NORMAN CLYDE

Norman Asa Clyde died in Big Pine, California on December 23, 1971, at the grand old age of 86. Author and fellow mountaineer, Walt Wheelock, wrote of Clyde's passing, "... with his death went the end of an era of mountaineering in which a single man could dominate the field."

It was during a three-day Sierra summer rain storm a few years ago that I first became aware of Norman Clyde's impact on the climbing history of the Sierra Nevada. To use the wet hours productively, I read Steve Roper's handy pack-sized book, *The Climber's Guide to the High Sierra,* from cover to cover. In the section entitled, "List of First Ascents," I found Clyde's name mentioned again and again as the first to have climbed a long list of mountains stretching from Slide Mountain, north of Yosemite Valley (in 1921), to Mt. Le Conte, south of Mt. Whitney (in 1925). Whiling away the rainy hours, I tried to imagine what sort of man it would take to make so many of those first ascents – most of them solo.

Later that same year, I read, *Norman Clyde of the Sierra Nevada,* published in 1971 by Scrimshaw Press. There, in what is now one of my favorite books, I savored a collection of 29 of Clyde's previously published magazine articles on his experiences in the Sierra. The book also included a foreword by Francis Farquhar, past president of the Sierra Club, and a prologue by Jules Eichorn, one of the foremost American climbers during the thirties, both of whom accompanied Clyde on several of his trips into the Sierra. In addition, I found several photographs taken both at the height of Clyde's career in the 1920's and 1930's, plus poignant shots of the old man rummaging through his manuscripts in the spring of 1970. Best of all, though, there was a revealing and touching reminiscence by Smoke Blanchard, an acquaintance of Clyde's since the 1930's, and a friend during Clyde's twilight years.

I began to form an image of Clyde, a man whose presence is felt in the Sierra even today, 50 years after the peak of his climbing career.

Norman Clyde was born in Philadelphia on April 8, 1885, the son of a Presbyterian minister. When he was 12, his family moved to Canada, 80 miles from Ottawa. There he became an accomplished outdoorsman, mastering the skills he learned from the Scottish immigrants who lived in the area. Norman's father passed away when he was 17, so he, his mother and his sister moved back to the United States.

GIANT OF THE SIERRA

By Burton A. Falk

For a short time Clyde held a factory job, but he soon gave it up to enroll at Geneva College in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, from which he graduated in 1909. He then headed west, stopping to teach briefly in North Dakota and Utah.

David Bohn, the prime mover in persuading Clyde to gather up material for the Scrimshaw Press book, stated in the epilogue to that volume, that Clyde came to "... California in 1910 or 1911, having been strongly influenced by the writings of John Muir, especially *The Mountains of California.*"

One of Clyde's first acts upon reaching the Golden State was to enroll in a master's program at the University of California at Berkeley. There, though he finished the necessary class work, he failed to earn a degree because he did not complete his thesis. Walt Wheelock stated, "He balked at (the thesis), which was apparently his first major outburst of objecting to the 'system.'"

In his early years in California, Clyde married a woman who died of tuberculosis only three years later. An interesting insight into his personality is that he never mentioned this, his only marriage, even to close friends such as Smoke Blanchard and Jules Eichorn.

Clyde became interested in mountaineering during the summer of 1914, when he traveled to Yosemite, then later climbed Mt. Whitney. It was on that trip that he first met members of the Sierra Club and became a member himself.

For the following 10 years, Clyde taught in a number of schools around California, then, in 1924, he was appointed principal of the high school in Independence, a small town located in the central Owens Valley, in the shadow of the Sierra.

In 1927, after a Halloween Eve showdown at the high school in which Clyde stood off, with a shotgun, several students intent on making mischief, he either resigned or was fired by the School Board. That was to be his last regular full-time job for the rest of his life.

