



*Although the climb was made in May, the leaders had to break trail across long patches of snow. Photo by Niles Werner.*

# We Climbed Telescope Peak

Telescope Peak, overlooking Death Valley, was given its name in 1861 when the chief of a surveying party reported he "could see 200 miles in all directions as through a telescope." Today a fine trail leads to the summit and it is a popular hike among those who go in for mountain climbing. Here is the story of an ascent made by 51 members of the Sierra Club.

By LOUISE WERNER  
Map by Norton Allen

**E**ARLY ON A May morning 60 hikers strung out along a trail that hung like a balcony, 8000 feet above Death Valley. Blue jeans, a red plaid shirt, a yellow sweater, a green parka—splashes of color sauntering past the gray sedimentary rocks of the slope. A crisp wind blew off the snow-etched ridge that culminated, about seven miles away, in the lovely white point of Telescope Peak, the crown of the Panamint Mountains. At their feet a gulley streaked down to bake its feet in the salt flats of the

Death Valley sink. The Desert Peak-ers of the Sierra Club of California were in their favorite environment with their favorite companions.

John Delmonte, leading, breathed deep the heady air, forgetting for the moment the tensions of his workaday world as owner-operator of a Plastics Factory. As the trail rounded a knoll dotted with Pinyon Pines, and began pulling up toward the ridge, he slowed his pace, remembering that the ages of his party ranged from 8 to 62.

The saddle, overlooking Panamint

Valley as well as Death Valley, demanded a rest stop. Judith and Jocelyn Delmonte, 8 and 10, their faces rosy with exertion, asked for their father's canteen and threatened to drink it dry. Chris Vance and Fred Bode, 10 and 11, reached the saddle deep in a discussion about their respective ascents of Mt. Whitney, the highest peak in the U.S. "It wasn't hard," said Chris, "But it wasn't exactly easy either."

In the bottom of Death Valley a haze brooded over Badwater, the lowest point in the United States. Beyond, dull reds and yellows played on the Funeral Mountains. Farther desert ranges undulated to a buff-colored plateau where a series of lava buttes appeared. On the west side of the saddle the escarpment dropped into Panamint Valley, similar to Death Val-



*Telescope Peak, showing the ridge over which the party made the ascent. Elevation 11,045. Photo by Niles Werner.*

ley but not as large or as deep. Over the purple crests of the Slate and Argus Ranges the Sierra Nevada thrust up snowy peaks.

"We used to see wild horses here," said Dr. James Bonner to a group of foreign exchange students he had brought as his guests from the Cali-

fornia Institute of Technology. "Burros are commoner, however. Wild burros will watch you with curiosity as you inch nearer to take their picture. Wild horses don't have that much faith in people."

Sage brush crushed under boots, scented the air. Mormon tea bushes

bristled yellow. The wind on the ridge cut through the brilliant sunshine. Half a dozen young hikers dashed toward a snow patch, the laughter of the girls turning to screams as the snowballing began and they felt icy trickles down their necks.

Carl Heller, a marine serving as rear

*This photograph of the climbing party taken on Mahogany flat at the end of the automobile road. Photo by Niles Werner.*







*Among those who reached the top—Wayne and Ruth McCartney, Fred Bode Jr. and Sr., Jocelyn Delmonte, Chris Vance with his dog Brownie, John Delmonte, leader, Judith Delmonte and Carl Heller, assistant leader.*

guard, herded the last of the queue up the saddle. Some felt the mile and a half they had come was sufficient exertion so lingered on the saddle to return to camp at leisure. John started up the trail that contoured the next knoll, passing a few limber pines that thrust out ragged arms to the wind, their barkless trunks twisting like corkscrews.

Up and up climbed the excellent trail at an easy grade toward the snow which the wind had swept off the backbone of the ridge, and piled in drifts on the Death Valley side, burying the upper part of the trail. Deciding that the top of the ridge would be better going than the snow, John Delmonte

led the way. It was like walking along the peak of a roof, looking down into the two valleys. No vegetation had

ventured this far, only the bare boulders.

A steep snow-slope loomed ahead. John remembered that the ranger in the station in Wildrose Canyon had told him a survey party on horseback had been turned back only a few days ago because of too much snow. There seemed no way to avoid the drift so he plunged upward, ankle-deep, breaking a zigzag trail as he went.

