night, when the rest of us were enjoying the luxury of sleeping bags with air mattresses, Juan lay on the sand with no pillow and only a bit of canvas over him. It was all he wanted. He told us that many years ago there were large herds of antelope in this area. On hot days, he said, the animals would sometimes wade out into the surf below San Felipe bay. The antelope, Juan explained, have a great curiosity, and the Indians took advantage of this weakness to snare them for food.

As we approached the mountain it



*Above—Members of 1934 expedition to the San Pedro Martir mountains. Left to right, W. J. McClelland, Juan the guide, Harry Horton, Malcolm Huey.*

*Center—Climbers on the second attempt to scale El Diablo, left to right, Randall Henderson, Malcolm Huey, Wilson McKenney.*

*Lower — Norman Clyde (left) and Randall Henderson, in Providencia Canyon in 1937. Clyde carried a 60-pound pack and ice axe. They reached the top in three days.*





appeared the most direct route to the summit would be up a canyon marked on our map as Providencia. A luxurious garden of desert vegetation—Palo Verde, ironwood, catsclaw and cactus—grew on the bajada, but we were able to drive our cars through this shrubbery and close to the mouth of the canyon. We camped there that night. The next morning, with two days' provisions in our backpacks, Malcolm and I started up Providencia creek toward the summit.

Harry Horton and "Mac" McClelland had other plans. They wanted to search for the legendary lost mission of Santa Ysabel. Near this mission, according to the story told in Fierro Blanco's book, *The Journey of the Flame*, the Jesuit fathers, before their expulsion from New Spain by royal decree in 1767, had for many years been storing gold and jewels taken from their various missions in a cave at the base of a 7000-foot cliff on the desert side of the San Pedro Martir mountains. The padres, according to this legend, learned in advance that they were to be expelled, and before their departure caused a great landslide to cover the mouth of the cavern where the treasure was hidden.

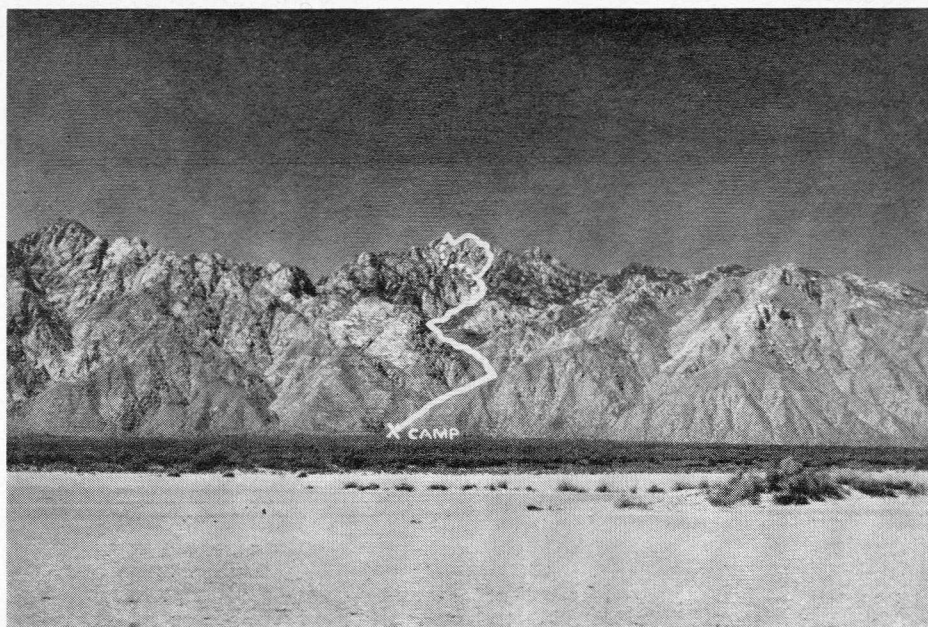
The location of the mission Santa Ysabel is no less a mystery than is that of the cliff where the gold and jewels were buried. During their two days in San Felipe Valley, Harry and Mac explored as far as they could take their jalopy both north and south along the edge of the dry lake bed, but failed to find any clue to the location of the lost mission.

