OFF BELAY

THE MOUNTAIN MAGAZINE

JUNE 1975 NUMBER 21

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Inset photo by William Jeffries—Rappel from the Crying Dinosaur, Superstition Mountains, Arizona.

OFF BELAY welcomes manuscripts, drawings, and photographs on all phases of mountain activity. Subject matter may be appropriate for feature, department, or editorial use. All material will be returned after review or use. We reserve the right to edit or expand contributions, and to substitute supporting material. For additional information, write Ray Smutek, Editor.

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CALIFORNIA

By Ken Horwitz
Northridge, California

On April 21, 1860, John G. Downey, governor of California approved an act of the state legislature creating the office of state geologist and ordering a geologic survey of the state. A man named Josiah D. Whitney was charged with this enormous responsibility. Today, 14,495 foot *Mount Whitney* in California gives tribute to this man, his survey party and their accomplishments.

While memorable, the expedition is not noted for its scientific accuracy. One of the errors the Whitney Survey made was the geological characterization of a spectacular range within the Sierra Nevada. From the *Geological Survey of California*, 1865: *". . . along the main crest of the Sierra, is a range of peaks, from 13,500 to 14,000 feet height, which we called 'the Palisades.' These were unlike the rest of the crest in outline and color, and were doubtless volcanic; they were very grand and fantastic in shape. All doubts as to the nature of these peaks were removed after observing on the east side of the crest, in Owen's Valley, that vast streams of lava had flowed down the slope of the Sierra, just below the Palisades."*

While the enormity of Whitney's task places him beyond reproach for his error, closer observations would have revealed to him that the Palisades are not volcanic but of granitic character. The volcanic lavas in Owen's Valley are of more

PALISADES

recent geologic time and do not extend to the higher portions of the crest. The Palisades are not the stark volcanic wasteland Whitney surmised but instead one of the finest alpine environments in the Sierra.

The Overview

Webster's Dictionary lists "palisade" as a *". . . fortification consisting of a row of stakes or posts set firmly in the ground and sharpened on top. . ."* A secondary meaning is *". . . a line of high cliffs. . ."* From any vantage and with little need for imagination, both definitions fit the California Palisades. In some sections, they are so imposing they give the impression of an enormous fortress miles in length, exposing one continuous, couloir-serrated face.

The Palisades are a nine mile section of the Sierra Crest, located some seventy five miles south of Yosemite. The eastern boundary line for King's Canyon National Park runs from peak to peak; the eastern slope is part of the Inyo National Forest.

The Palisades are a massive group, second only to the Whitney peaks forty miles to the south. Five of the peaks broach 14,000 feet; the majority are well over 13,000 feet. An aerial view gives the impression of a narrow arete winding its way along a sinuous northwest-southeast line, attacked by headwall devouring cirque glaciers. Only a few strenuous knapsack passes transect this formidable barrier.

The Palisades differ from the general geomorphological trend of the High Sierra. The peaks further south, for example, have tremendous eastern faces, but gradual western slopes. *Mount Whitney* exemplifies this characteristic. The Palisades, on the other hand, are steep on both sides, west and east.

The Northern Palisades

Most climbers receive their Palisade initiation among the northern peaks, lured by the Palisade Glacier and 14,242 foot *North Palisade Peak*. The approach used by all is the North Fork of Big Pine Creek, first by road from "downtown" Big Pine and thence by trail, and finally cross country.

The trail starts with several arduous switchbacks, enough to deplete a little of your enthusiasm, which is quickly revived by the cascading waterfall ahead, an excellent place for a light breakfast. From here, it is relatively level for nearly five miles as you wander past First, Second, and Third Lakes. To whet your mountaineering appetite, the sharp cathedrals of Temple Crag, the end of the steep ridge nicknamed the *Swiss Arete* by Smoke Blanchard, tower above the final lakes, leading up to *Mount Gayley, Mount Sill,* and the Sierra Crest. Beyond Third Lake, the trail climbs slowly to a small meadow, where Smokey conducts pre-climb training sessions for the Palisade School of Mountaineering. It is an excellent place to lunch, or for the less enduring, to camp. But be gentle. Like similar "glacier meadows" throughout the west, it shows the scars of careless use—too many firepits, abandoned cookery, unsightly litter.

Most climbers leave the trail here, and head up between the morainal hills toward Sam Mack Lake. The final two miles to the glacier are steep and strenuous, no longer a beaten path but a guiding line of "ducks." Since the glacier lies above 12,000 feet and the trail head 4,000 feet and many miles below, few climbers make the trip in one day. Many put their base camp in Sam Mack Meadows and climb from there, although the stark beauty of the glacier recommends pushing on.

The northernmost peaks of the Palisades are *Mount Agassiz* (13,891 feet) and *Mount Winchell*. Both names had their origin in 1879, when Lil A. Winchell

Above— The first glimpse of the Palisades is seen from Hwy 395 near Big Pine. Much of the crest, however, is obscured by massive foothills peaks.

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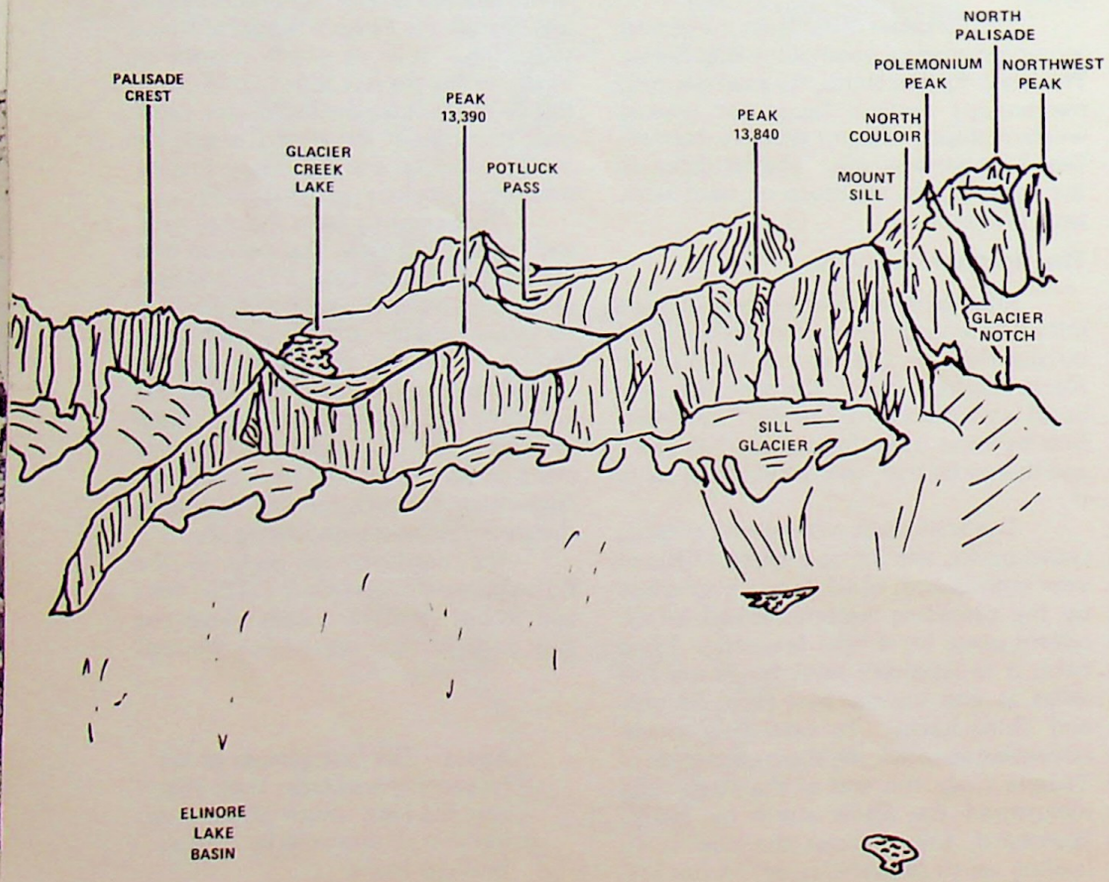

explored the area. The Winchell honored, however, was his cousin Alexander Winchell, a geologist. *Mount Agassiz* honors the great naturalist Louis Agassiz, the first to suggest that "glacial epochs" have been part of our past. We now know these "epochs" as the "ice ages." However, it is likely that the wrong geographic feature bears his name. Winchell mentions *Agassiz Needle,* an appelation which hardly applies to the rounded, eroded mound now called *Mount Agassiz.* Between the two, a severe passage, *Agassiz Col* will give the sure-footed access to the west side of the crest, but steep snow and exposed scrambling are involved. The pass south of *Winchell* is blocked by a 100 foot cliff on the west side.

Next comes the highlight of the ten mile chain—the North Palisade group. The crest swings sharply to the east and sends out a spur ridge north, forming a vast but hidden, north facing alcove. Towering above this arc are *Thunderbolt Peak* (14,000+ feet), *North Palisade* (14,242 feet, the highest in the group), *Polemuim* (14,000+ feet), *Mount Sill* (14,162 feet), and the northeastern outrigger, *Mount Gayley* (13,510 feet). The protection afforded by this ring of giants is responsible for the largest ice mass in the Sierra—the *Palisade Glacier.*

The true magnitude of the *Palisade Glacier,* however, was not recognized until 1903, when Joseph LeConte, Jr. realized the magnificent overview after the first ascent of *North Palisade.* Until then, the Lyell Glacier in Yosemite was thought to be the largest, another of Whitney's minor mistakes. And although the largest in the Sierra, the *Palisade Glacier* is quite small by Cascade and Coast Range standards; it is about a mile long and half again as wide. Like all the Sierra glaciers, the *Palisade* is ablating faster than accumulating; the difference is visually apparent when comparing early photographs with the present scene.

Two unnamed peaks (both over 13,000 feet) and the pinnacle capped wall called *Palisade Crest* (13,520+ feet) lie beyond *Mount Sill* where the crest resumes its southeastern trend. They can be reached by crossing Glacier Notch, the saddle between *Mounts Sill* and *Gayley.*

The Central Palisades

In most ranges, the region around the highest peak sees the most action, while the outlying peaks are relatively neglected. This is also true of the Palisades. Climbers flock to the Palisade Glacier peaks, ignoring the equally imposing and equally challenging southern representatives.

Three important peaks are grouped just south of *Palisade Crest—Clyde Peak* (13,920 feet), *Middle Palisade* (14,040 feet), and *Disappointment Peak* (13,917 feet). Glaciers, not quite so large as the northern one, scour the northeast flank. They are short and steep, revealing bare

blue ice most of the climbing season. Tremendous mounds of morainal deposits block the lower end and harbor several glacial lakes whose waters are a bright chalky blue. The color comes from the heavy load of finely powdered "rock flour" suspended in the water.

Access to the central peaks is no more difficult than to the North Palisade group, but there are more approach variations. The easiest way is the trail paralleling the South Fork of Big Pine Creek. After a mile and a half flat along the bottom of a wide glaciated valley, it switchbacks steeply toward Willow Lake. To the west is *Mount Alice,* a peak with a tremendous overview of the Palisades, but it's a long scramble to reach the top. To the southeast is *Kid Mountain,* whose rocky flanks threaten the trail. Hanging rock cleavers look as though they might shatter unexpectedly and shower an unwary passerby. There is a quiet feeling of respect when passing beneath these ominous guillotines —the talus below attests that some have proven unstable.

Willow Lake is almost no lake at all. Soon it will be a flat meadow as sediment deposited by two streams is slowly but irreversibly filling the shallow basin. From here two choices present themselves. The first is to follow the tributary some call the "Middle Fork" to Elinore Lake. From there you can reach the Clyde Glacier, *Clyde Palisade,* and *Palisade Crest.* Or a westerly stroll up beautiful, glacial-polished slabs leads to the glacier beneath the imposing, "back side" face of *Mount Sill.*

The route up the creek bed, however, is one of the roughest cross country hikes in the region. There is no trail, just a succession of willow thickets and talus piles. It's best to cross the stream a quarter mile above Willow Lake and stay on the north side of the creek close to the rocks. There are more gaps in the thicket here, produced by small rock slides from the cliffs.

This area can also be reached from Second Lake by way of Contact Pass, the col between *Temple Crag* and *Mount Alice.* Two differently colored granites come together here forming a "contact" zone extending many miles.

