A Mountaineer’s Vision

By Winfred Blevins

When Norman Clyde went “home” in 1928, the course of his remaining life ran over forty years, stretched across the peaks of the Sierra, and was always unequivocally his own.

Imagine for a moment that you have backpacked into Thousand Island Lake, below the Minarets in the Sierra Nevada. As you ease across the last couple of hundred yards to the water where you will camp, your eyes draw south toward the Minarets, a rugged massif topped by a sawtooth ridge of peaks and moated by a steep glacier. Peak-gazing, you nearly step on the gear of a small, stoely old geezer, about seventy years old, camped alone by the lake. He is sitting in the sun and reading the New Testament in Portuguese. He greets you with a Victorian courtesy that does not quite disguise cantankerousness and impatience at your blundering right in on him. Spread about his camp is an awesome array of equipment: heavy iron frying pans, cameras, a rope and ice axe, three or four pistols, a fishing rod, an assortment of cups and dishes, cans on cans of food, and several more books—a volume of novellas in French, Catullus in Latin, Goethe in German and Dante in Italian.

The next morning you see him load all this equipment into a battered wooden-frame pack, shoulder what looks like 100 pounds, and head cross-country to the Minarets before you have started breakfast. At midmorning you see him angling up the glacier, now unburdened of the pack. After noon he is climbing, solo, up the sheer cliffs of the Minarets.

As you do your own climbing over the next week, you find his name in the register just ahead of yours. The difference is that he has been averaging two of these 12 and 13,000-foot peaks a day. He has chosen routes possible only for roped parties and has done them alone. You begin to wonder whether the old guy might be a Hobbit, or whether you are suffering from hallucinations.

Norman Clyde was the man who went to Walden and never came back. Quoting Emerson over his shoulder—“Goodbye, proud world, I’m going home”—he went into the mountains in 1928 and stayed forty years.

He became the legendary American mountaineer of the first half of this century, climbing alone in the Sierra and widely in all the other ranges of the West; he wrote innumerable articles about the mountains, and published two books. When he died late in 1972, California lost the man who knew most about its backcountry.

That first peak you saw him climb, for instance, was Clyde Minaret (12,281 feet). He made the first ascent alone on a fine June day forty-six years ago. He walked up from Thousand Island Lake to Garnet Lake, Shadow Lake and Iceberg Lake. Then he cut steeply up to that glacier-moat, chopped steps across it with his ice axe, and paused to consider his circumstances. It was four o’clock already. If he tried to climb the peak, the glacier would be frozen when he came down. Cutting steps across a steep glacier in the dark was, he knew, a difficult and dangerous task.

He went anyway.

The climb itself is still precarious, but his description in Norman Clyde of the Sierra Nevada slurs over the difficulties. He almost took a bad, perhaps fatal fall on the descent. After cutting his way across the glacier, he bivouacked for the night. The next day, though he was hungry, he decided to return to camp at Thousand Island Lake over the top of Mount Ritter (13,157 feet) and around Mount Banner. His idea of a nice excursion.

His adventures were full of awesome episodes. He wrote of them with such casualness, and such a strange scholarliness combined with modesty, that reading them can put an experienced climber-backpacker into hysterical laughter. Often enough he talked of having climbed three peaks in a single day, in a grand circle or a long traverse—three peaks that most of us could take on one at a time, at best.

Clyde lived for forty years in the High Sierra—not near the Sierra but literally in them—and his home was where he happened to make camp. Every day when the weather permitted (except during the snowbound winters), he was climbing some peak. When he started the Sierra was relatively untouched. No one knows how many first ascents he made. One book lists 130 first ascents of mountains in the Sierras; if first ascents of particular routes were added, the number would surely exceed 1,000. Climbers still, from time to time, find a small cairn at the top of a peak that indicates that they have just completed a first ascent, except for Norman Clyde who was there two or three decades earlier.

Clyde was born in 1885, to a Presbyterian minister who was old-fashioned enough to believe that boys should be raised on the classics. Clyde read Latin and Greek even as a small child, and later was graduated from Geneva College in Pennsylvania with a degree in classics. In 1911 he rolled at the University of California to get an M.A. in English; but two years later he left without the degree,
short a course in Anglo-Saxon because he took Catullus instead. Six decades later he was still annoyed enough to cuss quietly at the professors and their "damn fool ideas."

