

Much of the climbing was done on exposed faces. Here, Ed. Gammon is leading the way up the ancient crater.



Lillian I. Casler and Willard Dean pause for a rest near the summit. Dean is chairman of the Desert Peakers.

We Climbed an Old Volcano...

Mopah Peak in the Turtle Mountains of Southern California has long been a landmark for lost-mine hunters, prospectors and gem stone collectors. More recently this ancient volcanic crater has become a challenge to the mountain-climbing fraternity, and here is the story of a recent ascent by members of the Sierra Club of California.

By RANDALL HENDERSON

Map by Norton Allen

LATE IN February this year I was a member of a little group of Sierra Club members who reached the summit of Mopah Peak in the Turtle Mountains near the Colorado River in the southeastern Mojave Desert.

We were not the first to scale this ancient volcanic crater, or what is left of it, for the forces of erosion have broken down most of the walls of the vent from which lava once spewed forth on the surrounding terrain. What remains today is a great pinnacle of

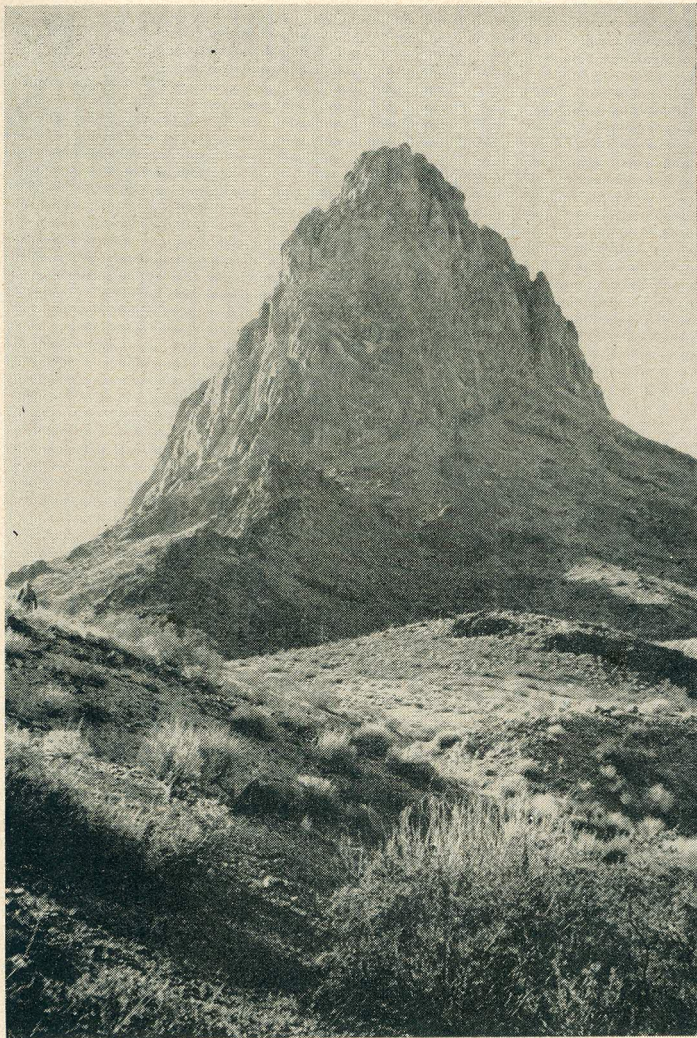
igneous rock which serves as a landmark for lost gold hunters, prospectors and gem collectors—and as a goal for those mountaineers who like to try their skill in difficult places.

For 75 years lost mine hunters have been drawn to the Turtles by stories of a fabulously rich placer field which once yielded great nuggets of gold—and then was lost. This is the locale of the legendary Lost Arch mine.

Then, 15 years ago when the new fraternity of hobbyists known as rock-hounds began to swarm over the des-

ert terrain in quest of semi-precious gem stones, some one reported that chalcedony and agate were weathering out of the seams in the volcanic rock of the Turtle Mountains—and today collectors are still climbing the slopes and combing the surrounding mesa—and getting lovely specimens of creamy chalcedony roses. This is a gem field that will never be exhausted.

My first trip to the Turtles was in 1940 when I accompanied Louise and the late Arthur Eaton on a rock collecting trip to the newly discovered chalcedony field. We camped along an arroyo five miles from the base of Mopah Peak at an elevation of 1100 feet. That great spire of rock was a challenge I could not resist, and while other members of the party roamed over the desert and climbed the lower slopes in quest of gem specimens, I explored the possibility of reaching the



Mopah Peak from the northwest side. This route was abandoned in favor of a more feasible ascent from the southwest.



