

*Sierra Club members at the summit of Rabbit Peak, in Southern California's Santa Rosa Mountains. Assistant Leader John Delmonte, in parka and muffler, stands alone on rock in center of picture.*

## *We Climbed Rabbit Peak*

A slow, steady pace with frequent short rests—that is Bill Henderson's formula for the strenuous climb to Rabbit Peak, in the Santa Rosa Mountains above Southern California's Borrego Desert. With Bill as their leader, 23 Sierra Club members reached the peak's windy summit one cold weekend last December. Louise Werner writes of the fun and thrills of a Sierra Club hike and gives *Desert Magazine* readers helpful suggestions for planning their own desert mountain recreation.

By LOUISE T. WERNER  
Photographs by the Author

**O**UR CARAVAN—an army weapons carrier and four town cars—stopped one chilly Saturday morning last December on the Borrego Desert near the eastern tip of Southern California's Santa Rosa Mountains.

This was Pegleg Smith country—the region where the fabled three hills topped with nuggets of black gold are said to be located.

But we had not come to search for Pegleg's gold. We planned to explore a new route to the top of Rabbit Peak.

There were 25 in our party, members of the Desert Peaks section of the Sierra Club of California. We seek the tops of desert mountains because we find there a vast and friendly solitude. Occasionally we feel the need of such solitude as an antidote for city living.

From our cars we could see the route we would follow on the skyline to the east—a ridge beginning on the desert floor at an elevation of 1500 feet, and rising gradually to the summit 6650 feet above.

"According to the map," said Bill

Henderson, trip leader, "the distance is about 10 miles in an airline. We'll try to stay on the backbone of the ridge all the way."

We had driven about 10 miles northeast from Borrego postoffice, passing Clark's Dry Lake and continuing in a pair of sandy ruts that climbed the bajada toward the base of the Santa Rosa Range.

Near our parking place Bill Henderson, a graduate student at U.C.L.A. and Assistant Leader John Delmonte, a plastics manufacturer of Glendale, California, found the neck of a broken olla and some pottery sherds. This was once the range of desert Indians.

We weighed our packs with a scale Bill carries in his weapons carrier. Weights ranged from 25 to 57 pounds. The heavier loads belonged to gallant husbands who had lightened the packs of their wives.



The line of backpackers strung along, past graceful ocotillo with leaves of a lovely autumn red and up the backbone of the ridge, among deer-horn, beavertail, barrel and cholla cacti and little seashells lying among the rocks. The creosote bushes were waxy green and agave lifted tall stalks all around. Two of them displayed their yellow blossoms out of season. The vegetation obviously had enjoyed the early fall rains.

The climb was gradual, and the wide-open view from the backbone of the ridge almost made us forget the weight of our packs. On the left, we overlooked Clark's Dry Lake and on the right, a deep gully that separated us from another spur of the ridge. Ahead was interminable upness.

After four and a half hours of backpacking, including a lunch stop and several generous rest stops, we reached a little plateau. Bill said, "We might as well camp here." We had come a good three and a half miles, and had gained about 2000 feet of elevation.

We were happy to drop the packs. A minimum pack for such a trip contains sleeping bag, food for one dinner, two lunches and one breakfast, a cooking utensil, cup and spoon, sweater and parka, flashlight, matches, lip salve, dark glasses, and a gallon of water. Most of us added a nylon ground cloth. Camera fans, of course, added camera equipment. John carried first aid.

We had a scant hour of daylight left. The men built fires with the plentiful agave windfalls, while the women unpacked the food. On a desert climb, where there is little water enroute, experienced climbers carry foods with a high liquid content. Dry foods are lighter to carry, but when you must carry every drop of your water on your back, canned foods have an advantage.

The Hendersons heated hamburgers with chile beans; Jon Gardey and Dick Apel, two U. C. L. A. students, heated up a can of spaghetti and some Vienna sausages. We had a can of vegetable beef soup with a can of corned beef thrown in. A one-dish meal like this, supplemented with a can of fruit and as much tea as the water ration will allow, takes on a special flavor after being carried for several miles on one's back. The zest with which climbers savor such a meal, eaten from a tin cup, is something seldom experienced at a well-appointed table with linen, silver and fine china.