Then began his unparalleled mountaineering career. He taught school all over California for nine months a year and spent his summers in the mountains. His passion for the mountains grew: In 1925 he made at least 48 climbs, 42 of them alone and 24 of them first ascents. In 1926 the figure rose to 60. In the fall of 1927 he was forced to resign as principal of the high school at Independence, near Mount Williamson, "because of the fluke idea of some damned old women," he said. The biographical sketch in his Close Ups of the High Sierra says he left because the townspeople thought they should have a principal who was a proper member of the community, not some crazed mountaineer who could never be found on weekends.

Suddenly free from employment and all ties, Clyde headed for the mountains and said good-bye to civilization for forty years.

When I met him in 1972, on a gorgeously clear February afternoon, he was living at the County Sanitorium at Big Pine. Though he had known almost no sickness in his life, he could no longer go to the mountains. He could see from the sanitorium the great eastern escarpment of the mountains where he spent his life, rising 10,000 feet above his head. He was reading, typically, a volume called Nouvelles Francaises.

Most of the mountaineers I know are well-educated men; many of them have doctorates. Clyde was one of the most cultured. Studying in six foreign languages, he read French about as well as English. He took some civilization into the mountains with him, in the form of a substantial library in a number of languages. Greek served him well at times because he was rusty at it and reading was slower. His friend Smoke Blanchard reports finding him at Big Pine "churning through Goethe in German . . . [plus] a New Testament in Portuguese which he bought for Spanish but was reading anyway. On his nightstand was a Life of Napoleon in French, which he has already read three times."

He listed some of his favorites: Goethe, Schiller, Heine and Emerson. "Thoreau's spotty," he said. "Damn old quack—took a canoe trip [described in Thoreau's A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers] and spent most of his time thinking about transcendentalism. Besides, Walden is inconsistent. Why did he move back to town?"

Clyde was no boaster. His essays on his climbs speak much more about the flora and the scenic beauty than about what he did. On that particular day he spoke of his skills as "just common sense," with perhaps a mere hint that no one in the mountains had any common sense but himself and maybe a dozen others. He was impatient with people who treated him like a hero.

But sparks could still fly. For example, we spoke of his lone, midwinter ascent of Mount Whitney (14,495 feet)—a dangerous excursion because a blizzard would surely be fatal for a man alone. He had snowshoed up one day in January and reached the summit late in the afternoon. The weather was mild, he noted—12 degrees below zero. A snowstorm struck. Thinking quickly, he started down a gully, chopping steps in the high-angle, frozen snow. For 1,000 feet in the dark. Then he snowshoed back to camp, arriving at 12:20 a.m. My photographer-friend indicated that he knew the route Clyde had taken, and Clyde misunderstood him to be suggesting that the feat was not awe-inspiring. Clyde fixed him hard with a look, and said, "Well, many mountaineers wouldn't have made it, I can tell you that."

We walked outside to look up at the snow conditions in the mountains. The photographer and I were thinking, for the purposes of this article, of repeating Clyde's climb (the first ascent, of course) of the east face of Mount Whitney, this time doing it in winter. He peered up. "You might make it, boys," he judged, "but that snow is unstable." It had been a winter of little snow in the Sierra, meaning that the snow was not well enough packed to make travel safe.

We had had a mountaineering lesson all winter long: Since Christmas, we had been trying to get the Whitney climb going. Several weekends we were snowed out. On two others we couldn't get climbing partners. Both of us were aware, standing there gazing at the awesome Sierra crest, that Clyde had climbed for forty years with no companions; and if the weather was bad, he stayed home—home in the mountains.

Climbing stories lead to climbing stories. We recollected a painfully tiring time on a climb when we were pushing our way up through mushy snow with fifty- or sixty-pound packs.

"Weight never bothered me," Clyde mumbled. He never went in for modern, lightweight equipment. He carried instead a duffle bag lashed to a wooden frame. He carried in it four pairs of boots and shoes, five cameras (including one "to throw in the lake"), six large kettles, cups and spoons, dishes and bowls, condiments, servers, graters, a special stick mop for washing dishes, and a variety of canned goods. Not to mention his books, a fishing rod and several pistols. "If I want to carry a rock in my pack," Smoke Blanchard quotes him as saying, "to keep me steady down the trail, that's my business."

Blanchard weighed one of Clyde's packs once at 92 pounds, and it wasn't carrying more than emergency food. When he came back six weeks later, the pack weighed 106 pounds. The extra weight was in pots and pans he had picked up, some food, and a string of fish. Clyde himself weighed only about 140, and he was 65 years old at the time.