In the meantime, Malcolm and I were meeting with unexpected obstacles along the creek which tumbled down the precipitous east face of the San Pedro Martir massif. Light rain started falling early in the afternoon and since we had to make our way through thickets of willow and mesquite we were soon drenched. Frequently we came to vertical rock pitches which presented almost im-

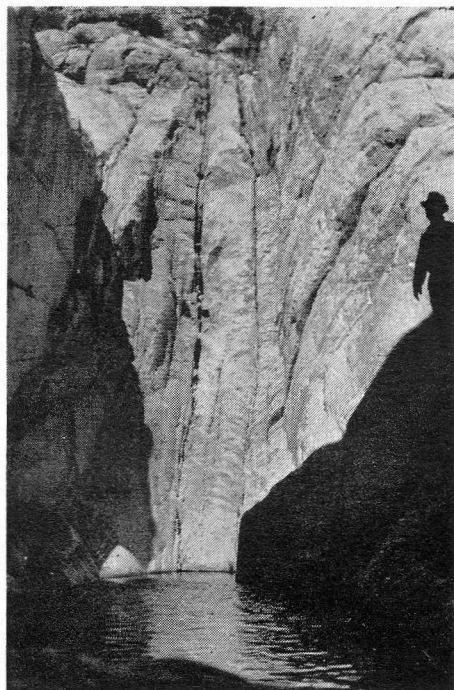
*Above—Route up Providencia Canyon to the top of El Diablo. Dotted line is the return route following the final ascent of the peak.*

*Center—The author's Model A on the great salt flat at the head of the Gulf of California in 1937. A paved road now skirts the edge of this salt plain.*

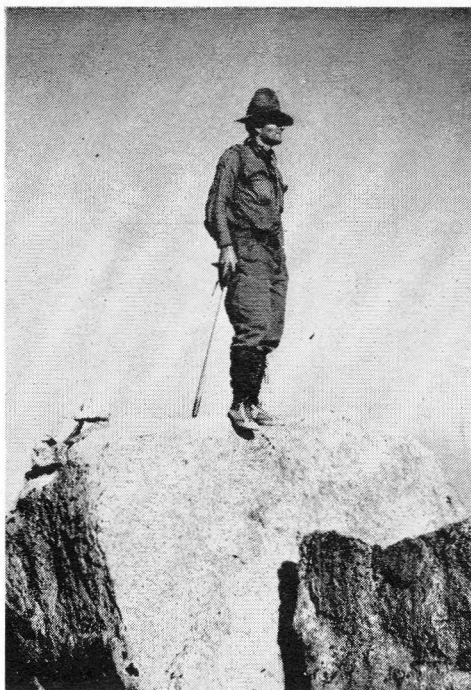
*Below—San Felipe fishing village on the Gulf of California about 1937. Since paved road was completed two years ago, town has grown rapidly.*



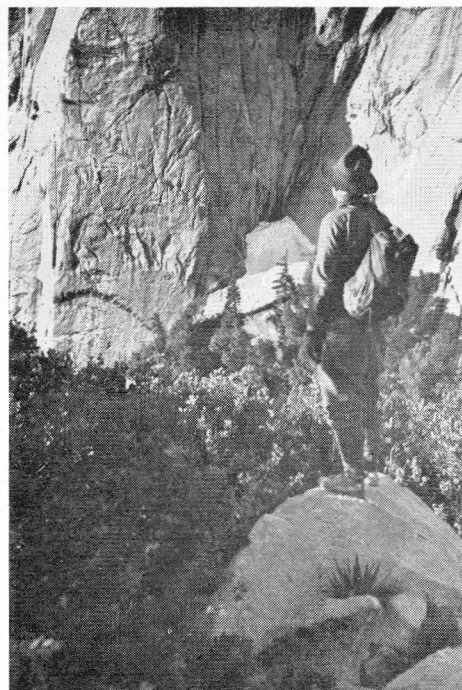




*One of the many pools in Providencia Canyon. Members of the expedition called this one the King's Bathtub. Malcolm Huey in silhouette.*