A red and gold sunset splashed the sky over Coyote Mountain as we cleared the rocks out of our bedsites. The moon came up, and little clusters

of lights twinkled in the Borrego Desert. No doubt some of the residents there saw our fires, 3500 feet above them on the ridge.

We gathered 'round a big central campfire of dry agave for fellowship, and to sing such songs as: "All day I've faced the barren waste, without a taste of water." Leader Bill announced reveille would be at 2:30 a.m. "It takes a 15-hour day to climb from here to the summit and back here again, to pick up our packs and return to the cars," he said.

It was a cold weekend on the ridge, and some of us were none too warm in a minimum sleeping bag. The wind tore at the ground cloth. Ordinarily

we enjoy gazing up at the unbelievably bright desert stars, for a while before going to sleep. But high on the ridge of Rabbit Peak, we pulled the ground cloth over our faces and burrowed deep in our sleeping bags.

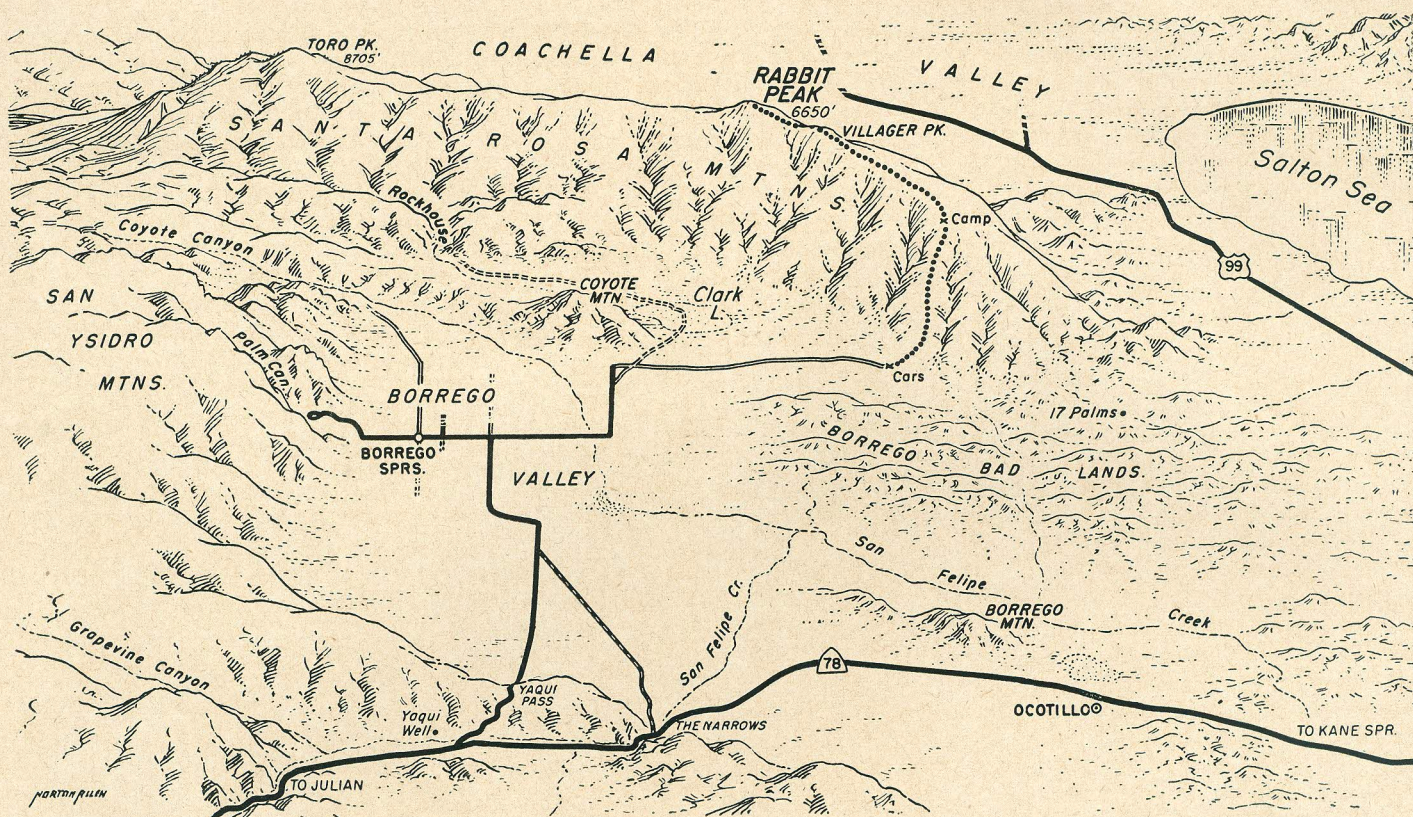
At 2:30 a.m., Bill sounded off. The camp came to life, and somebody started the fire. At three we were gathered round the flames, muffled in all the clothes we had. Those who had considered long woolen underwear worth its weight in a pack were the most comfortable.