During the 57 years between Clyde's first trip to the Sierra in 1914 and his death in 1971, he became intimately familiar with the range. Because of his great compulsion to explore alone, if necessary, he made more first ascents of Sierra peaks than any other single climber.

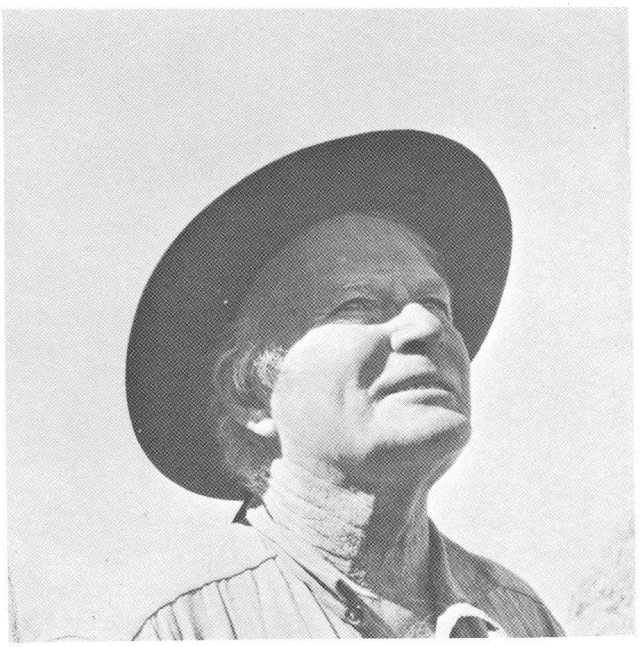
Walt Wheelock, who carefully considered the matter, believes that Clyde accomplished 127 first ascents in the Sierra – a figure which does not include his new routes on previously climbed peaks.

Most of Clyde's earliest climbs were made on non-technical routes. In 1931, however, Robert Underhill of the Appalachian Mountain Club came to California and spent the summer teaching several Sierra Club mountaineers, including Clyde, the new European techniques – employing rope and protection – for ascending the more difficult crags. That same summer, Underhill, Clyde, Eichorn, Farquhar and two others, made the first ascent of Thunderbolt Peak, on the Palisade Crest, the last of California's 14,000-foot peaks to be climbed.

Some of Norman Clyde's other first Sierra ascents include: Electra Peak, 1914; Mt. Huxley, 1920; Mt. McAdie, 1922; Mt. Aggasiz, Mt. Irvine, Lone Pine Peak, 1925; Independence Peak, West Vidette, Trojan Peak, Mt. Russell, 1926; Clyde Minaret, Mt. Baldwin, 1928; Temple Crag, Norman Clyde Peak, 1930; Four Gables, Mt. Mallory, 1931; Mono Rock, North Guard, 1934; and Mt. Cedric Wright, 1935.

It was relatively uncomplicated and inexpensive for Clyde to live among the mountains during the summer, even though it did require a minimum of cash to buy food, clothing, and equipment. For him to continue his low-income life style during the balance of the year meant that he had to find some sort of affordable shelter each fall when camping in the high country became desperately impractical.

Clyde worked out a unique plan for overcoming those tiresome, but necessary, material considerations. For 40 autumns, after the first snow had dusted the peaks and the last fishermen had left the streams, Clyde settled in as a winter keeper. In his early years, he usually holed up at Glacier Lodge on Big Pine Creek. During his latter winters, he could be found at Baker Creek Ranch, also near Big Pine. During his Glacier Lodge years, he was evicted unceremoniously from his cabin each spring with the advent of the first visitor and was forced to move elsewhere, usually to a nearby camping spot. This involved the movement of a gigantic pile of mountaineering equipment – for he was well-known as a packrat – and a lot of grumbling on his part. To provide himself cash, Clyde would guide parties to the summits of difficult Sierra peaks. These excursions sometimes were contracted for by teams from the U.S. Geological Survey. On



Norman Clyde. **Summit Photo**

other occasions, climbers paid for his help in bagging a formidable peak or two.

