



On the trail to the Peak of the Devil—the 15 Sierra Club mountaineers who spent nearly a week in their attempted ascent of ol' Diablo. Photo by Roy Gorin.

On the Trail to Picacho del Diablo

By LOUISE T. WERNER
Map by Norton Allen

OUR GOAL was El Picacho del Diablo in the San Pedro Martir Range, towering 10,163 feet above sea level and the highest point on the peninsula of Baja California. Not many people have climbed this Peak of the Devil—given its name perhaps because it is so inaccessible, and its slopes so precipitous.

Fifteen of us had ventured into the interior of Lower California to make the ascent of ol' Diablo from the west. Our approach was through a primitive wilderness area of magnificent pine—a forest 40 miles long and 20 miles wide. Between this forest and Diablo peak is Cañon del Diablo, a great gorge 3000 feet deep, and this is the

barrier which makes the ascent of the peak so difficult.

The Sierra Club of California, Los Angeles chapter, had chosen this Baja California region for its Easter vacation outing in 1950. On Sunday, April 2, more than 100 members of the club gathered on the beach at Ensenada, 75 miles south of the Mexican border. On Monday the caravan moved south along the one highway in Lower California, most of them bound for Santa Maria beach, which was to be base camp for the week.

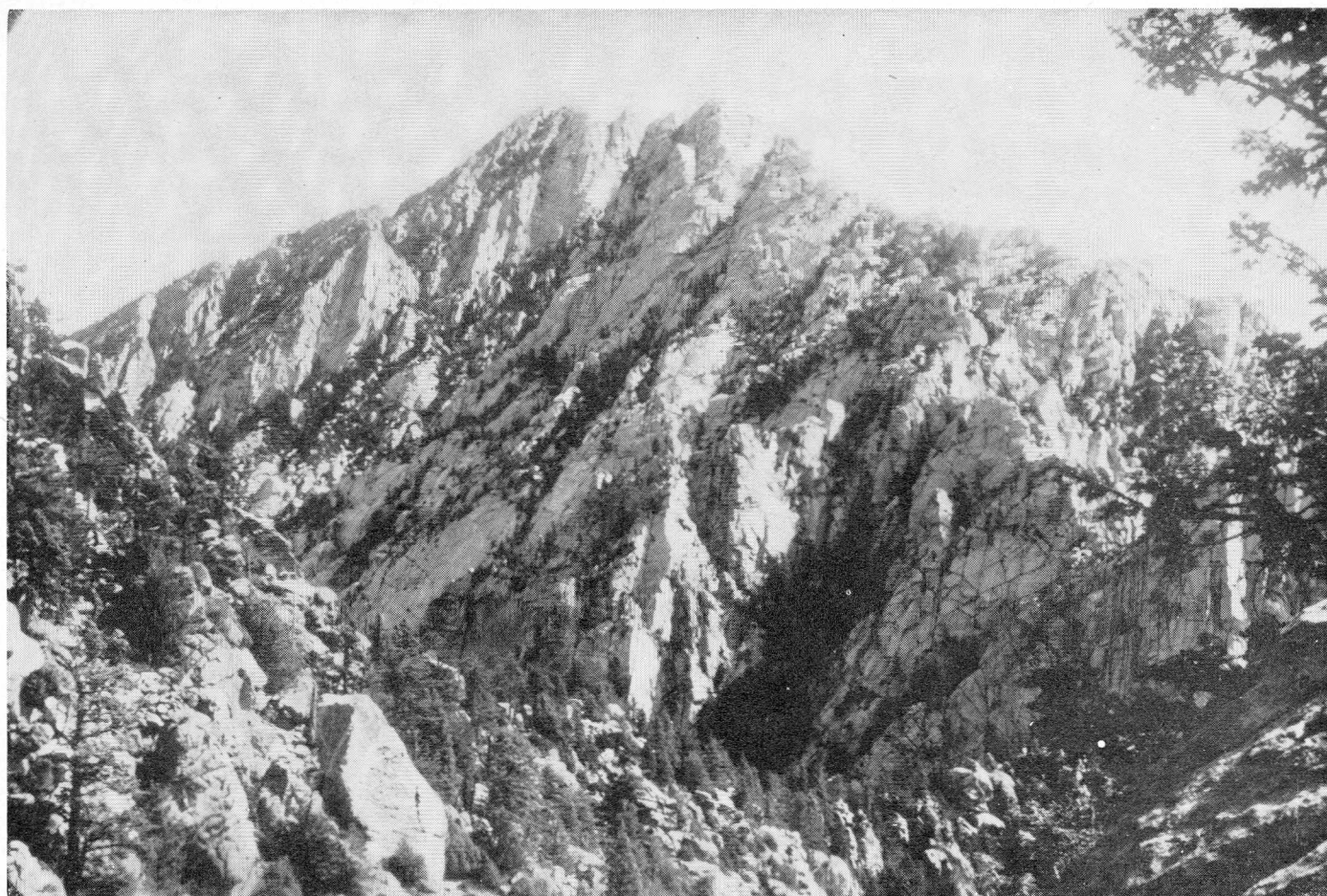
At Telmo Junction, 85 miles south of Ensenada, those of us who had chosen to spend our week making an assault on El Picacho del Diablo, left