From Willow Lake, the second alternate continues along the trail to Brainard Lake. Somewhere in the cliffs above, so the story goes, is a beautifully painted mural of the lake dating back to the '30's. But like all good mysteries, few seem to know exactly where. One hiker I know claims to have seen it within the past year though.

The trail ends at Brainard Lake; water courses, alpine meadows, and polished slabs invite you onward toward the glaciers, *Middle Palisade,* and *Disappointment Peak.* South Fork Pass in the col between *Disappointment* and *The Thumb* is one of the few, reasonable crossings of the Palisade crest. But it still involves steep snow and some tricky rock scrambling.

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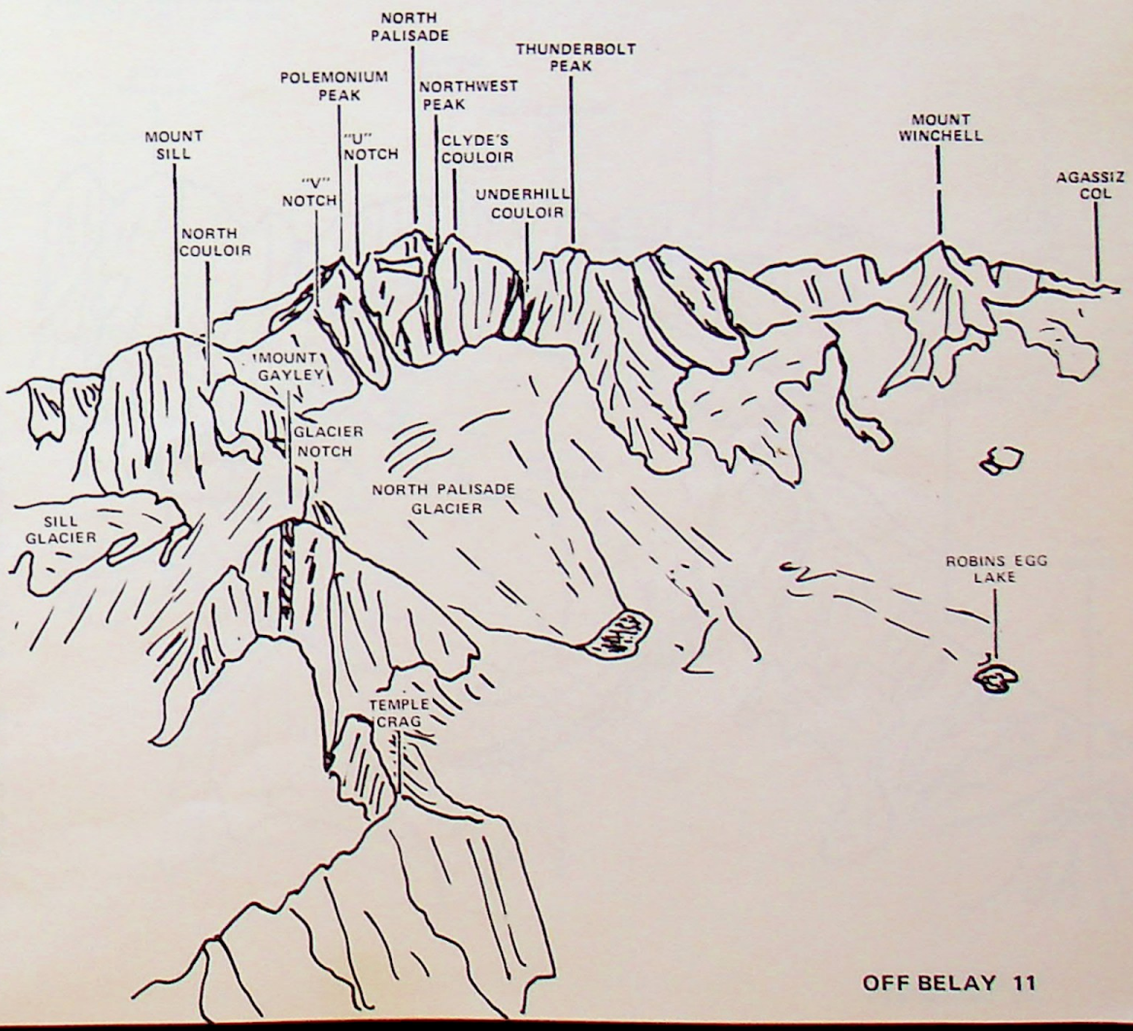

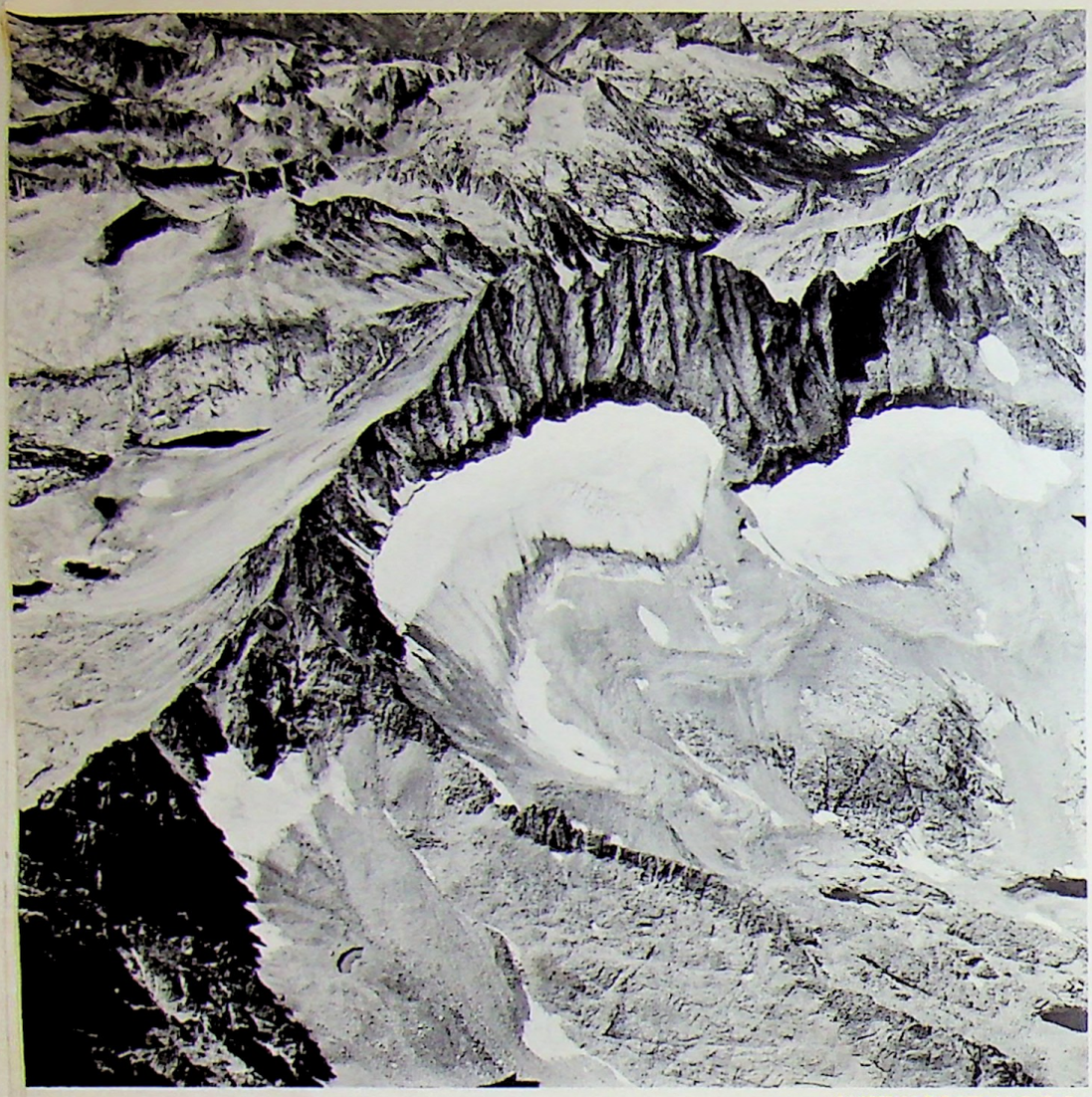

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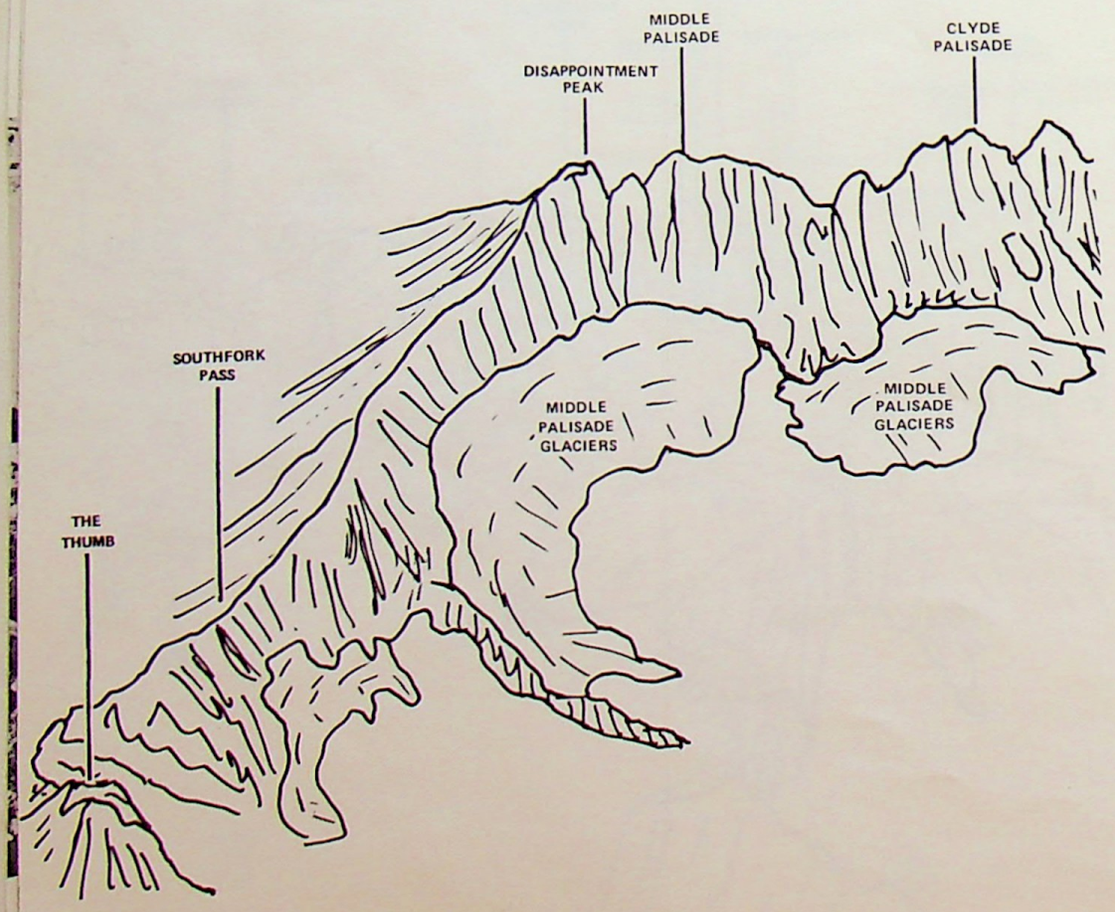

The Southernmost Palisades

If the central Palisades can be termed "neglected," then the only appropriate description of the southernmost peaks is "abandoned." Few climbers seem to get beyond *The Thumb,* even though several peaks, including a "fourteener" are strung out to the south.

After *The Thumb,* sometimes called *East Palisade,* comes *Mount Bolton Brown* (13,538 feet), *Mount Prater* (13,329 feet). *Split Mountain* (14,058 feet) anchors the end of the chain, earning the nickname *South Palisade.* Access to these peaks is usually from the west. The only reasonable eastern approach is from Red Lake, reached by trail up Red Mountain Creek.

The West Side

The Palisades are often viewed but seldom climbed from the west. Those passing by are doing just that—passing by on the popular John Muir Trail as it winds its way beneath the Palisade crest.