As an additional source of funds, Clyde wrote articles. Starting in the late twenties, and continuing into the fifties, he was a regular contributor to such publications as *Touring Topics* (now *Westways), Motorland, National Motorist, American Alpine Journal* and *Sierra Club Bulletin.*

His prose was formal, even stilted. He used words that were always correct, but not fashionable:

"Eventually finding a ledge leading to the bottom of the couloir, I followed it thither."

"Our day had indeed been a varied one, with the crossing and recrossing of miles of snow in July, and scaling the precipitous south face of Mt. Lyell by a route hitherto untrodden by the foot of man."

"Thus terminated another of my numerous trips afoot across the Sierra."

What he lacked in modern style, he made up for with wonderful imagery and freshness:

"The days were remarkably beautiful. The sky was usually clear in the morning, but each afternoon great masses of soft fluffy cumulus clouds would gather about the western peaks. Presently they would float lazily across the blue sky to the peaks along the main crest of the Sierra, where they appeared to linger for a while before drifting eastward to vanish in the dry atmosphere above Owens Valley."

"Brilliant rays of evening sunshine streamed across its sheer pyramidal front surmounted by the sharp summit; the lower portion of the mountain lay buried in dark shadow. Farther down we halted again, and as we looked back, the summit of Bear Creek Spire glowed roseate in the last rays of the setting sun, the end of a perfect day in the high Sierra."

In 1933, Clyde became involved in one of the sadder incidents of Sierra history. During August of that year, Walter A. Starr, Jr., a young San Francisco attorney and an experienced Sierra climber, failed to return from a solo climbing expedition in the Mt. Ritter-Minaret area, located just south of Yosemite National Park.

Because the mountains in which Starr had disappeared were so rugged, only the most skilled of the climber-volunteers, including Clyde, set out to comb the crags. The balance of the search party confined themselves to the lower elevations, with the hope that the missing climber, possibly just injured, might have attempted to crawl away from an accident.

Steve Roper, in *The Climber's Guide to the High Sierra,* stated, "Teams went out to search for four straight days, climbing standard routes to check summit registers, making first ascents, and scanning the range with binoculars. Unsuccessful, they left. . ." Clyde, however, did not. He stayed on and continued to search alone among the needle-like spires of the Minarets. After a full week, while in the vicinity of Michael Minaret, he noticed a fly drone pass, the another, and another.

"The quest (was) nearing an end," he wrote. "I began to follow a ledge running in a northwesterly direction. When I had gone along it but a few yards, turning about, I looked upward and across the chute to the northwestern face. There, lying on a ledge not more than fifty yards distant, were the earthly remains of Walter A. Starr, Jr."

A few days later, Clyde and three other climbers returned to the site of the tragedy, where they interred the body on the ledge where it lay. Starr's father, Walter A. Starr, Sr., a prosperous San Francisco attorney, and a climber of note in his own time, looked up from below. It is said that Starr, Sr., in appreciation, rewarded Clyde with a stipend for the rest of his life.

Because of Clyde's accomplishments in the Sierra Nevada, several of the range's geographic features have been named for him. On a recent topographic map, the U.S. Geological Survey officially titled a summit on the Palisade Crest, just short of 14,000 feet in elevation, Norman Clyde Peak. Two permanent ice patches on that same peak are called North Clyde and East Clyde Glaciers. In addition, the highest of the Minarets bears his name, while two pinnacles in the Evolution Valley area commonly are known as the Clyde Spires.

While Clyde will be mainly remembered his for role as a pioneer Sierra climber, he will also stand out as a true, one-of-a-kind character.