"Many people might find his way of travel in the mountains quite strange, especially with today's gear, but, you see," comments Blanchard.

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“Norman was not just visiting the mountains or passing through the peaks. He lived there.”

Yes, he lived there. He spent twenty winters at Glacier Lodge on Big Pine Creek, snowbound at 8,000 feet and utterly alone for months at a time. To those who wonder what he did up there alone all that time, he presented a characteristic answer in his essay “Snowbound in the Sierra Nevada”: “I am well aware that for many people who know of no better way to employ their time than to play solitaire, this would indeed be a problem. For someone, however, who has more hobbies than he can keep abreast of, the problem is not so much having too much free time, but rather not having enough. With reading and writing, taking pictures, occasional practice with rifle and pistol, and during the months of deep snow, rather frequent ski trips to timberline and beyond, I have more than ample use for all the spare time at my disposal.”

He also spent nearly twenty winters at Baker Creek ranch, less isolated from civilization. That sojourn came to an end in 1971 when some “adolescent and adult hoodlums” ransacked his cabin, destroying and stealing his property senselessly. The vandals took what were the necessities of life for Clyde—his cooking utensils, kerosene reading lanterns and so on—and left his mountain photographs, notes and manuscripts in incredible disarray. Clyde estimated that he would need $150 to fix the cabin up again, and that was money he did not have. Thus he was relegated to the sanatorium a mile away for the last year of his life.

The Baker Creek cabin, though, suited him. He had an outdoor living room—made from three sofas he resurrected from the town dump—where he could entertain visitors or relax and read. He had a wickup for sleeping out. And he had three rooms for storing all the gear he collected, with the instincts of a pack rat, over the decades. He lived there during the winter, free of charge, in return for a certain amount of maintenance work. (He had the same deal at Glacier Lodge, where he was winter watchman.) He supported himself by his nature writing, regularly published in Westways and in its predecessor Touring Topics, and in Motorland, National Motorist, American Alpine Journal and Sierra Club Bulletin.

When spring came, he would have to leave the cabin to make way for the fishermen who rented it during the season. The cabin was always running over with gear—Blanchard called it “the largest one-man Seattle Co-op mountain equipment store I’ve ever seen”—and Clyde had to stash it somewhere while his mailing address was on the trail. He hid most of it in a cluster of rocks. But his collections of snowshoes, three kinds of skis, traps, classics, shovels and ice axes, boots, hatchets, saws, twenty toolboxes of handguns, and cartons of writings and photographs would have to go to town for safekeeping.

Then he would go into the wilderness. He had his creature comforts there too. Aside from what he carried, he had hundreds of hotels. These were campsites discovered and used by Clyde alone, chosen for their scenic beauty. He had one in every corner of the Sierra. His favorite was one that overlooked the Palisades; he called it the Palace Hotel, and claimed that the view alone was worth fifty dollars.

He also had his own hospital. It was a sunny little clearing by a stream, completely private and free of cost. Clyde was sure that three weeks of lounging there on a bed of leaves could cure almost anything.

Perhaps Clyde should be seen as a kind of Thoreau, who took Thoreau’s principle of “economy,” for instance, and lived on it fully (as Thoreau did not, quite). He organized his life so that he spent virtually no time merely providing himself with necessities; he gave all his life to doing precisely what he wanted to do. He minimized his burdensome possessions and creature comforts in favor of pursuing his passion; yet clearly, in his own eyes, he had far more of the good things of life.

But he did not give us a Walden. Clyde’s writings are intriguing, but they are limited by the man. He was not interested in telling us about himself. As a result he told us what he saw and what happened in objective terms. We get only cryptic hints of what he felt. He gave us his physical journeys but not his spiritual journey. Since he was something of a Victorian gentleman, he may have found interior disclosures embarrassing. Yet I yearn for a fuller scrutiny of his spiritual life—an understanding of the interplay of his mind and feelings with the great and dramatic world he lived in. He was capable of communicating that, but seems to have regarded it as a private matter.

His adherence to the principle of economy directed his life away from some of what we usually admire in men. Reducing and expanding his life simultaneously, he moved unspecifically toward what he wanted, toward what mattered personally to him. He did not dramatize his life to gain the awe or affection of others.