Three basins are nestled under the western scarp of the Palisades, three thousand feet below the crest. The northernmost is Dusy Basin, beneath *Mount Winchell.* The Bishop Pass Trail winds through the heart of this high alpine, frost shattered rock zone. Palisade Basin lies beneath *North Palisade,* reached by crossing over Knapsack Pass from Dusy Basin. It was through Palisade Basin that LeConte traveled on the first ascents of *Mount Sill* and *North Palisade.* The Upper Basin of the King's River is southernmost and lies beneath South Fork Pass.

All of the area to the west of the Palisade crest lies within King's Canyon National Park and is subject to the management policies of the park. Wilderness rangers enforce the rules, so don't fall into the common trap of not securing a wilderness permit if you are planning to cross the crest. Another common violation among hikers it bringing dogs into the park, an automatic twenty five dollar fine.

Owens Valley

On the approach toward the *Palisade Glacier* up the North Fork of Big Pine Creek, there are unmistakable signs of construction at the eastern ends of First, Second and Third Lakes. Portions of railroad tracks cross a makeshift dam with floodgates. Wheels, cables and spikes lay around, now obsolete and useless. What are they doing here? There was no mining in this area; that was farther north for tungsten along Pine Creek.

The answer to the silent question posed by these half century old artifacts reveals one of the dirtier schemes in California history. It is the story of how the City of Los Angeles took the water from the once agriculturally productive Owens Valley and turned it into a sage covered desert. The tale is tinged with "glittering generalities," blackmail, deceit, and re-

peated use of the argument "good for the betterment of the majority."

It began in 1903. An agent from the Bureau of Reclamation showed up in the Owens Valley, selling the settlers the idea of a water storage system. Eagerly, the Valley's residents cooperated to the utmost, for the water they now used was laboriously obtained through hand dug irrigation ditches. Then treachery. After completing his investigation of landholdings, mortgages, water rights, etc., the agent sold out to the City of Los Angeles. A 230 mile aqueduct was built from the Owens River to Los Angeles. For a short time everything was fine. The city only rook the excess water beyond what the Valley needed for irrigation. But then the moisture starved behemoth-to-be demanded more. Ruthless buying of water rights began. One ploy was checkerboard buying of land; unbought farms were drastically devalued because they were surrounded by land that was to be dried out. Sales were extracted by misrepresentation and outright lies; the City needed their irrigation ditch water options so more water would enter the aqueduct.

Many farmers were ruined; few broke even for the backbreaking work they had put into their land. The farmers became desperate as they saw their land become useless. The aqueduct was dynamited and floodgates opened, but this was little more than a gesture of their hopeless plight. If the City had build an adequate storage system as originally planned, there would have been water for everyone. But they never got around to this until the late 1930's. By then the economy of the Owens Valley had been completely devastated. The once agricultural fields and apple and pear orchards had disappeared —desert sage had once again taken over.

And the ruins at the lakes?—desperate attempts by the people of Big Pine to build their own water storage system and resist the impending doom. But rockslides and overwhelming costs made the effort hopeless. Like Owens Valley, it never saw fruition. Only skeletons remain.

Until recently, hostility and bitterness greeted any Los Angelino coming into the Owens Valley. Climbers or backpackers wandering into a bar in Lone Pine, Independence, Big Pine, or Bishop, were often lucky to escape with their teeth intact. Now, there is a different generation. Few remember what happened during the twenties.

Ironically, the San Fernando Valley, north of Los Angeles to which the water was piped is no longer an agricultural community but a huge population suburbia. One and a quarter million people live there, locked to companies such as Lockhead Aircraft and General Motors. The water system that ruined the Owens Valley is now obsolete and the City has turned elsewhere, to the Feather River Project, to get more water. And to complete the irony of it all, the last reservoir at the end

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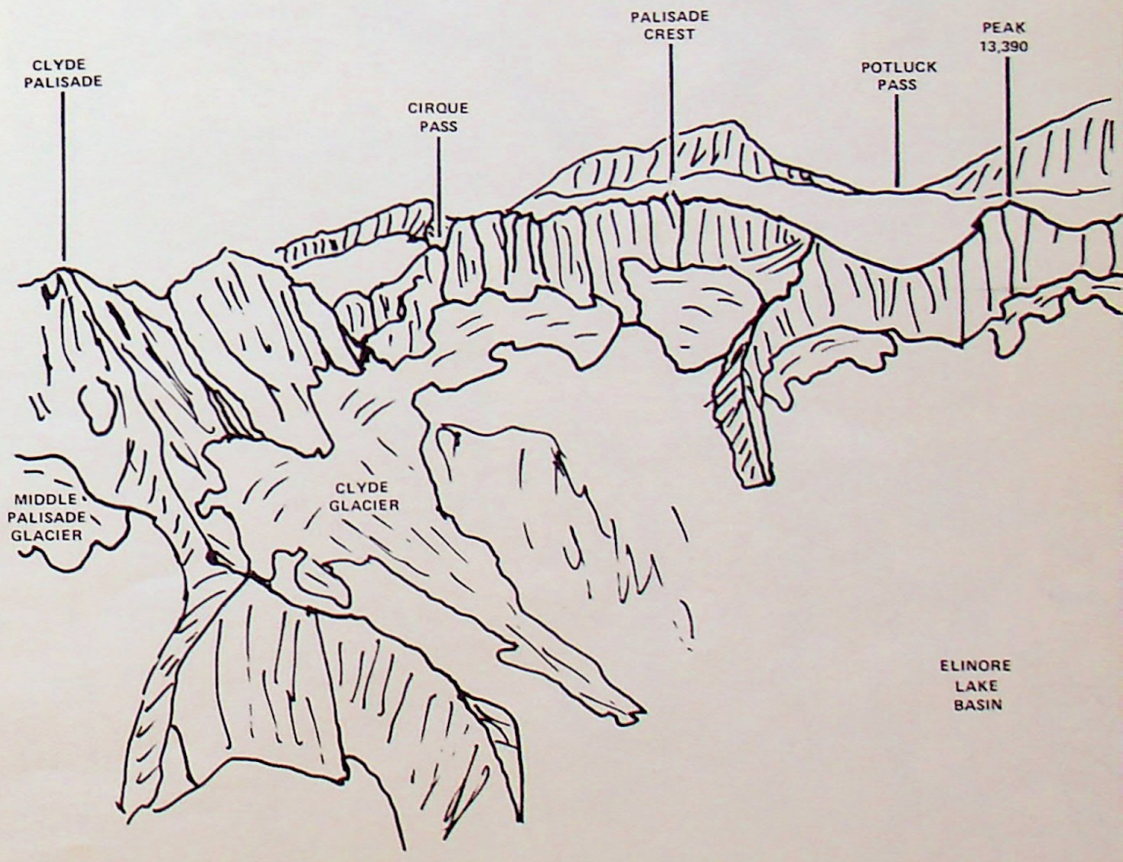
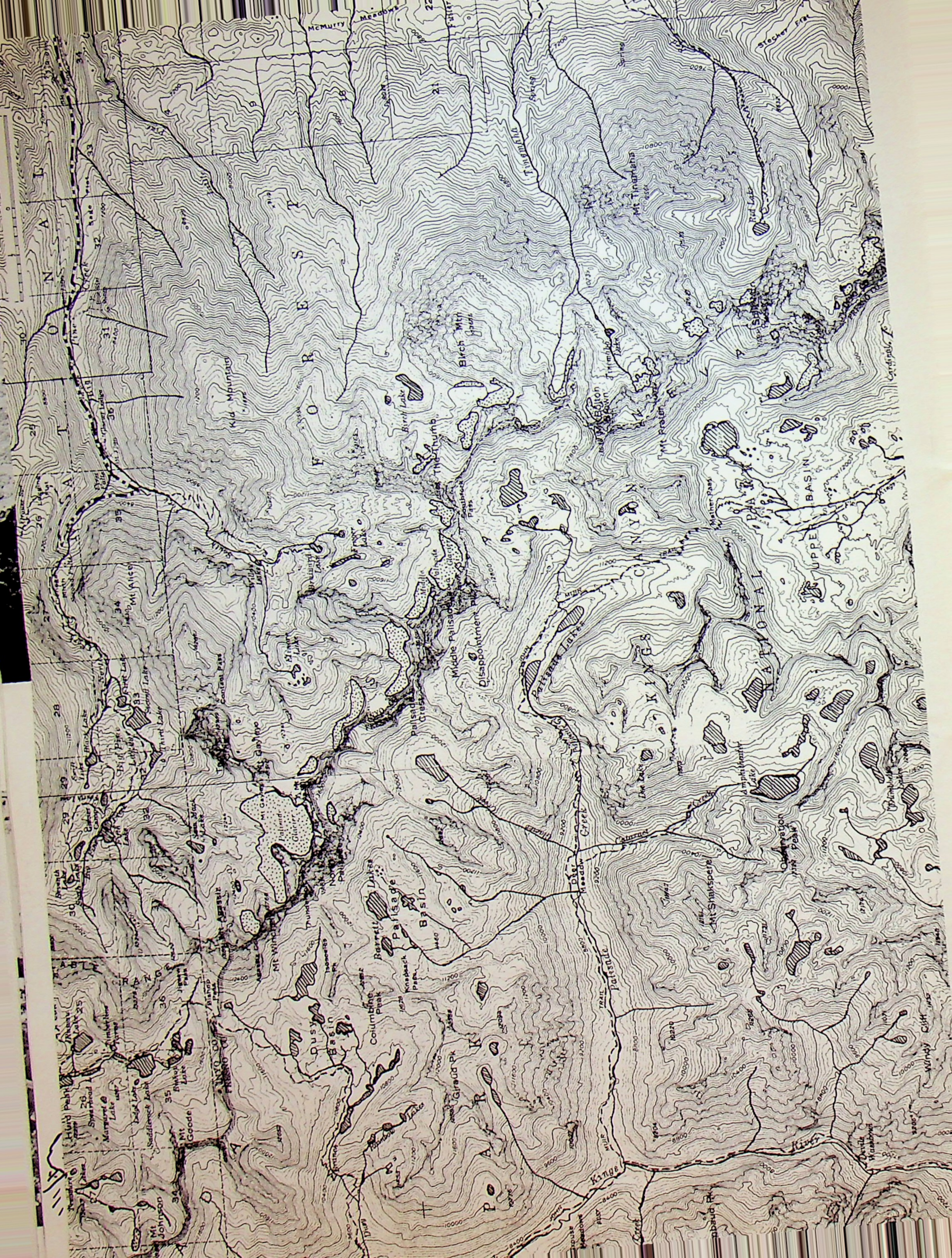




McMurry Meadows
Kid Mountain
Birch Mtn
Mt Tinemaha
Middle Palisade
Disappointment Pk
Palisade Basin
Columbine Peak
Dusy Basin
Grand Pk
Mt Goode
Mt Johnson
Mt Shakspeare
Mather Pass
Upper Basin
Amphitheater Lake
Windy Cliff
Kings River
Palisade Creek
Deer Meadow

of the aqueduct, the Van Norman Reservoir, named for one of the most ruthless engineers of the project, was destroyed by the San Fernando Valley Earthquake of 1971 and remains partially empty and useless today. All this at the expense of over 300 families in the once fertile Valley known as Owens.

"Edie" Mendenhall

One of the most fascinating individuals in the town of Big Pine is tiny, white haired, seventy seven year old "Edie" Mendenhall. "Edie" knows more of the history of Big Pine and the Palisade region than anyone else in town.

Edith Mendenhall was the wife of Harry Mendenhall who, as Edie related, *"made Norman Clyde look like a newcomer"* to the Palisade region. For many years, in the early 1900s, Harry Mendenhall roamed the canyons of Big Pine Creek and its tributaries photographing virtually every lake, peak, glacier, and stream of the area. His negatives were well stored and today Edie sells reproductions made from contact prints as souvenir postcards in the small store she owns. Look for Mendenhall's Sporting Goods, located next to the post office at the intersection of Highway 395 and the Glacier Lodge Road.

Edie has a tremendous memory and she will not hesitate to sharply correct any misconceptions you might have about the town or the mountains. When asked what she thought of Norman Clyde, she spoke at once that *"he was the greatest mountain climber that ever lived. He was great at finding people when they were lost in the mountains."* She continued, *"A few years ago, a young kid from San Francisco came through and stopped for a campfire permit. Norman was called upon to help find the man after he disappeared further north in the Minarets (a very steep metamorphic formation in the Ritter Range close to Devil's Postpile National Monument). Clyde found him sure enough, upon a ledge where he had fallen and died."* With astonishment one realizes Edie is depicting the tragedy of Walter Starr well over forty years ago. Many a Sierra hiker has carried a copy of Starr's guide to the John Muir trail with him.

