

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

LA TE 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

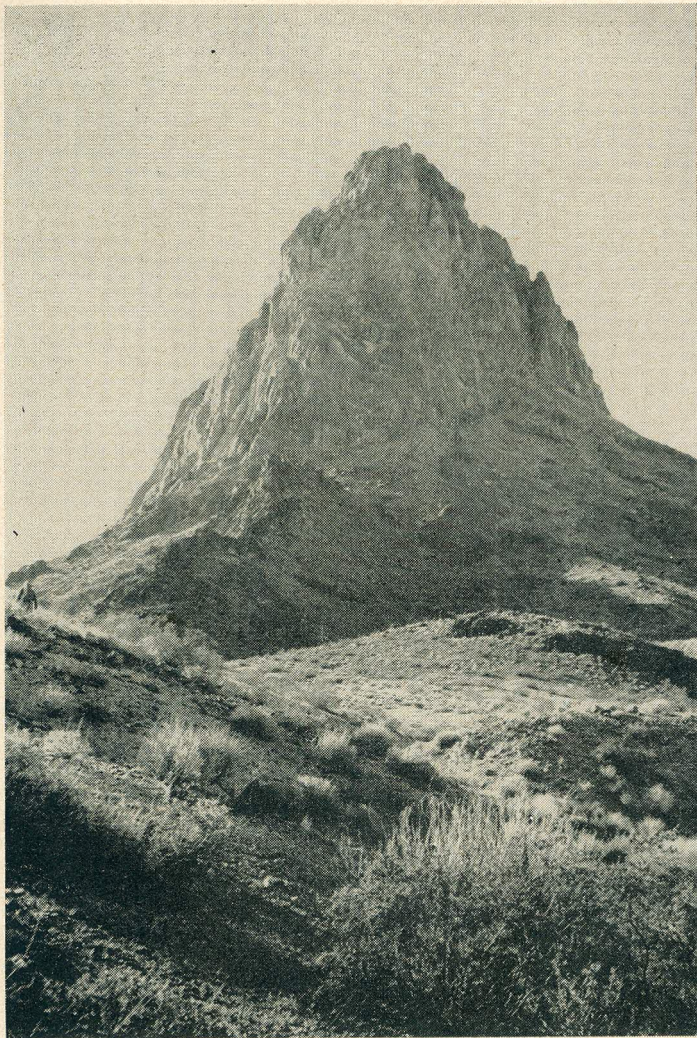
igneous rock which serves as a landmark for lost gold hunters, prospectors and gem collectors—and as a goal for those mountaineers who like to try their skill in difficult places.

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