These choices led him away from participating in the community, helping others, working toward a common betterment. The standards of people who devote their lives to public service, or to large, publicly visible accomplishments, were foreign to Clyde. He thought of his life in terms of John Stuart Mill’s metaphor of the tree—a thing whose purpose is to grow fully into what is contained in the seed. He may, in his way, have achieved an adamantly private stature—not by the standards of this century, but of the nineteenth century.

When Prentice Hall tried to get him to write an autobiography, he replied that he knew of no subject he was less interested in writing about than himself.

He predicted some years ago what the end would be for him: He would just keep climbing in the Sierra until one day he forgot to come back. If life were art, it would have happened that way. Three years ago, after much delay, his second book was published. In it was a tribute from his long-time climbing friend, Jües Eichorn, of which even so modes: a man as Clyde must have been proud. In Norman Clyde of the Sierra Nevada, Eichorn wrote: “For me there can never be another human being so completely in tune with his environment—the mountains—as Norman Clyde.”

W
There are several ways to do this trip. 1) Moderate; Day 1: Pack up Copper Creek and hike over Granite Pass. Day 2: Do State & move camp into Granite Basin. Day 3: Do Goat & out.
2) Strenuous; Day 1: Do Goat the first day and go into or beyond Granite Basin. Day 2: Climb State & out and hope to God that you don't fall asleep driving home! (40+ miles, 13,000 gain)

We had something like option 1 in mind. I sure wasn't going to do (2) again. Did it that way with Mad-Man-Mantle in '72---once is enuf!

We got a late start after picking up our permit, but made the rim of Granite Basin in good time. The question was--Did we have enuf left to go for the peak? We convinced each other that we did. The route is easy to Crouse lake and into the granite slabs above. I wanted to do a reprise of our '72 trip and went for the ridge on the right. From there it's large boulders on the ridge to the summit. It was enough! But wait, we had to return! It was straight down the slope from the peak and through pleasant meadows and, finally, into G.P.

The weather was delightful as we strolled through the forests toward State lakes. The obvious route is simply to stay to the right of the west ridge -- an easy route, topped off with another ridge run to the summit. Beauty all around!

Finally, we must leave, but our perfect day is spoiled by the thought that we must strain back over Granite pass. We reach camp at 5:00 and can now truly savor the weekend knowing that tomorrow is, for once, an easy day.

The only effort is 500 gain out of GB and then the looong trail down. Smoke, like an early morning fog, was rising from the forest. Lightening had started it in July and they were allowing it to do a slow burn. I wanted to put it out with my shovel and water bucket, like any good Smokey the Bear would do, but the sign said "Oh, no, no".

So take your pick of how you want to do these--just how masochistic are you? We did the better, easier, way. '72 was a long time ago and Ron isn't as young as he use to be!!

CHR

TRAIL CREST

This trail is really an ant run and the new snow, cool air, and blowing wind still didn't dissuade too many. Some improvised headgear just so they could get The Peak. Compacted, new snow on the switchbacks made the going treacherous.

Doug was out there to do his thing and passed me enroute. I did Muir and remet Ron at Trail Crest where we had lunch.

The hope was that Hitchcock wouldn't be too nasty by running the east ridge from T.C. Well, it's not that good! It's easy enuf to the first notch, but from there it's a constant boulder whack. We followed Doug, backpacking, to the last notch and then did the summit from there. The slope from the notch goes down very well and Ron And I decided that to get the peak up this slope was the best(least haste)way (the west ridge isn't any fun either).

Down at Hitchcock Lakes, the thing was to get out of the wind for the night, and we found a good spot behind a rock wall.

Next am we packed to the J.M. trail and went for Hale--cool winds were blowing again. We passed an O.C. group doing the same thing. As we anticipated, Doug had also done these two the day before! Confucius says: "Mountaineer who go to party on Sunday do 'crazy tings' on Saturday".
Ron spotted Ralph Drollinger's name in the Young register. After which it's back over the top and out.

Fragments of SPS groups were littered everywhere. Rumors had it that some were even doing the East Face.