Edie was a teacher, educated in Los Angeles. She began teaching in Big Pine in 1919. Edie sympathized with the situation Clyde got into at the Independence School where he was principal.

When asked about the heavy snows of 1969, Edie scoffed. They weren't that heavy. She had seen snows many years back that were so bad the town went for days without telegraph or electricity. Edie remembers snow over three feet deep on the level ground of Big Pine and storms holding the temperature at fourteen below day after day. *"No,"* according to Edie, *"sixty nine wasn't all that bad."*

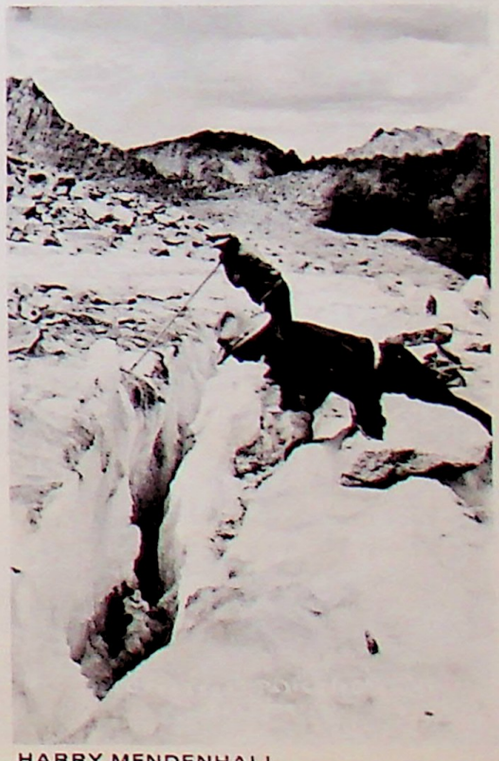
Edie is quite bitter about the havoc Los Angeles played upon the Owens Val-

HARRY MENDENHALL

HARRY MENDENHALL

Harry Mendenhall photographs taken in the 1930's. Above— Main Street in Big Pine. Below— Exploring the Palisade Glacier.

HARRY MENDENHALL



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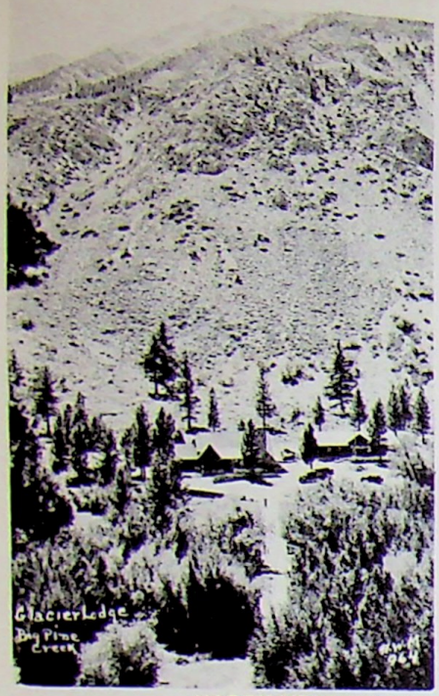

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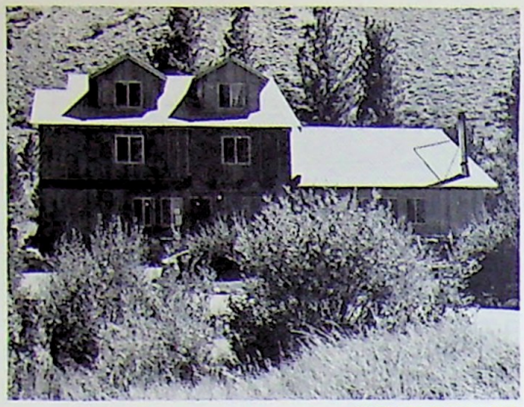


KEN HORWITZ

Left— The original Glacier Lodge, photo taken during the 1930's. Above— The present day Glacier Lodge.

ley by taking its water supply. The distance between Lone Pine and Big Pine was all beautiful ranches until Los Angeles bought everyone out, she informs. Big Pine was once larger than any other town in the valley.

So, if you get the chance, stop in and pay your respects to this remarkable woman and pick up some of Harry Mendenhall's old reprints.

Glacier Lodge

A resort lodge in an area of intense visitation usually holds little interest to the climbing populace. We are not the type who would pay to sleep in a building when the wilderness extends a much more pleasing invitation. However, the "Glacier Lodge" on Big Pine Creek yields much more of interest than would seem possible at first glance.

Glacier Lodge was not built during the recent boom of tourism, as escapism became a major goal each weekend of city dwellers. It dates back to the early twenties. It was the home of Norman Clyde who was caretaker for over twenty years. The lodge appears in many of Harry Mendenhall's early photographs.

The lodge that stands today is not the original building. Some unusual catastrophies have occurred, all recorded by photographs beneath the glass at the registration desk inside the lodge. The first lodge burned down in 1967 when the shake roof caught sparks from the fireplace. Only two years later, but much more dramatically, the second lodge was also destroyed. The winter of 1969 was a season of very intense snowfall. An avalanche came off a north slope of Kid mountain behind the lodge and while it did not destroy the lodge, the snow slammed against it and jarred the structure with sufficient force to break a gas line. For six days the unoccupied lodge filled with natural gas. Fortunately for the owners of the lodge, a picture was taken during these six days of the snow piled against the lodge. The insurance campnay laid claim that the avalanche destroyed the lodge and thus they were not to be held liable. However, such was not the case. A six day collection of natural gas in an unoccupied building is quite a volatile situation and when contact with a pilot light was made, the inevitable occurred. The lodge was blown to bits and pieces. Several beams from the second lodge are now built into the third glacier lodge.

The present lodge, owned and run by Win and Bettie Carter and their four boys is quite a credit to problem solving in today's time of energy problems. The Carters produce their own electricity from Big Pine Creek where water dropping a hundred feet drives a turbine for the needs of the lodge. Win Carter is a semi-retired rock climber, although most of his climbing was in Southern California where he was an instructor for the Sierra Club's Basic Mountaineering Course. He has spent quite a bit of time talking to Clyde about his times in the Palisades and seems happy to relate them. The Carters are a goldmine of information—little facts about the area that one would never expect to run across except that it happened to be mentioned in a casual conversation.

Glacier Lodge, at first glance, looks like any other weekend resort lodge but after investigating the place somewhat, you realize it is not just a resort out to make a buck, but also a home for some individuals who find the Palisades to be one of the most beautiful spots in the country.

The North Palisade

Joseph N. LeConte, son of Joseph LeConte, the famous geologist for which a stone house memorial was built in Yosemite Valley, had an obsession to be the first to climb the *North Palisade. "Of all the vast area of the High Sierra, without doubt the wildest, most magnificent, and most difficult of access is that portion about the extreme sources of the Middle Fork of King's River. . ."* He continues, *"To capture the summit of North Palisade, had long been a great desire of mine and a number of trips through the mountains to the west and south of the peak only furnished a still further incentive to make the attempt."*

So on July 17, 1903, LeConte and several friends started out from the western limits of what is now King's Canyon National Park determined to make the ascent. From LeConte's description of

JOSEPH LeCONTE

Photo taken near the summit of North Palisade during the first ascent in 1903.

their gear, one wonders how light was light in 1903: *"We reduced our outfit to the simplest possible dimensions, took our three small burros only for packing, and left our little tent and all bulky and heavy articles behind. . . . To cook dinner with nothing but a frying pan, a diminutive pot, and a tomato-can is an art requiring considerably experience and is not an easy one to acquire."*

After several days spent on the approach, LeConte and his group, early one morning, made their way up the ridge and partially snow covered talus slopes to the crest of *Mount Sill*. *"Such a stupendous view I never expect to see again in the Sierra. We were on the edge of a precipice which sank for a thousand feet absolutely sheer to the head of a splendid glacier, the largest in the Sierra Nevada, but never before described. Its area seemed fully a square mile, perhaps more, for distances are hard to estimate in such a locality. All along the base of the cliff below was a bergshrund, probably a mile in length. Against the mountain-side the slope of the snow was very steep, but lower down it eased off, and the glacier was crossed by fifteen or twenty crevasses far more perfect and much larger than I have ever seen on Mount Lyell. The lower Palisades. Doubtless, also, score from the Club's Outings will climb or be pulled and boosted up its rugged face, but never again will anyone feel the inspiration, the excitement, and the glory of success that we three experienced when the first ascent was made."*

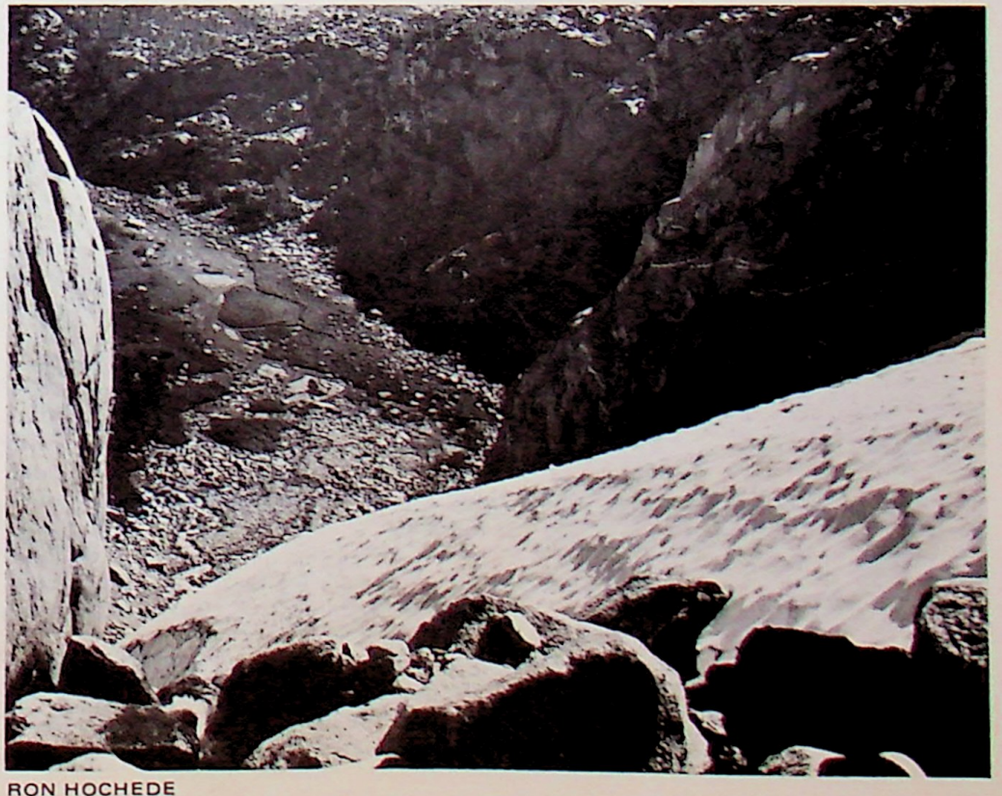
Middle Palisade

"July 20, 1919—The undersigned made a first ascent of this peak this day and were disappointed not to find it the highest point of the Middle Palisade. We hereby christen this summit 'Peak Disappointment.' We made the ascent by the south face from the head of the chute just south of the peak. We entered the chute by crossing the knife-edge on its end swept to the right around a buttress of Mount Sill and was lost to sight, but farther down were two beautiful lakes of milky white water which contrasted in a most striking manner with the clear emerald lakelets scattered all about. To the south stretched away the long line of Palisades all guarded by sheer cliffs on the east."