"Only if you are in good enough condition to hike 20 miles a day with a pack, can you hope to make this trip." This was the advance warning sent out by Sierra Club leaders to members who wanted to participate in an assault on El Picacho del Diablo, highest peak on the Lower California peninsula. Fifteen rugged mountaineers signed up for the trip—and here is the story of their experience in Baja California 125 miles south of the border.

the caravan and turned toward the east on a dirt road for the 31-mile drive to Rancho San Jose where the road ends.

It isn't much of a road, but the hospitable Mr. and Mrs. Salvador Meling who own the San Jose ranch had been advised of our coming, and had put seven men at work on the trail to make it passable for our touring cars.

Roy Gorin was leader of our mountain-climbing group. Roy is a six-footer in his thirties, a veteran of many rugged ascents. His first consideration was the security of his party, and he had given each of us, long in ad-



El Picacho del Diablo from the west, looking across Cañon del Diablo. This 10,163-foot summit is the highest point on the Peninsula of Lower California, about 125 miles south of the border. Photo by Al Schmitz.

vance, a list of equipment, and the essential items for the trip. We had been warned that this was no expedition for one who could not hike 20 miles a day with a pack—and have enough energy left at the end of the day to cook and eat his own dinner.

Ed Peterson was assistant leader. He is a naturalist, and gave us interesting information about the botany of this mountain wilderness. Other members of the party were: Freda Walbrecht, Los Angeles attorney, and the first woman known to have climbed all the 14,000-foot peaks on the west coast; Capt. Sam Fink of the Santa Ana fire department and a seasoned mountaineer; Bill Stewart, physics and astronomy student at the University of California in Los Angeles; Jeane McSheehy, former WASP, now teaching geography in Coronado high school; Barbara Lilley, co-ed from San Diego State College.

Six were from Northern California: Helen Rudy, Al Schmitz and Frank Thias of San Francisco, Walter Donaghho of Sacramento and Al Maher and Jane Tucker of Palo Alto.

Mrs. Meling welcomed us with fresh apple juice. Her family came into

Lower California from Texas in the 1880's and settled on the western slopes of the San Pedro Martir Mountains. The only transportation then was by wagon train and they had to make the roads as they came. Mr. Meling's family came into the country in 1908 from Norway. The ranch house nestles comfortably on the bank of the sprawling Rio San Telmo. There is no telephone. Kerosene lamps light the parlor.

Mrs. Meling is a fine looking middle-aged woman, obviously capable of meeting all the situations that must be met during a lifetime spent a hundred miles from a doctor. She showed a motherly concern for our party. We did not meet Mr. Meling. He was out guiding another party.

Accommodations at the Rancho are as follows: rooms, \$3 per day; meals, \$5 per day; riding horses, \$3 per day, a packer, \$5 per day; pack animals, \$2 per day. Hot showers are available.

Ray Gorin checked our equipment to make sure no one ventured into that wilderness without the essential items that would keep us safe and independent for five days in a back-country

without grocery or drug stores or doctors. The dunnage was made ready to load on the mules.