*Norman Clyde of the High Sierra, standing on the top of El Picacho del Diablo April 5, 1937. He has climbed the peak from both east and west.*



*When the climbing parties faced a barrier such as this there was only one alternative — to find a way out of the canyon and make a long detour.*

passable barriers. Sometimes these had to be detoured. Some of them could be climbed with the aid of our rope, but it was slippery going. Several times we had to wade waist-deep in pools before we could reach the waterfalls which had formed them, and then use shoulder-stands to gain the top.

Toward sundown it turned cold, and Malcolm and I separated, searching the slopes on both sides of the canyon for a cave where we could find shelter for the night. It was dusk when he shouted across the canyon that he had found a shallow cave that would serve our purpose. A dead tree growing just outside the cavern provided the wood which enabled us to dry out our clothes and keep warm that night.

Rain fell during much of the night, and the next morning the slopes of the range above were white with snow. We started up the canyon soon after sunup and within two hours had reached the snow line.

We realized now that we had underestimated the time necessary to climb Picacho del Diablo. From the 1500-foot elevation where our base camp was located at the mouth of Providencia Canyon we had spent an entire first day reaching the 3800-foot level—and it was certain we would not gain the top on the second day. We were wearing tennis shoes, and it became evident this was the wrong kind of footgear for climbing over snow-covered rocks. Rubber on wet rocks is treacherous footing. Our feet were

cold and our soggy shoes began to disintegrate.

At ten o'clock we agreed that El Diablo was beyond our range for this trip, and turned back, reaching camp before nightfall.

That was failure number one.

Just a year later, on March 21, 1935, I crossed the Calexico border on a second attempt to reach the summit of El Diablo. Malcolm Huey was driving his pickup again, and this time I had my Model A Ford with big tires. Our companions were Wilson McKenney and Paul Cook, both of Calexico.

On this trip we blazed a new trail from the Mexicali-San Felipe road inland to the base of the San Pedro Martirs. Malcolm had flown over the area in a plane during the year which had elapsed since our first assault on El Picacho, and had decided it would be possible to take our cars through a pass between the north end of the San Felipe hills and the southern end of the Pinta range. There was no road, but we had two good sand cars—and we found it a feasible route. We flushed a small herd of antelope as we crossed this desert where no wheeled vehicle had ever before been seen.

Due to a knee injury Paul Cook was unable to accompany us on the climb. The first night out, Malcolm, Wilson and I camped not far from the cave where Malcolm and I had spent the night a year before. This year we had a cloudless sky and perfect climbing weather.

We spent much of the second day detouring out of the canyon to get around a series of waterfalls which could not be scaled by direct assault. That night we camped at an elevation just under 7000 feet.

The third day we might have reached the top—and it was my fault we failed to do so. In mid-morning I separated from Wilson and Malcolm to explore a ledge which seemed to hold the possibilities of a short-cut to the summit. It offered such easy going at first that I continued my ascent in high hopes—and then after an hour of good progress my path was blocked by a field of soft snow. For awhile I floundered in the snow, making little headway, and then realized this route would never get me to the summit this day.

In the meantime Wilson and Malcolm had climbed a long talus slope which brought them to the top ridge of the San Pedro Martirs nearly a mile north of its highest peak. They worked along the ridge toward the south and eventually reached a secondary peak—250 feet below their goal. But a 600-foot chasm separated them from the highest point. It was near sundown, and as bedding and extra food had been left at the previous night's camp, they left a record of their climb to this point and returned to camp shortly after I arrived there. We had less than a day's provisions left, and had commitments which prevented our spending a fourth day on the ascent, and the

next morning we headed down the canyon with El Diablo still unconquered.

We had 100 feet of rope, and as we left camp on the return trip that morning we resolved to head straight down the gorge, roping down over the waterfalls we had detoured around on the ascent. We thought this would save time.