The weather was giving us strong hints that Autumn had arrived--at least, there were no bugs for a change.
This trip was supposed to meet at the Mammoth Visitor Center, but early bird Peter Brooks and heartless Dick Kutsch routed George Toby, Ralph Johnson, and Shuka Ravek out of our cozy sleeping bags in the nearby campground. We thought we were safe from bears and other marauding creatures. Skies were clear and the temp was just at freezing. We enjoyed a leisurely breakfast in Mammoth. A newly paved road takes you down from Minaret Summit to the Agnew Meadow turn off, then you hit the dirt. Heavy equipment was working the road to Reds Meadows with flagman and delays. They are furiously trying to pave that section before winter sets in. We changed our plans of going to Minaret Lake. We backtracked to Agnew Meadows and hiked in to base camp at Ediza Lake. This also changed our climbing schedule. We had planned on climbing Clyde Minaret on Sunday, but I was aware that Mary Omberg and Mark Goebel were planning to lead another group up Clyde the same day, with two groups on Clyde, one dislodged rock could be a disaster.

So on Sunday in absolutely perfect fall weather we headed for Banner and Ritter. We cramponed up the snow to the saddle and climbed Banner by the usual rock scramble. There was no register on the summit. On the way down you get an excellent view of the two third class chutes leading up the North face of Ritter. The right hand chute appeared easier. However there were two idiots in that chute shouting belay calls and kicking rocks loose every couple minutes. We opted to do the left hand chute. The snow approach led high up into the chute and got very steep. Actually it was more ice than snow. We cramponed all the way using the French technique demonstrated to us by Dick Kutsch. Although the two idiots were two thirds up the ridge where the routes join, we beat them to the ridge and suffered no rockfall. There were people all over the summit (they came up the other side) and to our surprise three dogs. Two were big dogs but one little mutt only weighed about 15 pounds. We stayed on top a while and watched them descend. That little dog leaped from rock to rock like a mountain goat. Fantastic. We also descended by the easy route back to camp. Late in the day, the chute we came up would be very icy.

Monday we followed the use trail from Ediza to Iceberg Lake and on to Cecille Lake. Iceberg Lake lived up to its name. There were many blue white icebergs floating on the lake. From the shores of Cecille, Clyde Minaret is a magnificent looking peak. All five made the summit by the Roy Magnuson/Bill Russell route up the North Face. (see June 1980 Echo for description). Key to the climb is to attain a 10 ft wide ledge, visible from below, that leads up to the right (West) to a steep narrow chute that merges with the North Face and on to the summit ridge. To get to this ledge one must climb or traverse a snow field. Early in the year this would be no problem, but late September it was mostly ice. We climbed the rocks on the right side until we encountered a small berghcchrund, which required some very carefull cramponing. To our credit not a single rock bigger than a golf ball was dislodged. The route was mostly class 3 with a 10 foot near vertical class 4 downclimb near the summit. Clyde Minaret is a great sustained rock climb. Probably one of the best on the SPS list. I can see why Roy Magnuson did it three times. Oh yes, Mary Omberg and her group of five (3 gals, 2 guys) signed in on the summit on Sunday. All got back to the cars at sundown and enjoyed a first class dinner in Mammoth. We were late but didn't care. Got home about 2 am. A super week end climb.

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ATTENTION SPS LEADERS

PLAN YOUR WINTER TRIPS FOR THE NOVEMBER - FEBRUARY SCHEDULE!

WRITE THEM UP AND SEND THEM TO PAT HOLLENBECK NOW!

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MUMMY MOUNTAIN
DECEMBER 29-30, 1980
AL CONRAD

This job assignment in Boulder has its rewards. Rocky Mountain National Park is only 65 km from "home". Since Mark had already climbed Long's Peak and I was looking for something less demanding, we headed for Mummy. We hiked in about 10 km and camped at Lawn Lake on only about 1.5 m of snow at 3350 m. The climb followed a late leisurely breakfast with the hope that the sun would boost the temperature above the -15°C we found upon waking up. In bright sunlight we headed for the 4092 m summit. It was a straightforward ascent except for a tricky Class 3-4 pitch we could have easily avoided. High winds forced the stay on the summit to be abbreviated and made thoughts of further climbing that day unwise. As is the rule there, we checked out at Park Headquarters before leaving. On to the mountains of Holland!
The Sierra ECHO is published seven times a year by the Sierra Peaks section of the Sierra Club.

COPY: Send to editor, Cuno Hanschau, 12744 Lorne st, No. Hollywood, CA, 91605. Priority will be given to TYPED, SINGLE SPACED copy.

ADDRESS CHANGES TO: Secretary James Murphy, 10031 Burnet ave, Mission Hills, CA 91345. The post office will not forward third class.

INQUIRIES ABOUT NOT RECEIVING THE ECHO: Direct to mailer: Sherry Harsh 1152 E. Kendocino, Altadena, CA 91001.

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