The first of the climbers topped the snow-slope and their "ohs" and "ahs" indicated to those still struggling up the snow, that something satisfying loomed ahead. There, just a few rods ahead, stood the tall cairn of rocks which marked the summit.

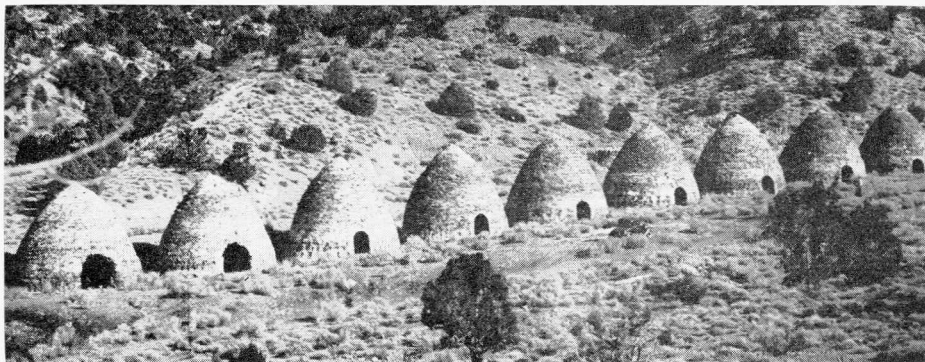
Reaching the top of a mountain must release some special substance into the bloodstream. The fatigue of hours on the trail is forgotten in the glorious feeling of satisfaction which comes with having conquered another peak. No wonder the Desert Peakers love to exchange their horizontal world at sea level, in and around Los Angeles, for the vertical world of the mountain tops. Telescope Peak offered them something special in this line. Nowhere else in the United States does the terrain fall so abruptly for such a distance. Its head, for half the year crowned with snow and battered by icy winds, rises in the air at 11,045 feet, while the ridges and gullies plunge to below sea level, there to swelter in the bottom of Death Valley.

In 1861, W. T. Henderson, one of an exploring party looking for the Lost Gunsight mine, made the first ascent and named the peak because, "he could see 200 miles in all directions as through a telescope."

But a dozen years before Henderson came this way, another party—the Jayhawkers bound for the California gold fields—also had climbed the Panamints. Their scouts, perhaps, had pulled themselves up to this ridge and had looked with despair toward valleys and mountains yet to be surmounted before they could find an open route to coastal California.

In later days a graphic glimpse of

*The "Beehives" in Wildrose Canyon.*







*Panamint George, over 100 years old, beside the old Panamint City boom town stage coach.*

the Jayhawker expedition was given in broken English by an Indian who as a teen-age boy in 1849 had watched their slow progress.

This lad was stalking mountain sheep on a high ridge in the Panamints when he was startled by the appearance of three men with white skins and long beards. He had never before seen a white man and he was afraid of them so he hid behind boulders.

The three, scouts of the Jayhawker parties, staggered by. Just a few days before this they had burned their wagons to smoke the meat of their starving oxen. The Indian boy could have led them to water and safety, but he feared to do so. Many years later he was asked why he remained concealed. He always answered, "Why? to get shot?"

This Indian in later years became well known to the white people who came to Death Valley. Guiding a party under the leadership of a man named George, he became known as Panamint George. The last 50 years of his life were spent on the Indian

ranch in Panamint Valley, at the foot of Telescope Peak with a score of other Shoshones some of whom became known as Hungry Hattie, Isabel, Mabel and the Old Woman.

Early surveyors, miners and geologists camped at Indian Ranch. Prospectors staggered in, crazed with heat and thirst. The isolated position of the Panamints and the relative inaccessibility of some of the canyons, made their oasis a natural refuge for army deserters, bandits and others desirous of evading the law. In places like Surprise Canyon, for instance, the law did not often penetrate.