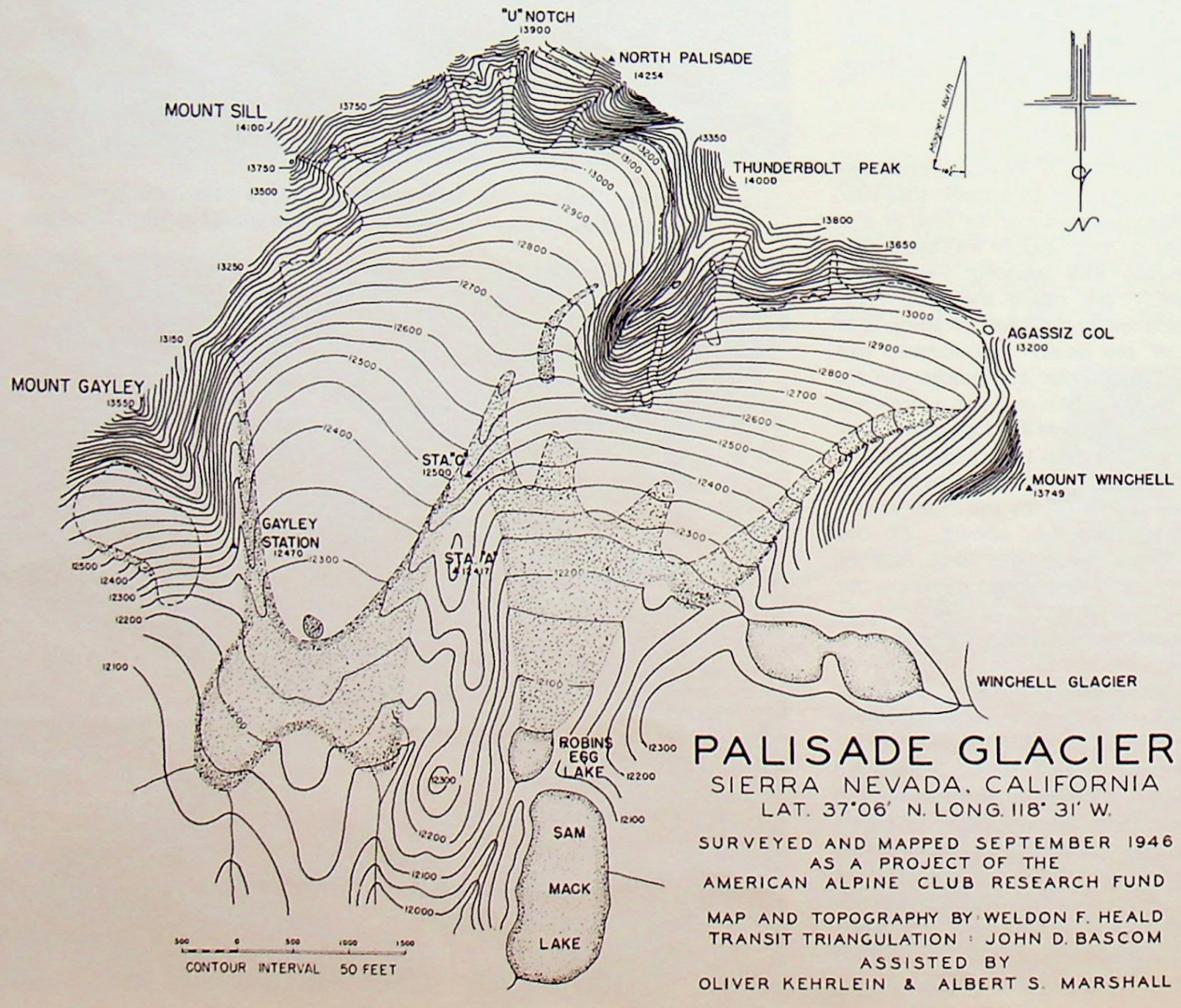
However, LeConte was blocked from traversing over to his much desired *North Palisade* by the deep cleft of the "U notch" forcing them to descend and try again the next day. They met with success after clambering up several wide snowfilled chimneys, built a summit monument, and placed Sierra Club register number 42 on top. (Number 43 was placed on *Mount Sill* the day before.) LeConte surmised his feelings at that point in his written account published in the Sierra Club Bulletin of 1904: *"I have no doubt that others will follow our track to the summit of the*

JAN TIURA

Above— Contact Pass between Mount Alice (left) and Temple Crag (right). Below— Looking down towards Sam Mack Meadows.



RON HOCHEDE



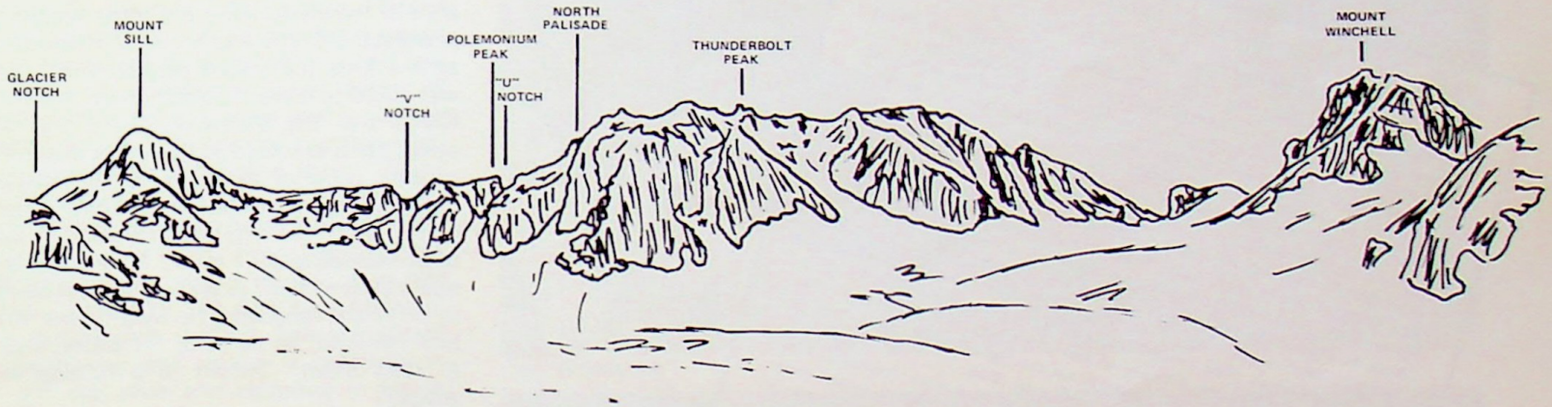
PALISADE GLACIER

SIERRA NEVADA, CALIFORNIA

LAT. 37°06' N. LONG. 118° 31' W.

SURVEYED AND MAPPED SEPTEMBER 1946
AS A PROJECT OF THE
AMERICAN ALPINE CLUB RESEARCH FUND

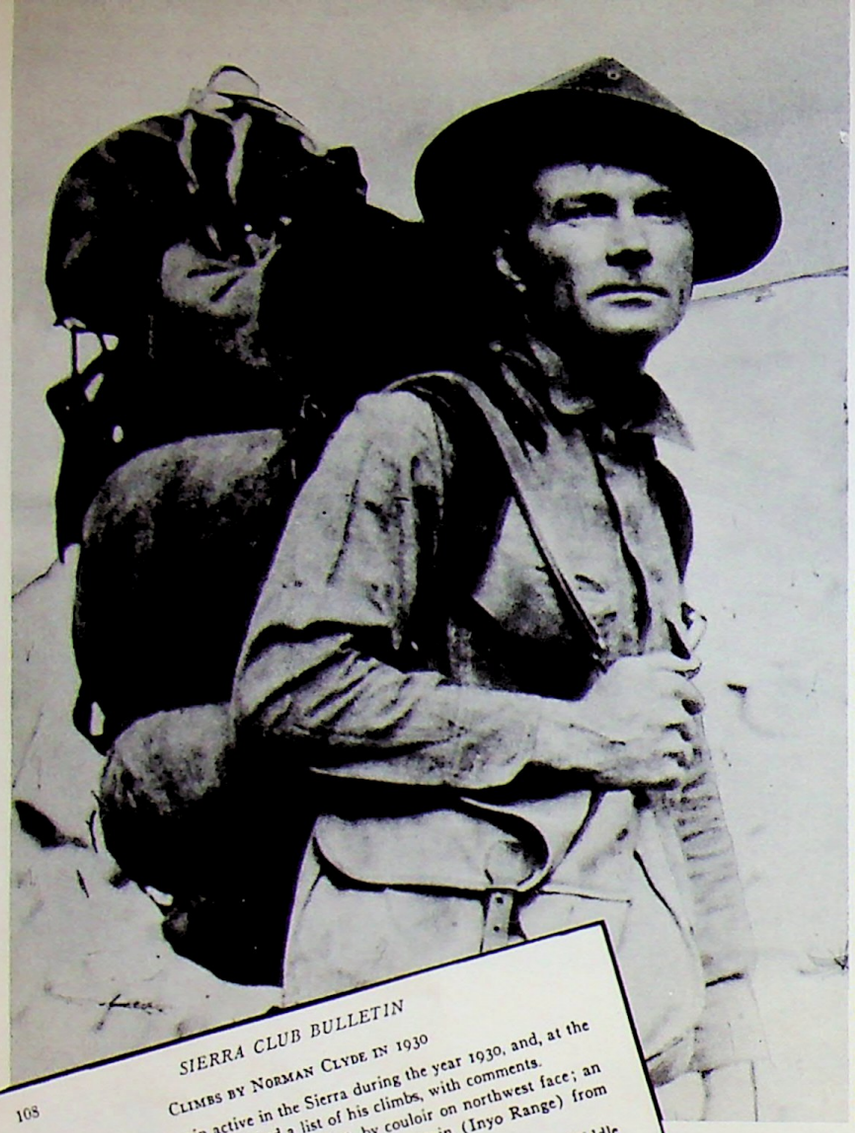
MAP AND TOPOGRAPHY BY WELDON F. HEALD
TRANSIT TRIANGULATION : JOHN D. BASCOM
ASSISTED BY
OLIVER KEHRLEIN & ALBERT S. MARSHALL



farther side. J. Milton Davies, San Francisco; A.L. Jordan, Berkely; H. H. Bliss, Berkeley."

This is the message Francis P. Farquhar and Ansel F. Hall, the Naturalist at Yosemite National Park read when they attempted *Middle Palisade.* It tempered the discouragement which had grown with each rock pile or "duck" along the way, indicating someone may have beat them to their goal. But they had merely repeated the previous mistake of climbing the misleading summit just south of *Middle Palisade.* From here, a knife edge arete and loose tottering rocks made a traverse to the higher summit an impossibility. "Disappointed," but not thwarted, they downclimbed *Peak Disappointment* and started up *Middle Palisade* the very same day. Two thirds up, the exposure became tremendous, almost postponing their ascent for the next party with a little more *macho. "We then held a brief consultation and, after examining the rocks above, concluded that we had had about enough and definitely decided to go down. We looked around for a route for the descent, and then, instead of climbing down, we both began to climb up. It was one of those spontaneous impulses that sometimes occur at critical moments. We found tolerable handholds and footholds and in a few moments were safely above our ledge; and from that moment, although the climbing was sometimes difficult, we did not stop until we reached*

CARL SMITH



PARKER SEVERSON, COURTESY LA SIESTA PRESS

108 SIERRA CLUB BULLETIN

CLIMBS BY NORMAN CLYDE IN 1930

Norman Clyde was again active in the Sierra during the year 1930, and, at the request of the editor, has furnished a list of his climbs, with comments.

May—Temple Crag, five ascents; the last, by couloir on northwest face; an excellent climb. 22d—Winchell. 30th—White Mountain (Inyo Range) from Sparkplug Mine; saw a mountain-sheep.

June 5th—The Thumb, by couloir on west face; a good climb. 7th—Middle Palisade, by north face; *one of the best climbs in the Sierra.* 9th—West Peak of the Middle Palisade; first ascent; difficult climb, requiring traverse to north face of ridge west of peak. 14th—Peak at head of Palisade Creek; no cairn; good climb. 15th—Bolton Brown; no record of ascent since Versteeg and Berls in 1922. 17th—Peak 13,046; found Versteeg's register. 18th—Middle Palisade, from south. 19th—West Peak of Middle Palisade, from south; moderately difficult climb. 20th—Disappointment Peak, by northeast couloir; a good climb, with some difficulty at foot of couloir. 28th—Unnamed peak, or spur, northeast of Agassiz; perhaps not the highest point. 29th—Peak in Inconsolable Range, north of Peak 13,210; good climb.