On Tuesday morning before the moon was gone, we were cutting through the Meling pasture in an easterly direction. Each carried a lunch, canteen of water, halizone tablets, sweater, hat and sunburn lotion. Mrs. Meling with characteristic solicitude, came along for a mile to show us a turn-off she was afraid we would miss.

Ten miles later we passed the abandoned Socorro placer mines. The horse trail climbed gradually over pleasant ridges covered with manzanita, buck brush and California coffee berry. Birds seen in this Upper Sonoran zone were the wren-tit, California jay, valley quail and raven.

Senor Juan Soto, the only person we met in this whole region after leaving the Rancho San Jose, lives in a stone hut in a small meadow. He posed jauntily for pictures. His senora, he said, had gone to their ranchito three miles up a steep trail to tend the corn and potato patch.

The Oak pasture was to be our first lunch spot. As we approached a fork in the trail and were debating



The waterhole at Vallecitos. Photo by Walter Donaghho.

which way to go, a Mexican rode up and directed us. We had not suspected it, but Mrs. Meling had ordered him to see that we didn't get lost! The Mexican turned out to be Pompa, the packer's helper. Our packer was Bill Barré, a handsome French vaquero, son-in-law of the Melings.

After lunch we entered the western fringe of the forest and soon the four-leaved piñon was supplanted by the Jeffrey pine, which from then on was the dominant tree. Most of these Jeffreys are of moderate size but we measured one that was a good five feet in diameter.

La Corona was our first overnight camp. We had climbed gradually in 25 miles from an altitude of 2200 feet to 6600 feet. La Corona is a beautiful circular meadow surrounded by tall pines. The stream was running just enough that we could dip in a cup without stirring up the bottom. Here food was our first thought. Some had brought canned foods like beans, corn, tuna and roast beef. Some cooked spaghetti and some dreamed up weird concoctions out of dehydrated milk, minute rice, corned beef and bouillon cubes. Nearly all made tea, the mountaineer's favorite hot drink. Some had brought neat aluminum kettles that nest in one another and some had brought billy cans to cook in. Appetites were ravenous. No one felt like spending much time around the campfire that evening. During the night the poor-wills whistled.

Wednesday morning found us climbing in a northeasterly direction. The white fir, that harbinger of the cooler altitudes, appeared. Through long isolation in this dry southern environ-

ment, it has developed new characteristics. The needles are notably thicker and more bluish in color than those of its counterpart north of the border.

Early that day we got our first glimpse of El Picacho del Diablo. We hoped to climb this peak. It seemed so far away we wondered if we could reach it in the allotted time. We planned to reach the rim of Diablo Cañon that afternoon, shoulder our packs, drop down the 3000 feet into the gorge and camp that night on the bottom.

The temperature was delightful for climbing. Water became scarcer above La Corona. At Vallecitos, a meadow with a dry water course, Pompa had dug a water hole against a huge boulder and enough water had seeped in to fill all the canteens. We couldn't have gone very far beyond that point without that water hole. Eight miles to the southeast of here, at Los Llanitos, Pompa dug another water hole. Water took on even more importance because from here on we would not have the packers to locate it for us. We might not find water again until we reached the bottom of the gorge, and we weren't sure we would find any then. We knew that if we didn't find water in the gorge, we must give up the idea of climbing the peak.

The packs we shouldered at Los Llanitos weighed about 30 pounds and contained sleeping bag, full canteens, food for two days, cooking utensil, matches, first aid, parka, sweater and personal necessities. The packers shook their heads and said, "Why did we bring pack animals in the first place?" Putting on a full pack in the late afternoon, after having already

walked 17 miles that day, was just plain punishment.