Panamint George hinted that he was the first to find the famous silver ledge in Surprise Canyon, on which Panamint City later mushroomed. With characteristic Indian logic, he took out only as much as he had immediate need for. His claim of course had no weight against those of Senators Jones and Stewart who eventually sank two million dollars in the ledge. In 1875 Panamint City had so lawless a reputation that Wells Fargo, which served

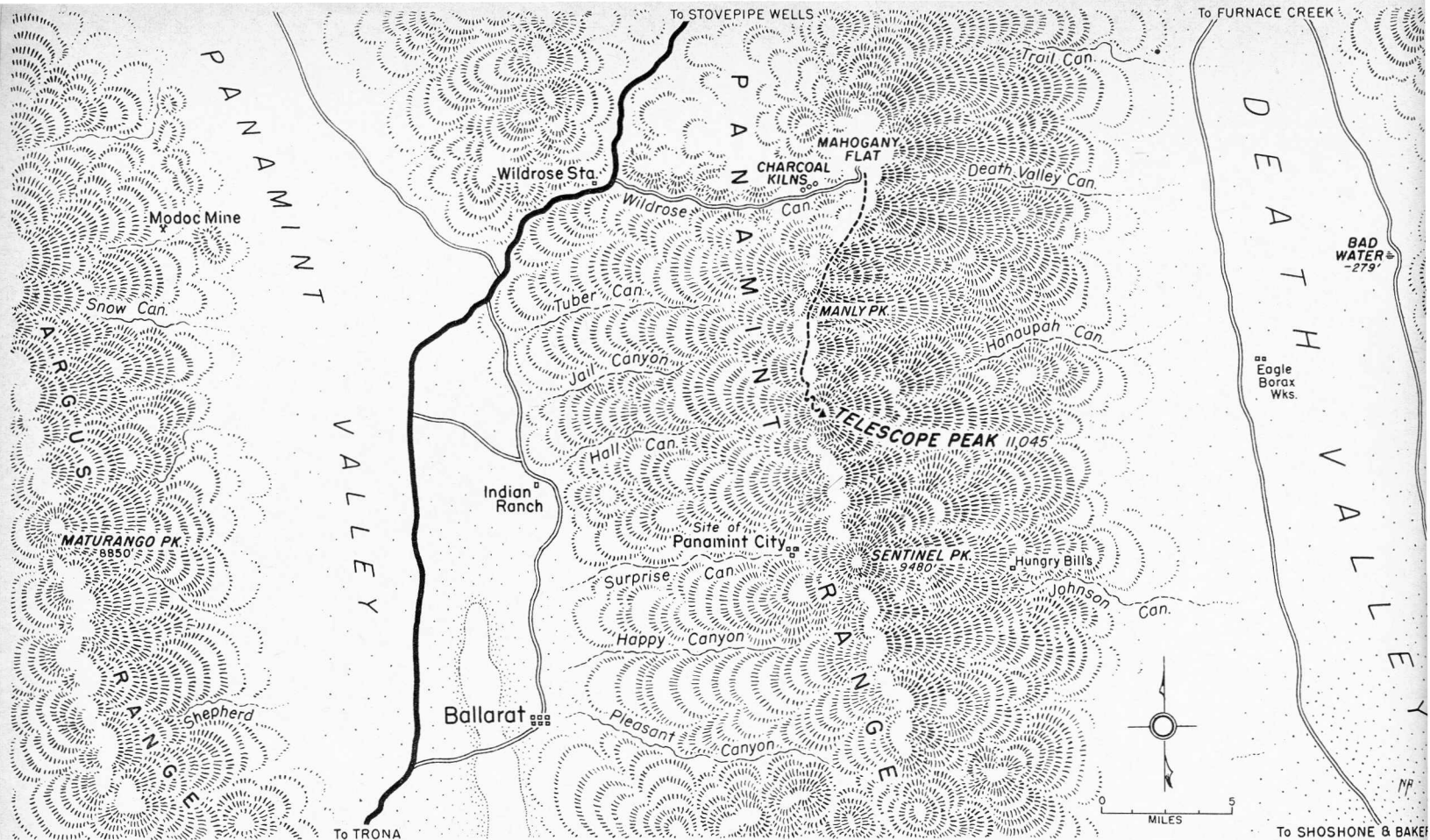
some pretty rough camps in its day, refused to risk a run to Panamint City.

I first heard about Panamint George in 1934, at a campfire in Wildrose Canyon on the evening before my first climb of Telescope Peak. Tyler Vandegrift had stopped at the Indian ranch and had visited with the old man, then nearly 100 years old. At Tyler's suggestion, we pooled our left-over food and one of the drivers volunteered to leave it at the ranch on the way out. I happened to be riding in that car.