July 1st—Peak, or spur, east of Agassiz; good rock-work; no cairn. 2d—Temple Crag, by Loop Route; very fine rock-climb. 4th—Peak 12,981, north of Palisade Glacier, from northeast; good rock-climb, involving passing or surmounting numerous pinnacles. 5th—Agassiz, from northeast; *one of the finest rock-climbs in the Sierra.* 6th—North Palisade, by north face; on lower portion using west wall of first couloir west of largest on that face; *one of the very best climbs in the Sierra.* 9th—Second highest peak of North Palisade; superb climb; no cairn.

July 10th to October 5th—Numerous ascents of Whitney and Muir by various routes, including ascent and descent of Whitney on northeast via North Fork of Lone Pine Creek, a mountaineer's route; also, from summit of Whitney (14,496) to bottom of Death Valley (minus 276), highest point in United States to lowest, between daybreak and sunset, on foot and by motor.

October 8th—Peak 12,438, north of Lone Pine Creek; one previous ascent, by myself. 9th—Peak 13,571, on main crest, above Tulainyo Lake; one previous ascent, by myself; a good climb.

November 5th—West Peak of Basin Mountain; some rock-work along arête west of summit; no cairn. 9th—East Peak of Basin Mountain; good climbing up south face of summit pinnacle, but easy at west and north; no cairn.

December 3d—Peak 13,474; a long climb from Glacier Lodge; good view. 5th—Temple Crag, by Crevice Route. 12th—Peak 12,840; long climb, but good view of Palisade amphitheater. 17th—Temple Crag, by Crevice Route. 24th—Traverse of Temple Crag; ascent by Crevice Route; descent by difficult route on northwest face.

the summit. The route was somewhat complicated and we frequently had to change from one chimney to another, traversing around the precipitous ridges. As we approached the summit, we carefully searched for further evidences of a previous climb. We had not seen any ducks for some time and not a trace of any previous ascent was to be found near the crest. With a shout we greeted the summit as its first visitors. We subsequently learned that Bliss, Jordan, and Davies had been forced by a hail-storm to abandon their attempt on the day after their climb of 'Peak Disappointment.'"

Farquhar compiled and wrote the much used reference entitled *History of the Sierra Nevada* which reveals his intimacy with the region as well as his mountaineering capabilities.

Norman Clyde

Norman Clyde and the Palisades are synonomous. There are few peaks in the region Clyde did not make the first ascents upon, he pioneered new routes and climbed them many times over.

Clyde moved to the region permanently in the twenties after his one and only wife died years before. He was an unusual man—fluent in many languages, knowledgeable in geology, astronomy, and many other sciences. He was principal of the high school in Big Pine for a time until one Halloween night when he fired a shot in the air to warn off some would be pranksters. Clyde was accused of shooting at the kids (he was a perfect shot), and was asked to leave. From then on, Norman Clyde and the Sierra were one and the same. He is credited with over a thousand ascents, most of them he did by himself. He was known as the "pack that walked like a man" for the huge amount of supplies including split wood for his fire and many cans of food as well as several books in different languages he would take with him because, as he said, *"it takes longer to read them"* [when in a foreign language].

Despite a recluse character, Clyde was a tremendous story teller and loved to talk. Win Carter of Glacier Lodge relates how he would ramble on over the Big Pine Quadrangle. Clyde would "read" between the contour lines, pointing out "this is a good place for two or three to camp" or "plenty of firewood right here." Clyde was caretaker for twenty years of Glacier Lodge, until 1967, when it was destroyed by fire.

Clyde relished being invited to dinner, but was not exactly the perfect guest. He would sit at the table and eat, not stopping until every scrap of food was gone, including the leavings on other plates. He was very adament about taking a bath and complained critically of the

For more on Norman Clyde, see CLOSE UPS OF THE HIGH SIERRA, published by La Siesta Press, Box 406, Glendale, CA 91209. ($2.50)

KEN HORWITZ

The summit of North Palisade is the high point above the hanging snowpatch. The Northwest Peak" is to the right. "Clyde's Couloir" splits the two.

inforced cleanliness at the Big Pine Sanitarium where he periodically went for treatment of his gout, or when short of money.

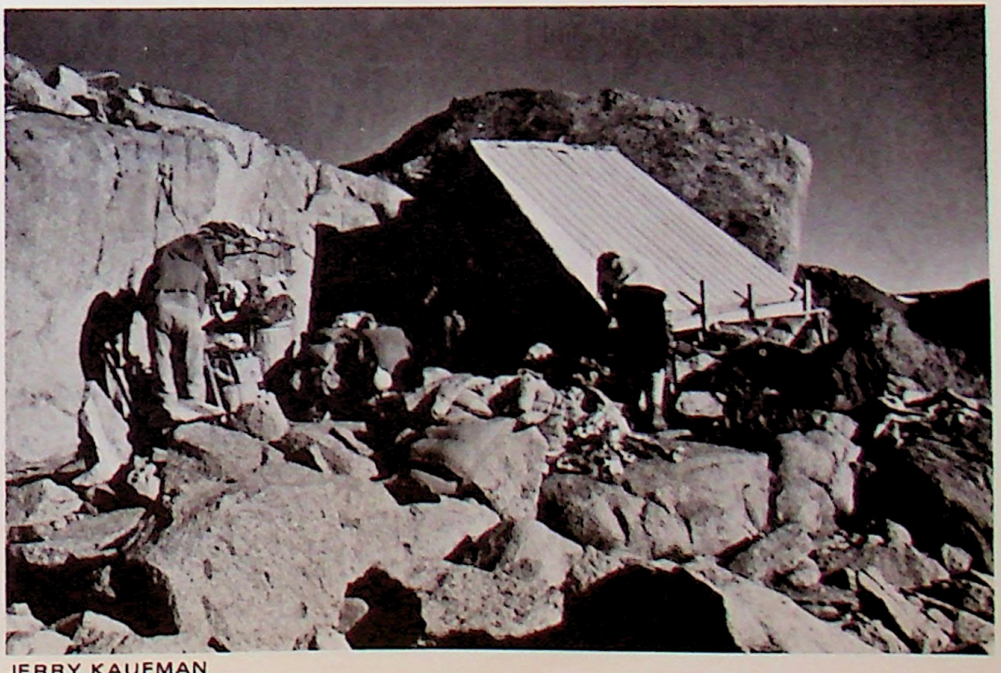
Clyde's material holdings never totaled more than a few hundred dollars at any one time. A low point in his later life occurred when he lost even this. His small cabin on Baker Creek was ransacked by the local townspeople, who felt that once a man goes to the sanitarium, he will never return. It was an accepted practice to redistribute the person's belongings. Perhaps this was the final blow; very depressed Clyde remained in the Sanitarium until he passed away in December of 1972 at the age of eighty seven.

Clyde's bravado in the mountains will never be matched. In one example, Clyde writes of his experiences with avalanches, and in the process shows his character, humor and imagination. *"In many years of rambling about at high elevations, only on two occasions did I incur any such danger* [avalanches] *. Once, after climbing through a notch on the upper rim of a cliff and entering a couloir, I stepped to one side. As I did so, I heard a swishing sound, and an avalanche swept down the notch through which I had just climbed. On another occasion, weary of slogging through wet snow well up to my knees, I hit upon the idea of starting miniature snowslides and riding them. This I did by sitting down heavily, causing the layer of new snow to begin to slide. The acceleration was rapid. Eventually I struck a shadowed area, where an icy crust had formed. Instantly, the slide shot forward, with a cliff only a short distance ahead. By swimming and rolling, I managed to get off the slide and watched it vanish over the cliff. That was the last time that I deliberately rode a snowslide."*

Oliver Kehrlein wrote an account of an ascent of *North Palisade* in the Sierra Club Bulletin. Without realizing it, he told more about Clyde than about the climb itself. Of the night the party spent in a couloir above their camp, Kehrlein wrote: *"The night was one of those clear, sparkling ones, when the stars appear large and brilliant, and Clyde did his best to keep us awake with a dissertation of the Pleiades, Orion, Ursa Major, and other interesting topics. With the first break of dawn, we anchored our rope and Clyde went ahead to cut new steps. . ."*

The Use of Proper Rope Technique

The early climbs in the Palisades are typical mountaineering ventures of that



JERRY KAUFMAN

The emergency hut, Palisade Glacier.

KEN HORWITZ

Near right— Two ice chutes lead to the crest between Mount Sill and North Palisade.

Far right— The broader, lower angled chute is called the "U" Notch and is part of the usual route on North Palisade.

Lower right— The steeper "V" Notch is an attractive ice climb in its own right.

RON HOCHEDE

era. One or two stalwart souls pushed on without benefit of rope or piton and managed to bag worthwhile objectives. This was the approach that Norman Clyde would pursue, beginning in the '20s and continuing into the era of modern mountaineering.

Virtually every peak in the Palisade group has several routes with only minimal technical difficulties (class 2-3). A skilled rock climber would consider them a scramble. The snow and ice problems, particularly bergschrunds, frequently cause greater consternations, since they are problems not characteristic of the Sierra and hence unfamiliar to Sierra climbers.

But the Palisades offer more than rock scrambles and snow practice. The soaring walls and buttresses present a multitude of challenges, which in that early era, were untouched, awaiting the development of suitable techniques. The "suitable techniques" existed; they were being rapidly advanced in Europe, but climbers in the western states were isolated. They used a rope solely to assist and protect less skillful companions, guide fashion. *". . . their idea of a real climbing holiday is likely to remain an independent spree over the rocks, with the rope left coiled up in the closet at home."*

Considering the present state of rockcraft and the contributions of Sierra rock climbers, it is difficult to imagine that the modern concept of roped climbing was not introduced until 1931. It is much less difficult to visualize the Palisades as the birthplace of technical roped climbing. It began in early 1931. Robert L. M. Underhill, an eastern climber with considerable experience in the Alps and an impressive record of exploratory mountaineering in the west, prepared an article for the *Sierra Club Bulletin*. It was titled *"On the Use and Management of the Rope in Rock Work."* Acknowledging the