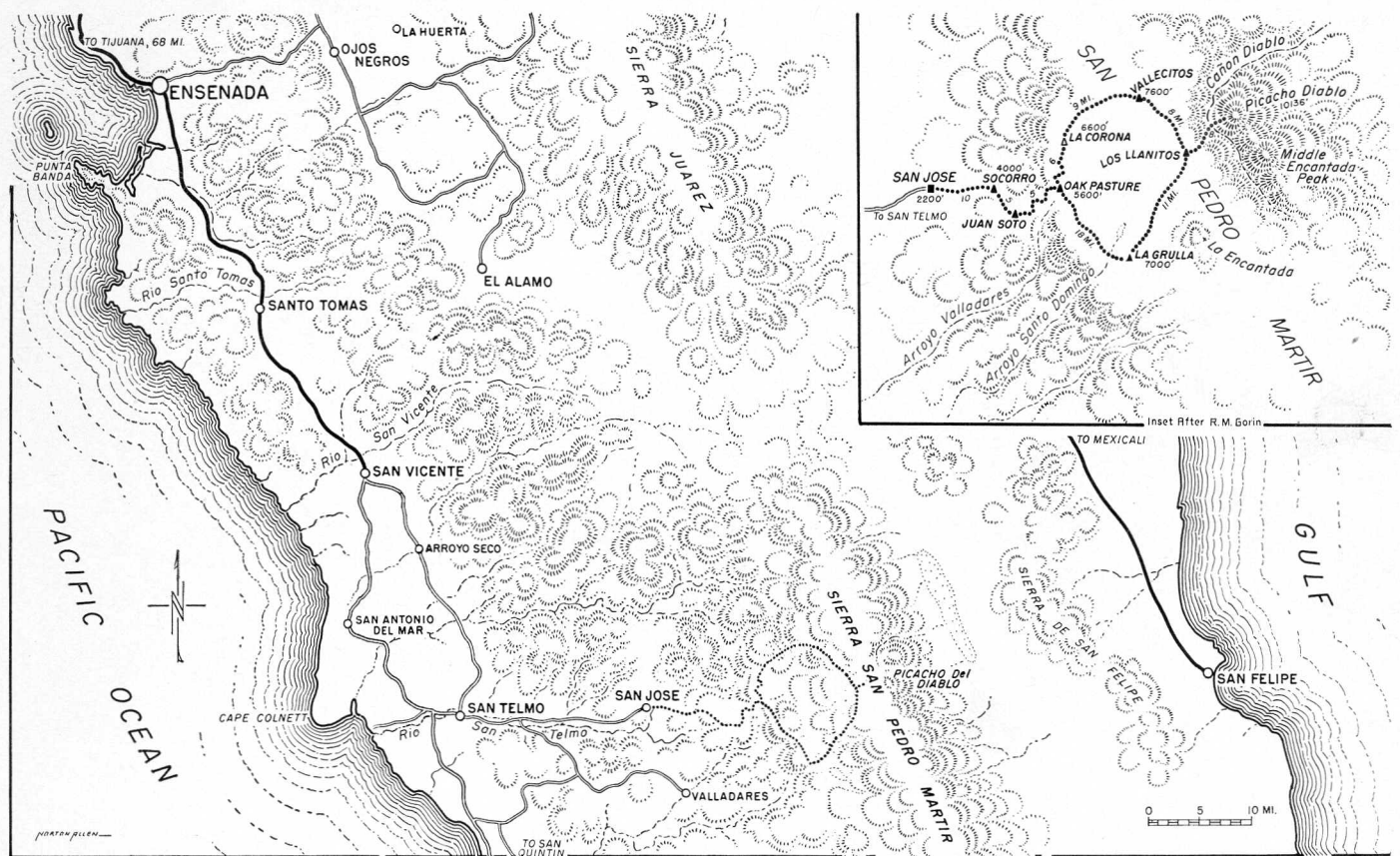
Jane Tucker, Jeane McSheehy and Walter Donaghho elected to stay at the water holes of Los Llanitos. That night they heard the screams of mountain lions. Twelve of us started for the rim, an estimated five miles. After toting the packs for about two miles, a nice little flat tempted us and we made camp for the night. We scattered to look for water, but found none. That made us all suddenly very thirsty.

Roy took inventory and found we had an average of two quarts each in our canteens. This had to do for dinner that night, breakfast the next morning, and the 3000-foot descent into the gorge. We had better find water in the gorge, we decided. Roy said, "If I catch anyone brushing his teeth, he'll get sent back to Horse Camp!" We crawled into our sleeping bags and dreamed of Utopia where all the streams ran clear, cool water. Next morning we found plenty of water in a gully a few hundred yards away, just beyond where we had searched!