At the summit, left to right, seated: Tom Corrigan, Lillian I. Casler, Ed. Gammon, Pauline A. Saylor. Standing: Bob Bear and Willard Dean.

summit. The northeast face of Mopah is almost vertical and I contoured around the base to the south face where there appeared to be a feasible route upward in a great couloir or gully of broken boulders. It was a hand and toe ascent and as I worked up over the loose debris I came to the conclusion that this was the vent of an ancient crater with the south rim entirely eroded away. Shoulders of rim-rock cut off my view both to the east and to the west.

Eventually, I reached a point where the climbing appeared too hazardous for a lone ascent—and turned back where my altimeter registered 3260 feet.

Early this year the Desert Peaks section of the Sierra Club scheduled Mopah for one of its week-end climbing expeditions, and as I was to be a guide on the trip I went out the previous week to see if I could find a route to the top.

Camping at an old stone corral near the base of the mountain, Cyria and

I had the same experience Edmund Jaeger wrote about in his "Desert Campfires" story in the April issue of *Desert Magazine*. The rocks out of which we had improvised a little fireplace began to explode. I realized then that they were the same type of andesite Jaeger had described, and hastily replaced them with other stones.

On this trip I followed approximately the same route as in 1940, but again I was turned back within 500 feet of the summit. I was sure I had climbed higher this time than on the previous attempt. I crawled into a shallow cave to rest before starting down the mountain. There was evidence that bighorn sheep had been using this cave for shelter.

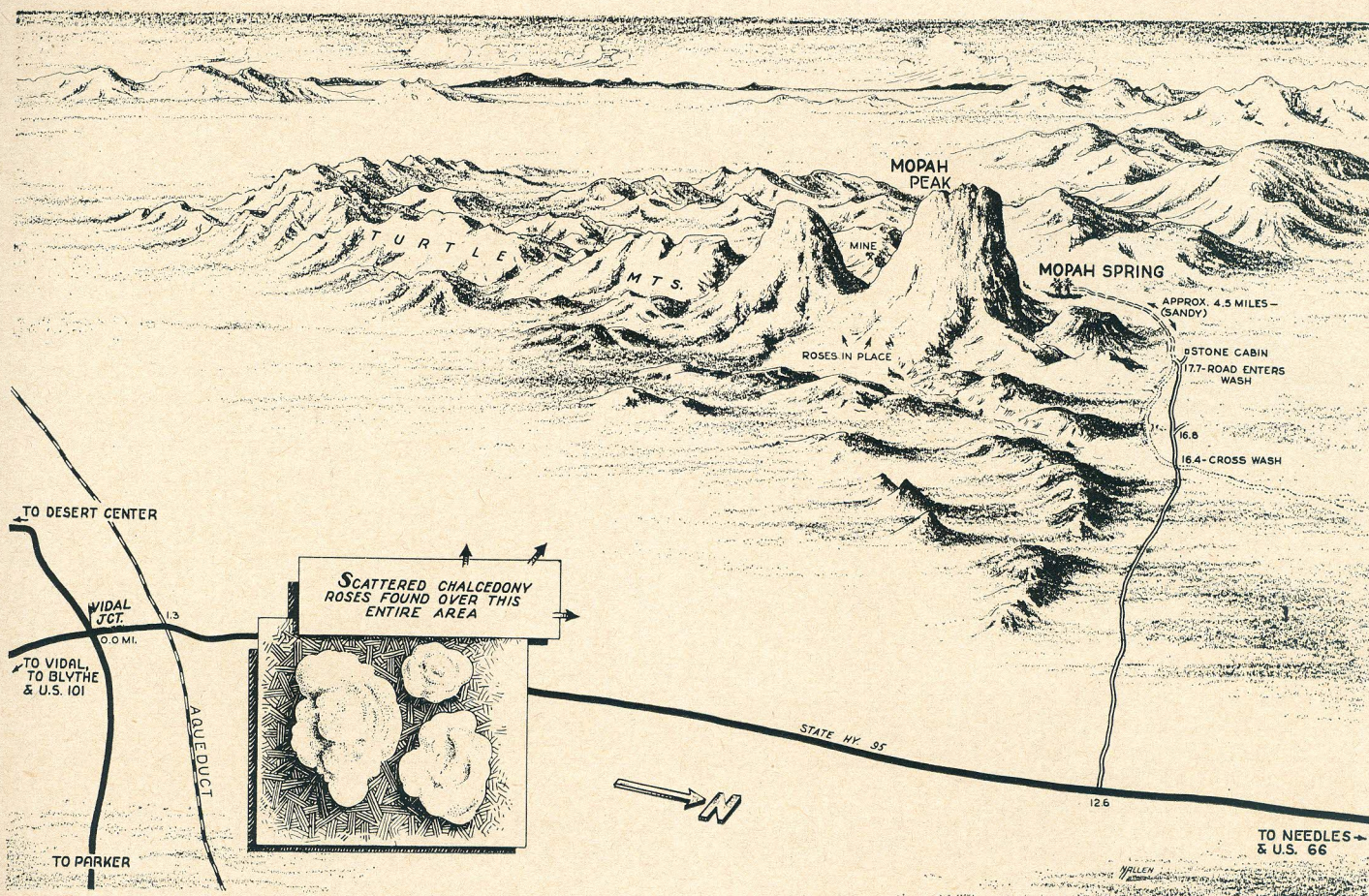
A loose rock in a little niche in the wall of the cave attracted my attention, and when I pulled it out there behind it was a little match box containing the card I had left there February 25, 1940, when I turned back at this same place.

