

# MUGELNOOS

OCTOBER 1, 1996

Number 729



## Elderberry Canyon

Ken Deemer

On May 4, 11 of us met for an early start to a long and memorable weekend. We skied Elderberry Canyon and the Bishop's Pass area for a total of 8,000' to 9,000' vertical. Included in the group were old timers Pat and Gerry Holleman, Don Pies, Reiner Stenzel, Diann Fried, Pete Yamagata from Sacramento, and Reed Moore from San Diego, as well as relative SMS newcomers Eric Watts, Brian Bartholomew and Lawrence Pollart.

We were well into a warm summer-like spell which had produced considerable melting over the past two weeks. Snow level was about 8,500'. The ranger station had warned of wet snow slide possibility. We were able to take three four-wheel drive vehicles up a passable road on Mt. Tom to about 6,500' where we started walking. The trail consisted of some long switchbacks and was quite passable. Elderberry Canyon was hidden from view during the ascent. After a couple of hours, we reached a ridge just above the canyon and our first good view of the more than 4,000 snow-covered feet to the summit ridge line.

cont. pg 3

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## MEETINGS

3RD TUES EACH MONTH NOV. THRU MAY EXCEPT DEC. 7:30 PM GRIFFITH PARK RANGER STATION AUDITORIUM 4730 CRYSTAL SPRINGS DRIVE, LOS ANGELES, CA.

## NEXT ISSUE: NOV. 19, 1996

ISSUE DEADLINE NOV 10, 1996. ALL PHOTOS, SLIDES, AND ARTICLES SENT TO: ANDY FRIED, MUGELNOOS EDITOR, c/o TEC GROUP, 10727 WHITE OAK AVE. SUITE # 205, GRANADA HILLS, CA 91344. 3 1/2" OR 5 1/4 " DISKS (IBM) OR AT 71237.1270@COMPUSERVE.COM. IF YOU WISH TO HAVE PHOTOS RETURNED AFTER PUBLICATION INCLUDE A SELF ADDRESSED STAMPED ENVELOPE. WE ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR LOST PHOTOS.

## UPCOMING TRIPS:

Date	Location	Leaders / Program
Oct. 5	LTC Deadline	
Oct. 12	SMS Pot Luck Dinner	Andy Fried
<b>UPCOMING MUGELNOOS PROGRAMS</b>		
Nov. 19	Intro to SMS Activities	
Dec.	No Meeting	

## LEADERSHIP TRAINING COURSE AVAILABLE

Registration is underway for the Angeles Chapter's Leadership Training Course, a program to prepare Chapter members to become qualified Sierra Club outings leaders. The course begins with an all-day seminar to be held at the Griffith Park Ranger Station on Saturday October 19, 1996. All applicants must be Sierra Club members and have participated in at least five club hikes or trips. Club members wishing to enroll in the course should send a stamped, self-addressed business-size envelope to Alice Danta, LTC Registrar, 17561 Medford Avenue, Tustin, CA 92680-1950. Completed application forms must be returned to the registrar not later than October 5, 1996.

### SMS ULR

<http://www.edgeinternet.com/skimt/>  
for more information contact Mark Bailey via e-mail at INTERNET:102045.3411@compuserve.com

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WANT IT PUBLISHED SO OTHER SMS'ERS CAN FIND YOU?  
IF SO PLEASE SEND IT TO PAT HOLLEMAN.

## SAN ANTONIO SKI HUT WORK PARTY

October 5-6, 1996

The SMS has enjoyed many fine days at the Baldy Hut, and Section members are urged to attend a work party so we can do our part to keep this wonderful hut in shape for next season. Come up one or both days. Call Jerry Held at 714-751-8805 for additional details.

cont. from page one.

Once on snow, the group quickly degenerated into an energetic advance party and the rest of us laggards. Don Pies and I had discussed a rumor we had heard that Reiner had begun to mellow a bit and enjoy a more leisurely pace. We were quickly disabused of this notion! The original intent was to climb to the massive headwall at the top of the canyon (about 11,000') and to descend from there. The summit route beyond this point is quite steep and avalanche prone, and we were concerned about possible slides from the canyon sides later in the day. As it turned out the snow was well consolidated with evidence of only minimal sloughing along our route. In addition, there were two delightful chutes, at least 1,000' in length, above and to the west of the headwall, which were just too inviting to leave untracked.