It was a good idea—at first. We rappelled over two waterfalls and were making fast progress until we reached a dome of slick granite at the head of a series of falls, the depth of which obviously was beyond the span of our rope.

Despite our resolution, it was going to be necessary to detour out of the canyon. But it wasn't as easy as that. We had just roped over a 40-foot vertical ledge. We couldn't return over that route, and the sidewalls of the shelf on which we were standing appeared at first to be impossible of ascent. For a moment it appeared we were barred from progress in all directions.

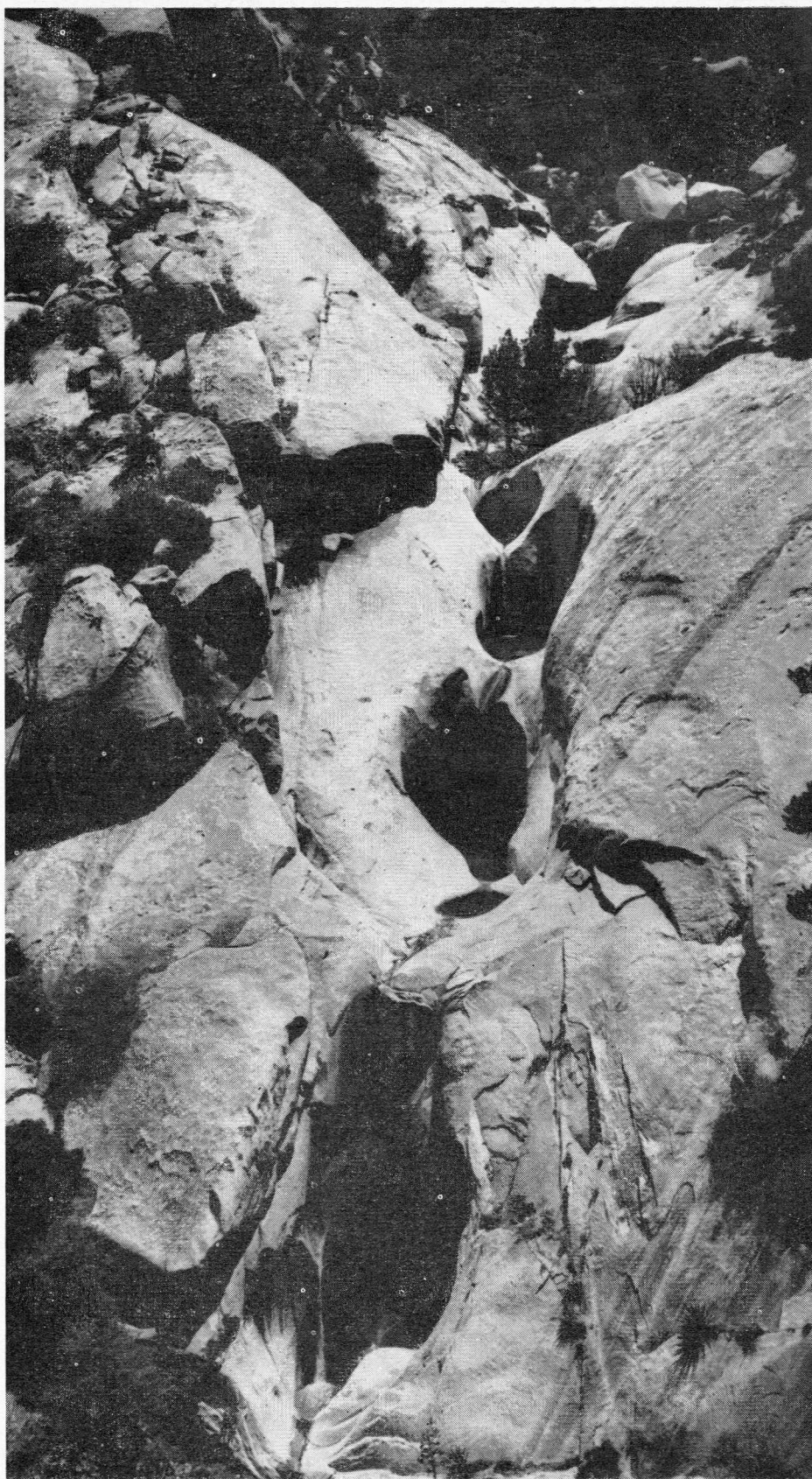
I will always be grateful to Wilson McKenney for getting us out of that dilemma. Thanks to his lanky build and the mountain goat blood in his veins he did find a way up one of the sidewalls, and Huey and I followed on the rope. Mac did a fine mountaineering feat that morning. Late that night we reached our camp, and the following day returned to our California homes.