Take his choice of hats, for instance. He chose to wear a Forest Ranger-style campaign hat, wide, stiff-brimmed, with a four-ridged dome. This became his trademark. Some of his friends claimed they never saw him without his hat on, even in his sleeping bag. Smoke Blanchard said, "He must have had a half-dozen (campaign hats) in the old cabin on Big Pine Creek one winter when I visited him there. I couldn't help laughing at the oldest. (It) had spent so many seasons buffeting up against rocks and bowing into storms and fanning so many camp fires. . .that it had become a somewhat ragged pyramid."

And then there were his famous backpacks.

Clyde, it seems, was not a subscriber to the popular theory that your pack should be as light-weight as possible to maximize comfort. He would often set out on a long trip with 90 pounds strapped on his back, and because of his inclination to pick things up along the way, he'd often return with an even heavier load.

He considered it quite necessary to take along a full-sized axe, a cast iron fry pan, fishing gear, at least two pairs of boots, a pistol or two, and, of course, several cameras – one for color, one for black and white, one as a spare, etc.

He did, however, take weight into consideration in the selection of his reading material. Because he often stayed in the back country for weeks on end, Clyde decided that, to maximize his reading hours-to-book weight ratio, he would pack in volumes published in foreign languages. So, because he was so well educated and so extremely bright, he regularly lugged along and read books in German, Greek and Spanish. Once, at a rummage sale, he picked up a volume of the New Testament in Portuguese, which was a language he hadn't studied. He managed to plow through it, anyhow.

Clyde traveled alone on many of his trips. To sustain himself on his longer ventures, he either cached stores beforehand, or arranged meetings along his way with friends who brought him supplies. On one trip, he lost track of a day in his stick-notching process of timekeeping, which caused his waiting friends a full day of concern. On another instance, he was alone in the mountains for so long that, on his return to town, his voice had almost completely vanished due to lack of use.

Toward the end of his career, Clyde spent his summers at Sierra Club base camps, where he enthralled campfire audiences with his tales of past adventures. He told the assembled campers that he was a survivor from the Ecocene, and began to relish his reputation as a dinosaur-like non-conformist. Some even say he became cantankerous in his advancing years. He was tagged with the name, "The Old Gaffer," and, while he never acknowledged that he appreciated that appellation, he certainly did nothing to stop its use.

Because of an enlarged heart, Clyde lived out his last two years at the Inyo County Sanitorium in Big Pine. He was alert and active, however, right up to his death two days before Christmas in 1971.

Many who knew the old climber were puzzled to read in his obituary that he had selected Tonopah, Nevada – out of sight of his beloved Sierras – as his final resting spot. How could that be? Was he being irascible right to the end?

They need not have been concerned. At the time of his death, the State of California had in effect a law that prohibited the scattering of ashes over its golden landscape. All remains had to interred in a state-licensed cemetery or mausoleum.

Neighboring Nevada had no such law. It was, therefore, possible for his friends to pick up Clyde's ashes in Tonopah, and transport them back across the state line to California, where they could scatter them among Clyde's favorite mountains at their discretion.

And so it was that a party of six including Smoke Blanchard, Smoke's son Bob, Jules Eichorn and Nort Benner – all fine climbers – set out up the south Big Pine Creek trail on a mission to properly inter the mortal remains of Norman Clyde.

They camped the first night at Finger Lake, nestled below the Palisade Crest, perhaps the most beautiful stretch of mountains in the entire Sierra Range. Then, the next morning, the four climbers, with a full paper sack in one of the rucksacks, ascended Norman Clyde Peak. Once on top, they scattered Clyde's ashes over the northeast face of the peak.

The remains showered down on the East Clyde Glacier, thousands of feet below – a fitting memorial for a true giant of the Sierra.

Burton Falk lives in Lakewood, California and has been an active mountaineer ever since climbing 11,502-foot Mt. San Gorgonia, Southern California's highest peak, on July 19, 1969 – the day man first walked on the moon. Since his first ascent, Falk has climbed over 400 peaks worldwide, including Aconcagua, Ojas de Solado, Chimborazo, McKinley, Kilimanjaro and Mt. Blanc.