A week later I camped near the old

stone corral again—but on this Saturday night there were a dozen other campfires, and bedrolls of 42 members of the Sierra Club and their guests were scattered among the rocks on the desert floor at the base of the Turtle Mountains.

Bob Bear of the Desert Peaks group was leader of the party, and among those present was Willard Dean, this year's chairman of the Desert Peakers.

Within the membership of the Sierra Club, a California organization of which John Muir was one of the founders, are various sections with special interests—the Rock Climbers, the Ski Mountaineers and the Desert Peaks clan. Throughout the year these mountain climbing folks schedule weekend and vacation trips to the various summits in California and Arizona. Between the Tehachapi Range and the Mexican border are 192 peaks with elevations over 5000 feet, and the goal of all Sierrans who like mountaineering is to become members of that small group which has climbed 100 of these



peaks. It is a little game initiated by Weldon Heald in 1945—and several of the Club members have qualified.

Not all the Sierrans at the campfire Saturday night were there to climb Mopah Peak. Some of the women had brought their small children, just for a weekend outing on the desert, and among those present were rock collectors who had joined the Turtle Mountains expedition to hunt for chalcedony, or gather garden rocks.

Our camp was five miles from the base of the Peak, and a rough prospector's road winds among the rocks and through the sand in the bottom of Mopah dry creek to within a mile of the base of the monolith. The next morning two jeep station wagons transported 21 prospective climbers up the wash to undertake the ascent.

Since Desert Peaks members generally do not go in for the rope-climbing technique of the Rock Climbing section, I wanted to find an easier route to the top than the one where I had twice failed.

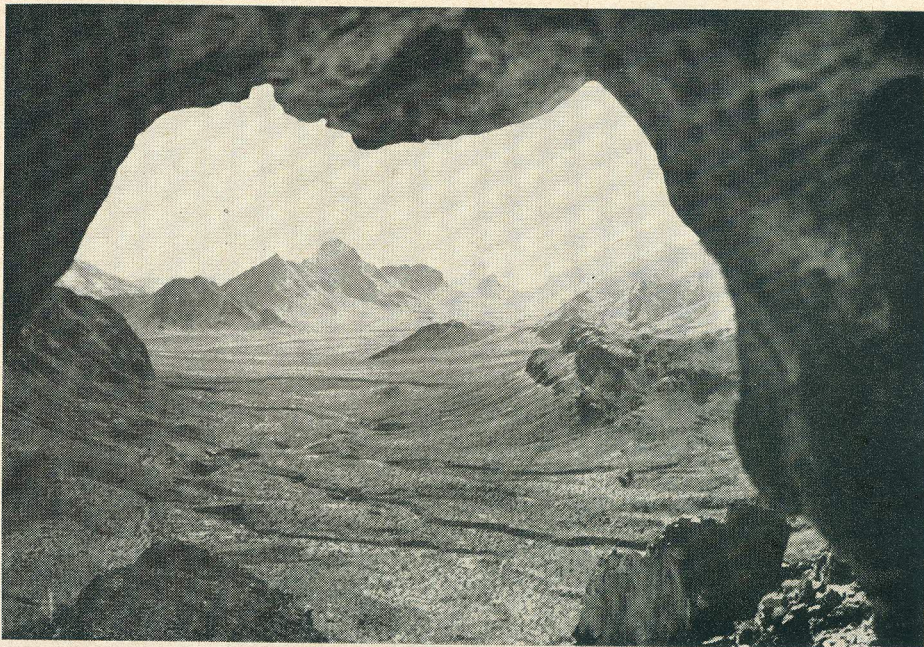
Tom Corrigan, who had once reached the top of the Peak and had done considerable exploring of the mountain, suggested that we attempt the ascent by way of a steep couloir on the west side. That was our first objective, but it soon proved impracticable for so large a party with limited experience in rope-climbing.

Then we circled the base of the mountain to the southwest approach where the face of the old crater appeared to offer adequate hand and toe holds. This was the route that finally brought success to seven members of the party. But it was a slow tedious climb with frequent use of the rope for security. It became evident there would not be time enough in one day

for all the members of the party to work their way up over the route, and a majority of the party continued around the base of the crater in quest of another or a better route to the top.