I began planning for a third attempt, but it was two years later, April, 1937, before the start was made. Through Sierra Club friends I learned that Norman Clyde, mountaineer of the High Sierra, was interested in making the ascent. He had climbed El Diablo from the west side in 1932, and he wanted to add the desert ascent to his experience.

Malcolm Huey and Wilson McKenney were unable to go in 1937, so Norman and I loaded our gear in my Ford jalopy and headed south, reaching the mouth of Providencia Canyon just before noon April 3.

We made up our packs and started up along the creek immediately. The detail of the lower canyon was now quite familiar to me. I knew the best routes over and around the various rock obstacles that blocked this precipitous creekbed, and Norman and I passed the first night's campsite of the previous expeditions at 4:45 in the afternoon and gained another 500 feet in elevation before making camp at six o'clock on a little sandbar.

We encountered heavy brush the



*This is the series of waterfalls which members of the parties were unable to scale, either ascending or descending. The pine trees in the upper part of picture are 40 feet in height, indicating the height of the falls.*

*There are 10 natural tanks in this series—fed by 10 waterfalls.*

next morning. It was especially difficult for Norman because he carried a 60-pound pack that was always getting caught on protruding rocks and

limbs. The size and weight of Norman's pack was due to the thoroughness with which he prepares for such an expedition. He even carried a shoe-



maker's hammer and awl for repairing his footgear.

Then we came to that long series of slick rock waterfalls which had nearly brought disaster on the last previous trip. Four hours were consumed in detouring these falls.

Detours on this precipitous terrain are hard work, but would not be hazardous were it not for the agave, or wild maguey. Agave is the worst enemy of the climber on the desert slope of the San Pedro Martirs. It is a wild species of the plant from which Mexicans derive their fermented drink, *pulque*, and their very potent distilled drink, *tequila*.

Every plant is a roseate of dagger-like blades with a needle-point at the end of each blade. The plant grows on these slopes wherever there is a bit of soil for its roots. And when it cannot find soil it grows in the cracks in the boulders. It is everywhere on this mountainside and a touch of the needle-point means a painful puncture. Every few minutes it would become necessary for the leader to stop and clear a path through or past the agave. This is done as the Mexicans do in harvesting the buds in their maguey fields, by seizing the blade just below its needle, and then turning it back and pushing the sharp point through the fleshy part of the stem below.

We saw very little evidence of wild game on the desert slope of the San Pedro Martirs, and I am convinced that the reason is agave. A head-on collision with a formidable roseate of these blades could readily bring death to man or beast.

Eventually we reached an elevation above the zone of the agave — and then we encountered manzanita. Manzanita grew so dense in one place that we crossed over from one ledge to another by walking on the tops of the shrubs.

There is a sprinkling of coniferous trees above 6000 feet on the desert side of the range, but no fine forests of pine such as are found on the west slope of the San Pedro Martirs. We saw some sturdy oak trees on the upper elevations.

Our camp Sunday night, April 4, was at the highest elevation where water was available, about 7800 feet. Actually, we climbed 300 feet higher, and when no water was found, returned to this level.

Monday we left camp at 6:45, carrying no packs except our lunch for the day, jackets and cameras. We expected to reach the top and return to this camp by nightfall.