We lost several hours Thursday morning, trying to find the rim. There were no trails, so we carefully ducked the route. A duck, in mountain lingo, is three or more graduated rocks placed one on the other to mark a route. They are usually placed so that from any given duck you can see a duck behind and a duck in front of you. Roy had also brought red and yellow ribbons which he tied to branches of trees and bushes. And yet, when we decided we must retrace a bit, we became temporarily lost.

Finally we found the elusive rim of the gorge of Cañon Diablo. It was as wild as our imaginations had pictured it. There, across the gorge, its summit only a thousand feet higher than the rim on which we stood, was El Picacho del Diablo. It would be a comparatively easy ascent if it didn't have that gorge protecting it. There is a route to the right, around the head of the gorge, but that involves several pinnacles where ropes are necessary for safe climbing. Norman Clyde and Randall Henderson scaled the peak in 1937, and avoided the gorge by making the ascent from San Felipe Valley on the desert side.

Lodgepole pines were abundant at this elevation, as were the San Pedro Martir cypress, found only in these mountains. Ed Peterson measured an ancient specimen of the latter. It was 15 feet in girth, perhaps a record for this species. A golden eagle soared over the Cañon Diablo. In the distance, the San Felipe desert dropped down to the blue waters of the Gulf of California, and the mountains of the



Mexican mainland had clouds above them.

El Picacho del Diablo itself is not a difficult peak. But to get to it, you have to cross some 50 miles of primitive wilderness. By the time you get within striking distance, you feel it is a hard-to-reach peak.

Jess Lang and Ed Peterson decided to remain on the rim, and our party was reduced to 10. We started down a steep tributary cañon, hoping it would take us all the way down without any drop-offs. There was some vegetation in the gully, even tall pine trees and a little grove of quaking aspens. Then it steepened a bit so that rocks began to move under foot. We had to go more carefully to avoid accidents from rock-falls. With ten people in the party, this was a slow and serious business. We were about halfway down the gorge when we realized that no one would make the mountain that day. We stopped to discuss the prospects. Five turned back under the leadership of Frank Thias.

Barbara Lilley, Sam Fink, Al Schmitz and I followed Roy in a slightly speedier dash for the mountain. We took some of the other party's water, averaging well over two quarts apiece; also extra food and sweaters, realizing that we would be bivouacking somewhere in the gorge that night. The rock work became a little more tricky, and the vegetation less. Suddenly, over the edge of a dry fall, we spied a beautiful pool of water! From

then on there was plenty of water all the way down to the bottom of the gorge. Had we known that from the start, our minds would have been easier.

Now we started up El Picacho. There is team work in strenuous mountaineering. There is a close knitting of the party. There is a strong feeling of one-for-all and all-for-one, that I have often wished could spread over the whole world. It is one of the things that makes mountaineering such a satisfying sport.

The lower part of the mountain was covered with manzanita. We worked toward a ravine with pines in it, hoping to get out of the brush. After we left the brush behind, the blocks of granite became larger and the going steeper. For a couple of pitches we used a nylon sling rope. We realized that we had started up from the gorge too soon. We should have continued down the gorge to the red banks before starting to climb. The route is just a rock scramble.

To complicate matters, the weather began to worry us. The sky had clouded over. A mountain top can be dangerous in a storm. If it should rain, the gorge might become a torrent and the ravine up the other side would be a mountaineer's nightmare. Roy estimated that we were about 1500 feet below the summit, and that it would take at least two hours to make the top, provided the going didn't get any worse.

Should we take the risk? We decided to turn back. From an armchair, such a decision may be hard to understand, especially if you have never had to make one like it. Individuals, when thinking as a team, especially in an emergency, sometimes make decisions that afterwards are not as understandable as when made. At that time, in that place, under those circumstances, it seemed the thing to do.