It felt good to be moving up toward the crest on the ridge above camp. We could see its outline in the moonlight. The wind whooshed about our parka hoods, making conversation a lost ef-

*Bill Henderson, Leader of the Rabbit Peak climb, found the skeleton of a bighorn sheep. The animals are protected in the Santa Rosa game refuge.*







fort. Most of us carried flashlights for emergency use, but Bill believes a hiker is better off if he cultivates his night vision; flashlights only confuse, especially if they are turned on and off, on and off. It was surprising how much we could see, once our eyes became accustomed to the dark. Luckily, the cacti had thinned out.

The higher we climbed up the ridge, the fiercer blew the wind. The sky greyed, and dark shadows of bushes and trees loomed ahead. A little later we recognized mountain mahogany, pinyon pines and juniper. A red streak appeared in the east and beneath it the dull blue of the Salton Sea. Sunrise was the signal for a breakfast stop. There we sat, looking down on the Salton Sea over 5000 feet below us, enjoying the warmth of a fire and of the sunshine and of hot coffee from a billycan. The canteens had ice, and the hard-boiled eggs we had brought from home had ice between the shells and the cooked egg whites.

We looked down on the old stamping grounds of that rugged individualist, Fig Tree John. Before the turn of the century, and before the Colorado River broke through and formed the Salton Sea, Fig Tree John, a Cahuilla Indian, lived with his family in a wattled jacal—a hut made of arrow weed and mud—at a spring near this edge of the Salton Sea. Around his spring he had a number of Black Mission Fig trees, the only fig trees in that part of the country. He roamed the Santa Rosa Mountains in search of

pinyon nuts, seeds, roots, mescal, rabbits, coyote and bighorn sheep.

Into this primitive environment came white men settling on the edge of the Salton Sea and planting date gardens. Fig Tree John put a barbed wire fence around his Spring and a row of mesquite poles along what he considered his boundary line. His tribe submitted to the white man. Not Fig Tree John. He turned against his own people.

He displayed, threateningly, an ancient 44-40 model 63 Winchester carbine. It gave him a bad reputation. Occasionally a white man missed a tool, a bucket or a piece of harness. It was easy to blame Fig Tree John. Sometimes the missing article was seen in Fig Tree's possession. To Fig Tree John that was nothing when compared to the way the white man had come into the valley and taken the land of his people.

There are a few white people alive today who knew Fig Tree well enough to see another side of him. Nina Paul Shumway and Leland Yost, in an article in the January, 1941, *Desert Magazine*, tell how Fig Tree used to visit at their ranches near Oasis. He would bring a watermelon, for instance, and present it with an air of ceremony, as if he were bringing a precious gift. After this gesture of generosity he would indicate that he would like some coffee or sugar in return. As he grew older, he would sometimes come without anything to offer and would simply ask for the sugar or coffee. He usually got it. His favorite dainties were corned beef and canned peaches.

Fig Tree John had a faded blue army uniform, a tall silk top hat and a cane, and he always donned this outfit on festive occasions. No one knew how he obtained it, but it made him a character, a role he seemed to enjoy.

Fig Tree John is said to have once saved the life of a youth who had lost his burros, and came crawling, half dead, to his spring. He nursed the lad for a week and then took him to Mecca on horseback. Eventually, the 44-40 model 63 Winchester carbine was found to be unloaded and minus certain essential shooting parts.