With Tom Corrigan and Ed Gammon taking turns in the lead, seven of us slowly worked our way to the summit. The volcanic rock in this massif is highly fractured, and we had

Looking out on the Turtle range from one of the many caves in the volcanic rock. These caves are used frequently for shelter by bighorn sheep.



to test each hand and foot hold carefully before trusting our weight on it.

We began the ascent of this route at 10:45, and at 1:10 we were looking down on the world from the highest of the three pinnacles which crown the ridge of the old crater.

There was a small cairn at the summit, but no record of previous ascents. The elevation was 3675.

Mopah is one of twin peaks. The other, approximately the same height, is a pyramid type of mountain lacking the challenge to climbers offered by Mopah.

From the summit we were looking down on Mopah Spring, a waterhole well known to all prospectors in that region, located in an arroyo northwest of the Peak. When I photographed this spring in 1940 there were two Washington palm trees there. Today the two palms are there, with four younger members of the same species growing nearby.

At the top of Mopah, one has a grandstand seat overlooking a vast panorama of Mojave desert terrain. To the east are the Whipple Mountains, with Lake Havasu occupying a canyon which was once the course of the Colorado River. To the South are the Riverside and Maria Mountains which mark the boundary between the Mojave and Colorado Deserts. To the west are the Old Woman Mountains and to the north the Sacramento Mountains, with Needles just beyond.

Perhaps the first person to climb Mopah was a Chemehuevi Indian in the 1870s. This was told to me by Charles Battye of San Bernardino, California. Battye is a veteran railroad man, now retired, who for many years was stationed at Needles, California. He spent his off hours exploring that desert area and became intimately acquainted with many of the Indians living in Chemehuevi Valley—the valley now occupied by Lake Havasu, the reservoir behind Parker Dam in the Colorado River.

In September, 1940, *Desert Magazine* published a map of the Turtle Mountains in connection with a field trip story about the chalcedony gem field. At that time we marked the volcanic crater as "Moabi" Peak, because that was the only name I could find for it on the old maps available.

Following the publication of this map, Charles Battye wrote, advising that the name properly should be Mopah, as he had distinctly heard the Chemehuevi Indians pronounce it that way. Battye stated that his Indian friend, Hi-ko-rum, related the following history: In the 1870s a member of the Chemehuevi tribe was being sought by U.S. soldiers from Fort

Yuma on a charge of homicide. A lieutenant and a half a dozen troopers came up the Colorado to Chemehuevi Valley on a steamboat. The culprit, learning of their approach, fled to Mopah Spring, and with his Winchester, some water and food, climbed the peak and defied his pursuers.

The lieutenant, after surveying from a safe distance the impregnable position of the fugitive, and not caring to sacrifice the lives of his men, held a parley with the Chemehuevis. He promised them that if the man would surrender, no harm would befall him, and as payment for their good offices he gave the tribe a substantial quantity of provisions.

Everything worked out according to plan, and the steamboat with the soldiers and provision left for Yuma. All arrived safely except the Indian. They reported he had fallen overboard and drowned.

Later, Capt. Polhamus, skipper of the steamer which transported the party, told Battye that the report was

a mistake, for he had seen the Indian many times after that.

According to Battye there were no palms at the spring when he first saw it 50 years ago.

Those who reached the top on this expedition were Bob Bear, Willard Dean, Ed Gammon, Tom Corrigan, Pauline A. Saylor, Lillian I. Casler and the writer. We added a few rocks to the cairn and left a small note book there as a register for future climbers. By 5:10 we were back at base camp again, having come down with the use of ropes by a route inside the couloir by which I had twice tried and failed to reach the top.

For those who like rugged climbing, Mopah will always be a challenge. Probably a score of routes to the top will be found where the ascent could be made without the use of pitons or the other paraphernalia of the rock-climbing fraternity. But it will always be advisable to use ropes for security, for much of the climbing must be done on exposed walls.

Photo Contest for May . . .

It is the driest year on record for many Southwestern areas, and that means the photographer will have to look carefully for good wildflower pictures. But, though the annuals may lag and their blossoms once open be scraggly and small, the cacti will be flowering for "business as usual" in the camera-posing field this spring. May and June are the best months.

A good cactus blossom shot may win Desert Magazine's May photo contest—or an animal study, a sand dune pattern in black and white, contrasts in shadow and light on a canyon wall, the character-lined portrait of an Indian patriarch. Any subject is eligible as long as it comes from the desert Southwest.

Entries for the May contest must be in the Desert Magazine office, Palm Desert, California, by May 20, and the winning prints will appear in the July issue. Pictures which arrive too late for one contest are held over for the next month. First prize is \$10; second prize \$5.00. For non-winning pictures accepted for publication \$3.00 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

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