Dropping back into the gorge was quick work but when we began to climb up the gully again the strain of the long, strenuous day began to tell. We climbed about a thousand feet and decided to bivouac. There was enough daylight left for one last look over the gulf and the mountains of Sonora beyond.

We found plenty of wood in the immediate vicinity to keep two fires going all night. It was comparatively warm and windless and the sky cleared. Al Schmitz had a loaf of pumpernickel and a can of liver spread; Roy passed around a handful of almonds and a can of sardines; Sam Fink contributed raisins from his pack, Barbara Lilley had chocolate and I had some figs and a package of jello. This cold supper was cheered by lots of hot tea. Level space was at a premium but we were able to rest.

It was a relief to reach the rim on Friday morning and begin dropping down to High Camp and thence to Horse Camp. We had to leave there immediately because the mules had



Mrs. Meling took time off to help load the pack train. Photo by Freda Walbrecht.



Señor Juan, 90, who has worked on the Meling ranch 50 years. Roy Gorin photo.



Barbara Lilley, Los Angeles Attorney, first woman to climb all the 14,000-ft. peaks.

found no feed and were threatening to leave us cold. I suspect that after they saw that we could carry our packs, they said to one another, "Let's beat it and let these gringos carry their own stuff back. What do they think we are, anyway!"

Our route back was by way of La Grulla, a lovely dark green, boulder-strewn meadow. This part of the plateau gets more moisture as evidenced by several streams that really flowed.

We saw deer and a coyote. Bill Barré, the packer, complained that to go all the way to the Oak pasture that day was too hard on the mules! But the mules got no sympathy and an hour or so after dark we were unscrambling our rations at the Oak pasture in an effort to get a meal by flashlight.

We had left the forest behind, that wonderful oasis in a desert land. An American lumber company has secured the rights to log out this forest.

They estimate it will take 50 years to get it all out. This forest grew here during a past when there was much more water than there now is. Natural reproduction is at a low ebb, especially at the southern limit. According to present indications, the forest may never grow back.

On our way back to the ranch on Saturday we encountered our only rattlesnake, a fat, light brown beauty. He kept the sound effects going while a dozen people photographed him. He never attempted to strike. I think we were so steeped in the friendly atmosphere of his own domain, that he didn't fear us. Nobody had the urge to bash his head in.

We merely scratched the surface of this fine potential vacation land. Ours was a scouting of the possibilities and we learned enough to know that we want to go back some day soon, and in a leisurely fashion enjoy the superb scenery, explore the Canyon Diablo and climb El Picacho del Diablo.

Vandals Apprehended . . .

Two residents of Palm Springs, California, were recently apprehended in the act of removing plants from the Joshua Tree National Monument. They were taken before the United States commissioner in Riverside and fined \$100 each. Superintendent Frank R. Givens warns visitors against damaging any natural features in the Park. Soil, dead wood, rocks and Indian artifacts are among the things on the taboo list.—*Desert Trail*.

Equipment For Mountaineers

Members of the Sierra Club who took part in the 1950 Easter week trip were given the following list of suggested items for their outing. This list was for the general group. A somewhat more restricted list was used by the back-packers who made the assault on El Picacho del Diablo.

ESSENTIAL ITEMS

Good stout, well-broken-in, almost new hiking boots (no tennis shoes)
Heavy pants or wool underwear
Parka
Dark glasses
Cap or hat
Wool sweater
Extra socks
Knife, pocket or hunting
Compass
Flashlight and extra batteries (no pen lights)
Small personal 1st aid kit, with tape and band-aids
Waterproof matches
2 Quart reserve water canteen or 2 quarts of juice
1 quart or more water canteen for daily use
Salt tablets

Kip or similar sunburn lotion
Mosquito lotion
Mosquito headnet
Snake bite kit (1 for each car group)
Sleeping bag
Knapsack
1 tent or equivalent for every four persons
Food for five full days
Utensils and can opener
Soap
Some light cord

OPTIONAL ITEMS

Small pliers for Cholla (1 for each car group)
Small towel
Change of underclothes
Small lightweight ground tarp
Lunch bag to wear on belt or outside pack
Pencil and paper
Kleenex and toilet paper
Candle
Chore boy and dish rag