A pack of barking dogs greeted us at the broken-down gate. A couple of shacks leaned crazily in the shade of tall cottonwoods. Chickens roosted on the seats of the old Panamint Stage Coach. This vehicle had somehow, after years of hauling some of the liveliest character who ever leeches themselves to a mining camp, come to rest by a clump of mesquite in the drowsy timelessness of the Indian Ranch.

The only story I've ever heard about an attempt to domesticate a bighorn sheep was told of Panamint George.





One of the Indians brought in a wild lamb that had lost its mother. The baby bighorn mingled with the goats they raised on the Indian ranch and became the special pet of Mabel, George's niece. One day the lamb discovered he could leap the fence. After that he came and went. Eventually he heard the call of the wild, bounded up a ridge of the Panamints, heading for the skyline. Though Mabel watched and hoped, he never came back.

Wm. Caruthers in *Loafing Along Death Valley Trails*, tells of stopping at the Indian ranch to give George some oranges. He found the old Indian irrigating his alfalfa in a temperature of 122 degrees.

"Heavy work for a man your age in this heat, isn't it?" asked Caruthers.

George bit into an orange eating peeling and all. "Me papoose," he grinned, "Me only 107 years old."

Panamint George died in 1944. Many of the younger Indians had gone to war or to work in defense plants. The ranch passed out of Indian hands.

Hundreds of climbers have written their names in the cast aluminum register box which the Sierra Club placed on Telescope Peak in 1934. The 51 who reached the top in May 1952, constituted the largest party to date. Unusual also was the number of families and the ages of some of the children. Judith Delmonte, 8, is probably the youngest to have made the top of Telescope Peak under her own power. Judith began mountaineering at the age of 2—on her father's back.

A trip to Telescope Peak offers enjoyment for nearly everyone. The drive—240 miles from Los Angeles—through Cajon Pass, Trona, over the Slate Range, approached the peak from the Panamint Valley side. A sign reading "Indian Ranch," pointed up a dirt road running toward a distant clump of cottonwoods.

We turned off the main highway, right, up a dirt road into Wildrose Canyon, where a symphony of wildflowers delighted our eyes. Yellow predominated—tiny pincushion daisies, brown-eyed Panamint daisies, and eight-inch poker-like spears of aloe. In a wash an apricot mallow grew beside a beavertail cactus that flaunted 16 red pompoms and nine buds. Lavendar phacelia smiled everywhere underfoot, accented with the sharp red of paint brush and the royal blue of lupine. Swarms of Brown Monarch butterflies fluttered about in quest of nectar.

In 1880 the Modoc Mines in the Argus Range needed charcoal to reduce ore. The nearest timber, juniper and pinyon pines, grew about 10 miles up Wildrose Canyon. There they built ten stone ovens, shaped like beehives, 35 feet high, 35 feet at the basal diameter, and two feet thick. This activity brought the first wagon-road into Wildrose Canyon.

Several hundred men once felled trees, split logs, stoked the ovens, tested charcoal and freighted it across Panamint Valley with teams. All that is left today are the ten ovens, remarkably well preserved, and a timber-line on

the hillside above them showing how far up the cutters went. Above this line the junipers and pines are larger than below it. Fortunately, conditions in Wildrose Canyon have favored reproduction and new trees clothe the scar. The "Beehives" are being preserved as a historical monument within the Death Valley National Monument.

A couple of miles above the Beehives a road ended on top of a ridge of the Panamint Mountains. Some cars boiled the last mile. Our waterless campsite at the end of the road on Mahogany Flat perched 8000 feet above Death Valley. Dead branches of mountain mahogany, juniper and pinyon provided firewood.

Unscrambling food and sleeping bags out of car trunks—building fires—the smell of juniper smoke, beans, ham and coffee — Mrs. Delmonte feeding her family of six a combination of noodles, peas and tuna warmed up together — songs and stories around the campfire — camera enthusiasts readying their equipment before crawling into their sleeping bags, in anticipation of a magnificent sunrise.

The seven mile trail from Mahogany Flat to the top of Telescope Peak has an easy grade. The CCC's built it in 1935. Before that, an improvised trail existed, probably started by Indians. Anyone able to walk may saunter out on this balcony that hangs 8000 feet over Death Valley. The mile and a half to the next saddle is well worth the effort. Having gone this far—who knows? — one might be tempted to continue up—and up—and up.