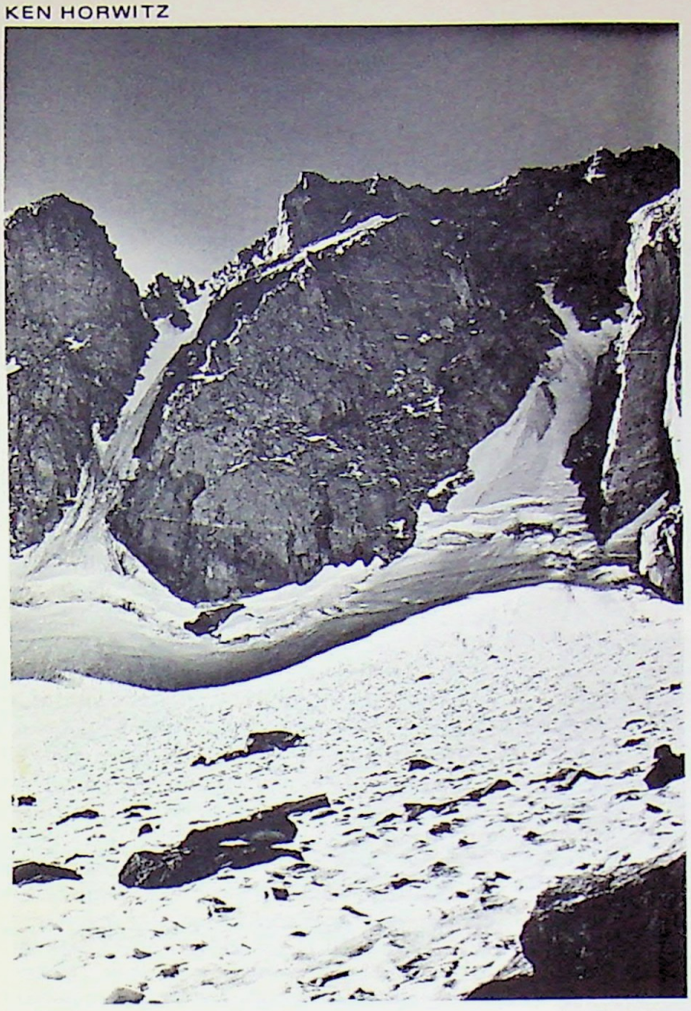
MICHAEL GRABER

Upper left— The Palisade Glacier; Thunderbolt Peak is on the far left,

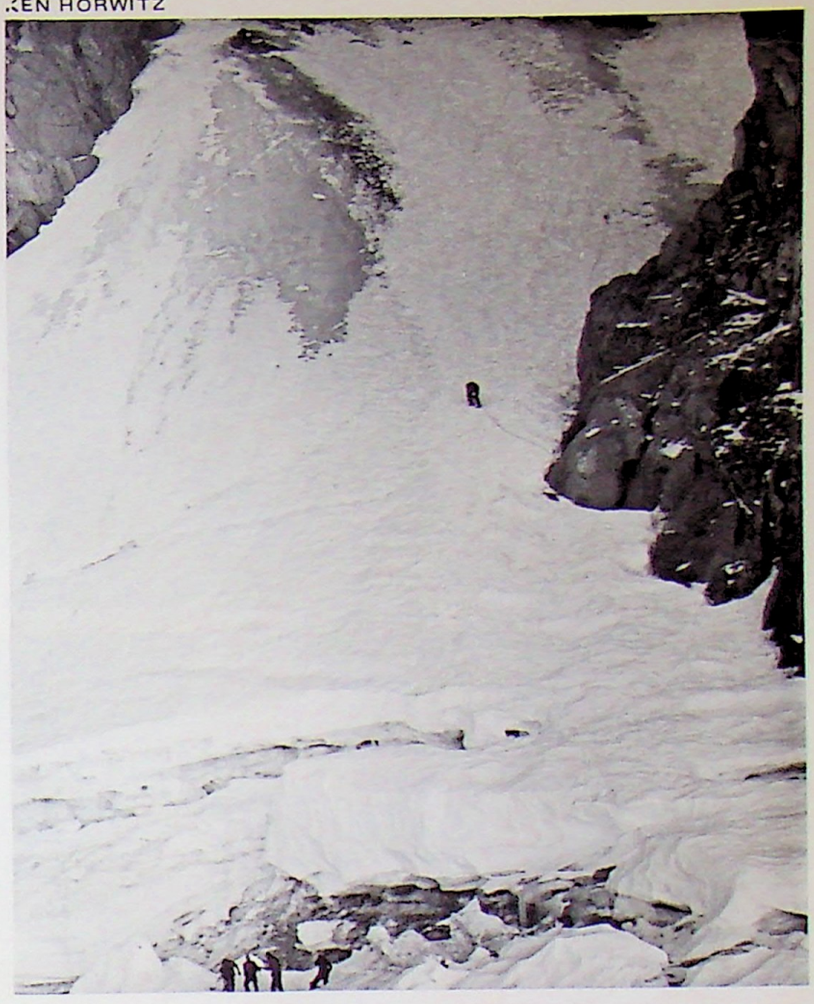
Center left— Starting up the snout of the Palisade Glacier.

Lower left— Blowing snow is characteristic of the glacier in winter.

KEN HORWITZ



KEN HORWITZ



MICHAEL GRABER

MICHAEL GRABER

BILL GUSTAFSON

CARL SMITH

Top left— North Palisade and Mount Sill from the South near Palisade Crest.

Center left— The west side of North Palisade from Knapsack Pass.

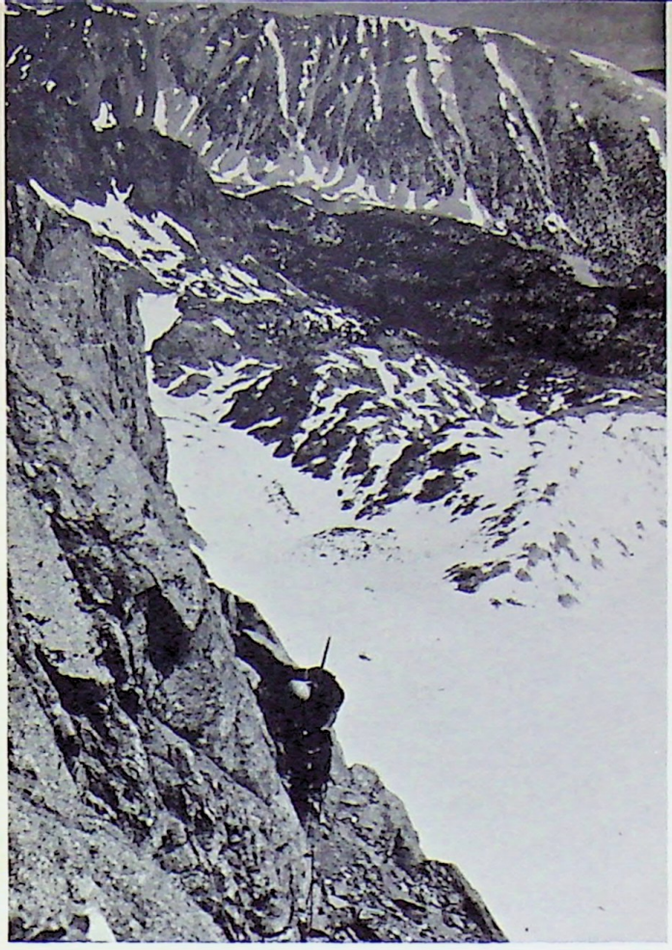
Lower left— The east face of Mount Sill from the summit of Temple Crag.

Englishman Geoffrey Winthrop Young's *Mountain Craft* as his inspiration, Underhill set down the first definitive treatise on rope technique to appear in a western mountaineering journal.

The presentation was philosophical as well as technical. *"The purpose of the rope is protective only;"* stated Underhill, *"under ordinary conditions, it may never, with propriety, be used as a direct help in climbing."* But the most significant contribution was the previously unheard of concept of "belaying the leader." Underhill defines the duties of the second climber thusly. His prime responsibility is rope management, insuring that the rope runs freely and does not interfere with the lead climbers motion. But his *". . . second and more difficult duty, granted adequate performance of the first, is to belay* [the leader], *should the latter request it. (And every leader should request it, for the sake of his party if not of himself, at least upon all exposed faces and all delicate traverses.)* Recognizing the danger of rope breakage in a static belay with hemp ropes, Underhill recommends Young's *"indirect belay, which is effected by interposing in some way the body of the belayer himself as a spring between the prospective weight and the final rock support."* Photographs and discussions of hip and shoulder belays were included, plus a description of the Dulfersitz rappel.

While the instructional material is well documented, its implementation is not. Later that year, in August of 1931, Underhill climbed in the Palisades with Norman Clyde, Bestor Robinson, Lewis F. Clark, Neill C. Wilson, Elmer Collett, Glen Dawson, Jules M. Eichorn, and Francis P. Farquhar, accomplishing three significant 4th class ascents including *North Palisade* and a subsidiary summit, *Temple Crag,* and *Thunderbolt Peak.* The entire outing is described in two brief paragraphs under "Mountaineering Notes" in the 1932 *Sierra Club Bulletin.* The only hint of the significance of this outing, and the only color, is in the second paragraph, submitted by Farquhar.

"The morning of the 13th began with clear weather, and all save Wilson and Collett started for a climb of the northwest peak of North Palisade, which we subsequently named Thunderbolt Peak. Clouds gathered rapidly, and shortly after the party reached the summit a violent thunder-storm drove all precipitately to a place of safety. So rapidly did the storm gather that Eichorn, last man to leave the ridge, was dangerously close to a lightning flash that appeared to strike the



T.J. SECOR

On the "Starlight Buttress", North Palisade.

BOB SHAVER

On the Polomonium to Mount Sill traverse.

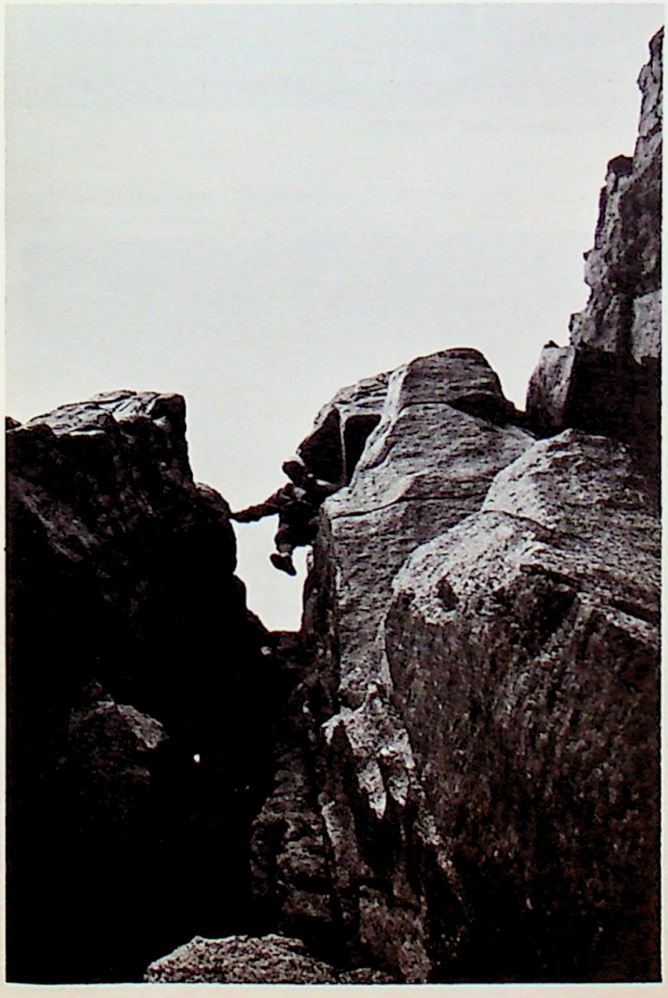
JERRY KAUFFMAN

JERRY KAUFFMAN

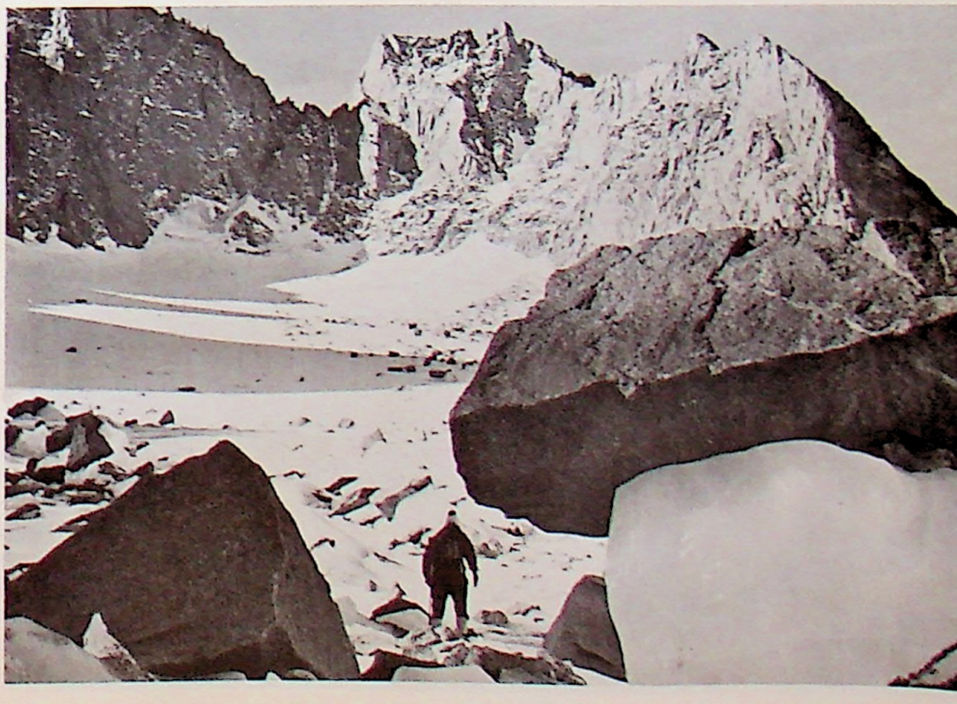
Climbing the summit pitch of Thunderbolt Peak.

A glacier table on the North Palisade Glacier.

Downclimbing Palisade Rock.