Undoubtedly the difference between Fig Tree John and his Cahuilla brothers who bowed to the inevitable, was a rock-bottom individualism that would not let him conform to pattern. It made enemies. It made him lonely. But nobody remembers the names of the docile Cahuillas, while Fig Tree John has become a legend. He died in 1927 at the purported age of 135 years.

The Fig Tree John story intersects the Pegleg Smith saga at one point. After the death of the original Pegleg, a San Jose rancher, said to be a personal friend of the one-legged miner, made camp one day at Seventeen Palms. This is within 15 miles of Fig Tree's spring. The rancher brought with him a 16-year-old boy. On the second morning, he left the camp in charge of the boy, saying he would be back in about four hours. Three days later he had not returned, so the boy reported him missing. San Diego



posses searched the area, but no trace of the San Jose rancher was ever found. It was rumored, that Fig Tree John had the job of guarding an Indian mine in the vicinity, and that he had bragged of doing away with prospectors who came near it.

Cheered and refreshed by the warm food, the rest and the sunshine, we continued up the ridge. It had gone up consistently to about the 5500-foot elevation. Then it had dipped a few times, causing us to lose about 400 feet of elevation. Ahead, the ridge dipped once more and then headed, with a long slope, directly for the summit. Now that it was light, the advantages of ridge-walking again became apparent, as compared to climbing up washes and gulleys, and contouring up slopes. The view was open in all directions. To our left the terrain dropped off raggedly for over 5000 feet into Clark's Dry Lake.

The top of Rabbit Peak is a boulder-strewn plateau. Beyond it, the ridge dipped and rose for another ten airline miles or so to snow-covered Toro Peak. In the distance, the snowy summits of San Jacinto and San Gorgonio hung mistily in the sky.

When Bill first scouted Rabbit Peak in 1947, he found a cairn on the summit containing the names of other hikers who had preceded him. In the cairn was a Linotype slug carrying the name of Randall Henderson, who climbed the peak February 19-20, 1938, on the north side with John Hilton, Wilson McKenney, Jimmy Lyons, John Vevers and Lloyd Hall. Bill moved the cairn from its boulder pile high on the peak to the one rock he considered loftier still.

The Sierra Club made its first scheduled ascent of Rabbit Peak in February, 1948. Twenty-five members signed the register which was placed in the cairn with the record of the Henderson party. James and Harriet Bonner and Clem Todd climbed up the north ridge in 1947, but they left no record. We also neglected to sign our names. It was so cold on the summit, we thought only of getting down and out of the wind.

Bill had 23 people on the top of Rabbit Peak by 9:00 a.m. He has a reputation for getting large parties up difficult peaks in good shape. An early start and a slow, steady pace with frequent short rests does it. People new to climbing surprise themselves when under Bill's leadership. They find that they have pushed out what they considered their limits.

On the way down we picked out a sheltered spot among the pinyons, junipers, rocks and sunshine and ate our lunch. We relished most, at this point, celery, carrots, apples, oranges



*Above—A typical Sierra Club pack for the two-day hike to Rabbit Peak. Minimum pack contains sleeping bag; food for one dinner, two lunches and one breakfast; cooking utensils; cup and spoon; sweater and parka; flashlight; matches; lip salve; dark glasses and a gallon of water.*

*Below—The Sierrans wore warm clothing against the chill and biting winds of December. In single file, they followed the Mountain ridge at a slow, steady pace, and reached the 6650-foot summit by 9 a.m. Sunday morning.*

and canned fruits. Some who had brought sandwiches found they had no appetite for them. A few were out of water. Some had water to share. To be able, in such a circumstance, to offer a drink of water to a companion who is out makes one feels more opulent than inviting him to dine at the best hotel in town.

On the descent Bill Henderson found the skeleton of a bighorn sheep. It had not yet bleached sufficiently to

remove the odor of decay. Barbara Lilley, who was climbing Rabbit Peak for the third time, said she had seen live bighorns on the two previous trips.

We reached base camp at 3 p.m. We repacked our knapsacks, and headed back to the cars. The leaders, who stayed behind to see that the campsite was left clean, saw a live bighorn above camp, just as they were about to leave. It was 6 p.m. before the last of us reached the cars.