We followed the route Wilson McKenney and Malcolm Huey had taken

in 1935, detouring to the right up an almost vertical cliff that blocked the way, then crossing through and over some dense thickets of manzanita, and finally ascending the long talus slope to the crest of the ridge a mile north of El Diablo peak.

We worked south along the ridge and an hour later came to the couloir which had turned back my companions of the 1935 expedition.

We were now at an elevation where we could look down to the Gulf of California on the east, and into the great gorge of Diablo Canyon on the west. Diablo is a tremendous gash in the range which starts on the desert side a few miles north of Providence Canyon, cuts through the high backbone of the San Pedro Martirs, and then circles south to flank the Martir ridge on the west side.

El Picacho del Diablo might be climbed from the desert approach by coming up Diablo Canyon, but I would estimate the one way distance at close to 25 miles, and the required time for a round trip, six to eight days of back-packing. I am sure Diablo has some gorgeous vistas for the photographer whose heart and legs are stout enough to pack his equipment up this great canyon.

The couloir which blocked our route to the high peak ahead is a shallow tributary of Canyon Diablo, and the most feasible route appeared to be to drop down about 700 feet on the Diablo side and then work our way up over some great inclined slabs of granite to the summit.

"We'll never reach that peak, and get back to camp by dark," Norman estimated.

He was right. The sun was just touching the Pacific ocean far off to the west as we reached the summit toward which we had been climbing for three days. This is the one point on the peninsula of Lower California where from the same stance one can see both the Pacific ocean and the Gulf of California.

We found a little cairn at the top. In it were records of an ascent made from the west June 16, 1932, by a Sierra Club party consisting of Bestor Robinson, Nathan C. Clarke, Norman Clyde, Walter Brem, Glen Dawson and Dick Jones. A second party consisting of Julia Mortimer, May Pridham, Fred Stitt and R. C. Kendall had registered there June 19, 1935. Also, there was a notation that Don McClain had made the ascent from the west in 1911.

We found no record of any previous climb from the desert side, although I have been told on good authority that such an ascent has been made, and

that at one time there was a record of it in the cairn.

Since our visit there, several other parties have climbed the summit from the west, members of the Sierra Club having reached the top during the last year.

It was growing dark, and we had neither food nor bedding, so Norman and I chose to rope off the summit and down the precipitous east side of the ridge as a short-cut back to our base camp. Three ropes took us down into a great bank of snow where we sank waist-deep. After a little floundering we got free and just after dark reached a trickle of water in a canyon where there was an abundant supply of wood. There we bivouacked for the night, taking turns stoking the fire until day-break.

Mexican maps list El Picacho del Diablo elevations at both 10,136 and 10,163. My altimeter, probably less accurate, registered just under 10,300.

On the return trip I worked around to a point where I could photograph the series of waterfalls which had forced long detours on this and previous trips. Countless ages of erosion had cut a series of natural tanks down across the slope of a huge granite dome, and each of the pools was fed from above by a waterfall. Standing on the ridge opposite, I counted 10 waterfalls in the series, although the accompanying picture was taken from an angle which does not show all of them.

The San Pedro Martirs are wild and rugged, and their upper reaches are inaccessible except to well-equipped climbers—but the beauty of this region is not surpassed anywhere in the high Sierras of either of the Californias.

In 1934 when our first climbing party reached the base of the San Pedro Martirs there were no tracks of motor vehicles anywhere in San Felipe Valley. Today a well-graded road connects San Felipe with the dry lake that bears its name, and on the desert adjoining the lakebed caterpillar tractors are leveling a great tract of land for cultivation.

Probably in the years ahead this warm fertile valley that lies between the Gulf of California and the range of the San Pedro Martirs will become a highly productive area for winter-grown vegetables and fruits. It will become quite civilized. But the great granite-capped peak which towers overhead—a mountain so forbidding the Mexicans named it "The Peak of the Devil"—will remain a challenge to those who seek out the really tough places on which to try their climbing prowess. El Picacho del Diablo will never become too civilized.