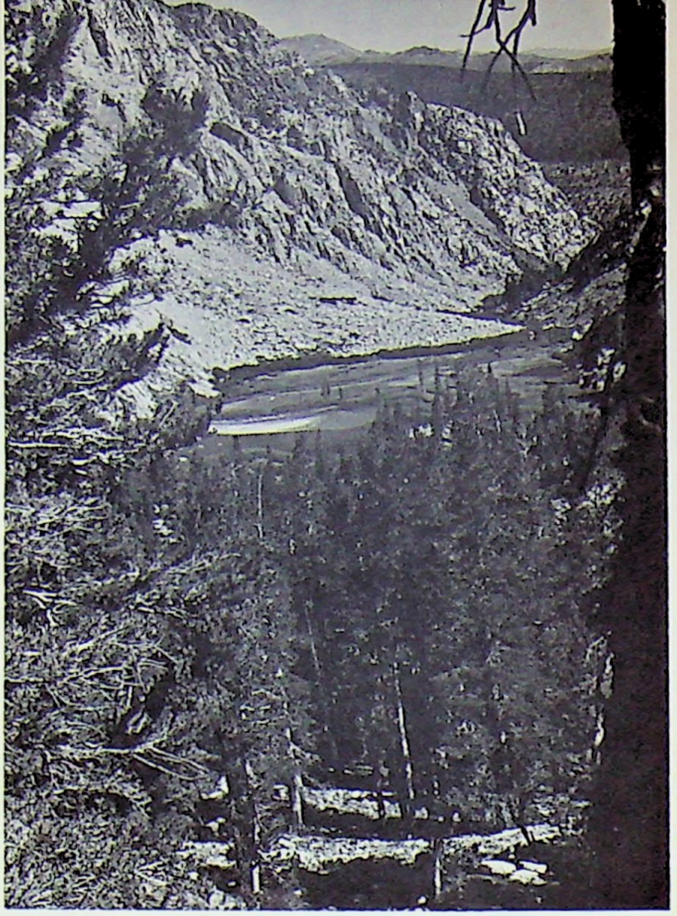


JAN TIURA



CARL SMITH

KEN HORWITZ



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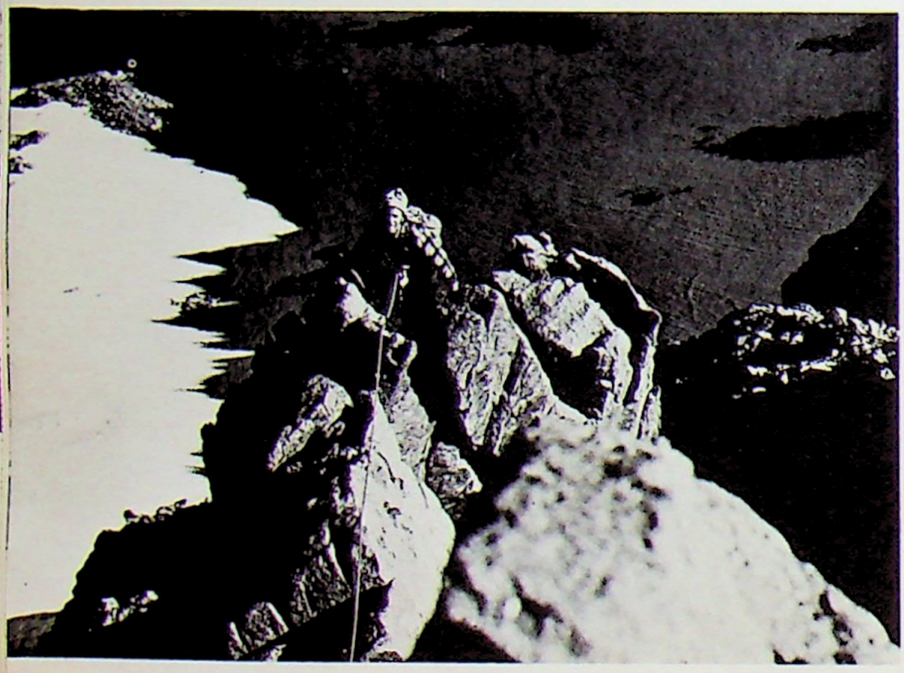


MICHAEL GRABER

Upper left— Clyde Palisade.
Center left— Climbing on Clyde Palisade.
Lower left— The Middle Palisade Glacier.
Above— Willow Lake on the South Fork.
Below— The Thumb.

KEN HORWITZ

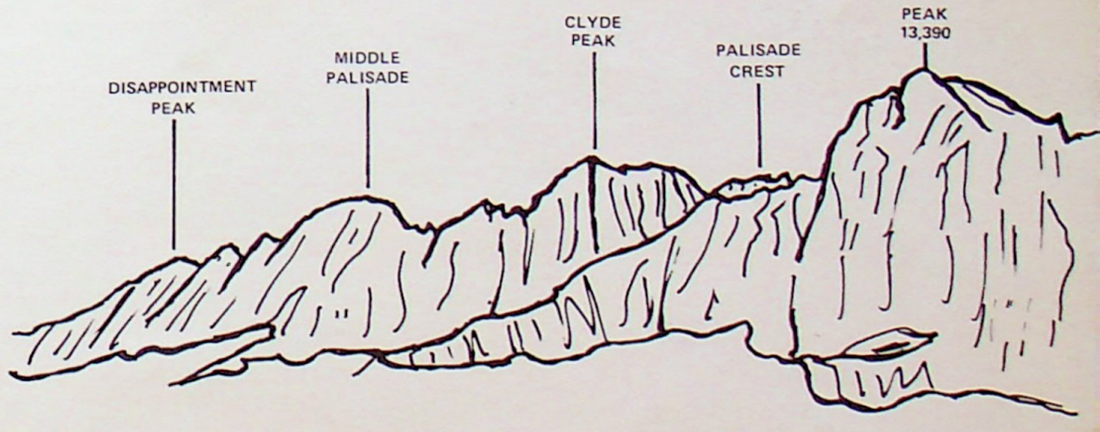
JOHN WEMESFELDER

KEN HORWITZ

mountain. The importance of immediate retreat as soon as the rocks begin to "sing" was strongly impressed upon the members of the party. After half an hour of huddling on a ledge, in the face of hail and snow, the storm permitted us to return. It was presumed that the descent would be an easy one, but the absence of snow, usually abundant above the bergschrund, made it necessary to rope down from the cliff, chop steps in the ice, and again rope down into the bergschrund. The result was an arrival at camp after dark. These three climbs demonstrated the facility with which even the most formidable mountains of the Sierra can be overcome through the use of proper rope-technique accompanied by sound leadership. It was also demonstrated that the ice-axe is an important implement in making climbs in this region."

Present Day Mountaineering

With the introduction and development of modern rope technique, quite naturally, came a route "explosion." Each peak in the Palisades now has numerous variations; a summary is best left to the guide books.



The Palisades attract a wide variety of climbers. The rock is good, the setting is magnificent, the glaciers are unique, and steep snow is an element absent in most other parts of the Sierra. High angle ice climbers have recently discovered another attraction. The steep snow chutes compact into solid ice by early fall, offering continuously long, alpine routes as steep as 60°. The *V-Notch* on *North Palisade* is a good example.

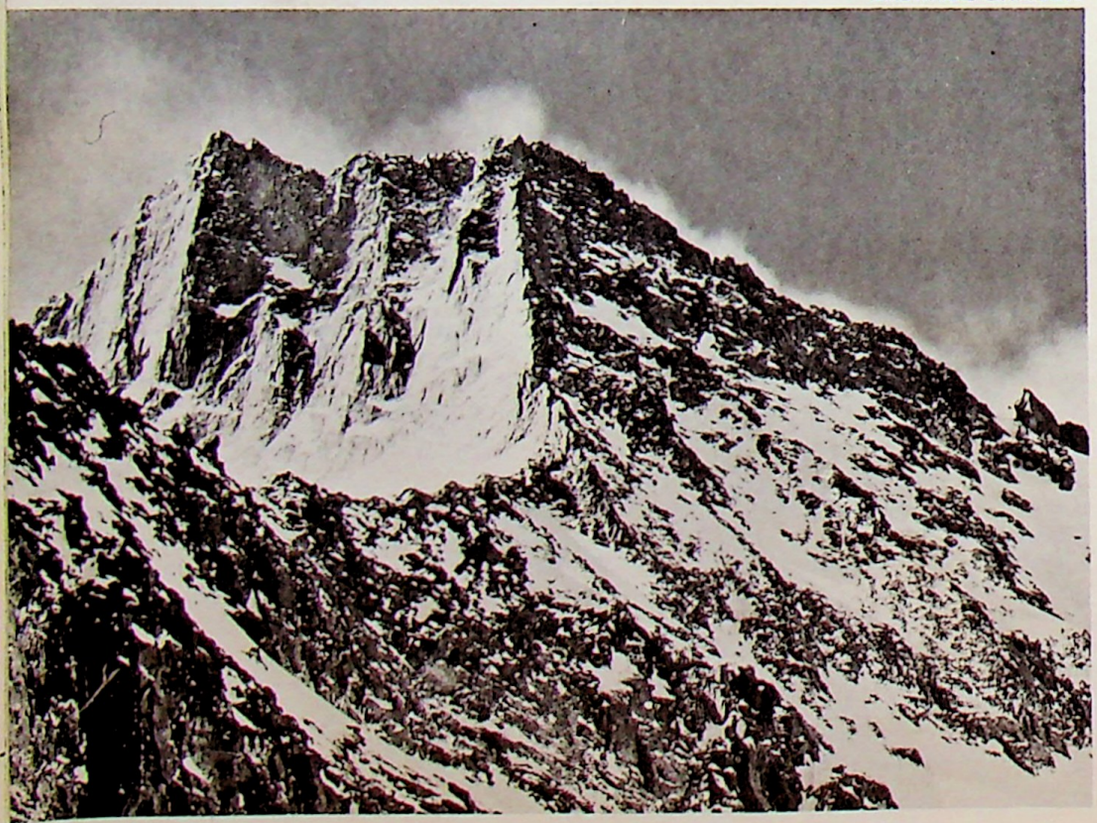
The most popular route in the group is the North Palisade via the *U-Notch*, a 40° snow chute which often turns into hard ice by late August. The lure of "North Pal" is great and most climbers congregate in its cirque, neglecting the fine peaks to the south. This is an unfortunate circumstance. The woefull cries of "overcrowding" are easily avoided by moving a few miles to the south.

Weather patterns in the Palisades are typically Sierran. The summer months are mild except for the occasional mountain storm. Because of the high elevation, such

Above— The Sierra Nevada in winter, seen from the summit of Mount Winchell.

Below— Clyde Peak. Below opposite page— Polished rock and glacial tarns.

MICHAEL GRABER



a storm may drop up to six inches of snow creating temporary avalanche conditions in the steep chutes.

Bad weather fronts move in from the north and are prefaced by high altitude cirro-stratus clouds 18 to 24 hours before the storm hits. Climbers from the states a little to the east, Utah for example, may be caught unaware, since the identical formations accompany fine weather in their back yards.

Lightning is a major hazard in the Palisades, expected in an area where one of the major peaks is named *Thunderbolt*. The thunderstorms begin in late spring and continue through the summer. Clouds begin to build up about 3:00 p.m., followed by an hour and a half of fireworks.

During the winter, storms are often exceptionally fierce with winds up to 80 mph. Considerable snowfall and the slabbing action of the wind can cause high avalanche hazards on the peaks themselves, and on the steep hillsides along the approach. These hazards are highest during and immediately following the storm, and may persist for several days.

Most of the routes in the Palisades are considered "roped climbs"; some require anchors and protection. Hard hats are adviseable, especially in the chutes where spontaneous rockfalls are triggered by the thawing action of the sun. Because most California climbers are rock oriented, they are often unprepared for the prob-

lems of glaciers and snow. Ice axe and crampons are essential, but also useless if the owner is not schooled in their use. While the glaciers are not heavily crevassed, there is still some danger, especially early in the season when crevasses are hidden.

Epilog

The Palisades are one of the finest alpine settings in the Sierra. They will remain so only if visitors are willing to recognize the fragility of such an environment. Delicate alpine meadows cannot tolerate overcamping, corralling of stock, or soap in its small streams. Respecting this delicacy and following wilderness laws as set down by the Forest Service will help the Palisades remain close to what Joseph LeConte found as he made his way up the King's River to climb.

"The meadows were ablaze with flowers; myriads of columbines, castilleias, tiger-lillies, strawberries, and tiny compositae were everywhere. The place was absolutely untouched. Not since the creation of the forest reserve had human foot trod this glorious wilderness, and even before that time the sheepmen who visited the valley must have been few indeed, for not a blaze, monument, nor corral did we see, and there were but few signs of old sheep-camps. . ."

This is our heritage. Treat it wisely and well.

—Ken Horwitz
Northridge, California

KEN HORWITZ