The advance party (Reiner, Gerry, Reed, Diann and Eric) were well into the Southern and steeper of the two chutes by the time the rest of us collapsed for lunch below them. However, once re-energized by peanut butter and power bars, Don and I ventured up the second. We certainly could have made it to the ridge line, a thousand feet or so above the group, but Reiner's party had since rejoined the others and we thought it best to peel off our skins a few hundred feet short and return to the group. The snow was pure ego! Don and I were back in a matter of seconds. We paused for some group photos and then, with few pauses, skied all the way to snow line (close to 4,000' of descent). We returned via a steeper trail which continued down the length of the canyon and intersected exactly with our starting point at the vehicles. It was painfully obvious that a few weeks earlier, we would have been able to ski another 2,000'.

Saturday evening, we feasted at Sizzler, then some of us enjoyed a relaxing soak at the hot springs south of Bishop. The group scattered to various campsites then met again early Sunday at the South Lake trailhead. We were able to don our skis almost immediately since we were a couple of thousand feet above our Saturday start. Gerry Holleman led the group on a delightful tour toward Bishop Pass. We passed over numerous benches and frozen lakes to a saddle below Mt. Goode. At this point, Reiner and Diann split off to keep an engagement in LA (What could possibly be more important than this?).

The rest climbed a few hundred feet more, then peeled our skins for a delightful run of a thousand feet or so. Reed Moore found a particularly challenging slope and laid down a perfect set of tracks. It was promptly dubbed "Reed's Run". We spent a well deserved lunch break admiring our work and decided that we just had to do it all over again. Many of us headed over to Reed's Run which was just the right combination of a little too steep but what the heck! It was a picture perfect afternoon, and we all

agreed that there were more than enough bowls, chutes and slopes for and extended base camp. Maybe next year..... Oh, by the way, this marked my final provisional lead trip. Thanks to Reiner, Gerry and everyone for your help.

## NEVADA SKI TOURS - MT. JEFFERSON

By Rich Henke

At 11,949 feet, Mt. Jefferson is the highest peak in Central Nevada. It is located in the Toiyabe National Forest just to the north of Tonapah, Nevada. Skiing in Nevada is not a sure thing since often the snowfall is minimal for an entire season. The Sierra Nevada effectively blocks much of the moisture heading east. However, the snowfall in the Spring of 1995 was abundant and the ski season extended through April.

On 13 April 1995, I drove almost 400 miles from L.A. to Tonapah to meet Armando Menocal who was driving from the Tahoe area. As I approached Tonapah, I encountered an icy storm with high winds that shut off the power in Tonapah. I wasn't sure that I would be able to continue on to Pine Creek Campground that night where I had arranged to meet Armando. I gave it a try and covered most of the remaining 80 mile drive before I parked and slept in my van. I continued on in the morning and found Armando at the campground at 7,500 feet. He also had weather stories to tell having barely been able to cross a high pass in the storm the previous evening.

We started walking west from the campground at 9:30 a.m. as light snow flurries were falling. Our plan was to ski a 2 day loop going up Pine Creek Canyon and returning via Bucks Canyon to our starting point. On the way, we hoped to ski all 3 of the summits of Mt. Jefferson. The trail we were following forced us to cross the adjacent Pine Creek 8 times before we were able to put on our skis and continue up the steep canyon. We had a difficult time locating ourselves on our map since we had taken a wrong turn at a lower junction. We finally camped on a high ridge at 11,000 feet, just east of the south summit of Mt. Jefferson.

It snowed during the night and we wondered about avalanche problems on the steep slope we would ski in the morning. However, the morning was bright and sunny and the small amount of new snow did not pose a problem. At the summit, we found various research equipment powered by solar panels used for reasons we did not know. An archeological site was discovered near here in 1978 which is apparently the highest known Indian village in North America.

We turned north and followed a high snow covered plateau that extended for 6 miles. Both the central and north summits were but small bumps on this high area. To the west, we could see the Arc Dome Wilderness where we skied earlier this year in February.

Dropping down into Bucks Canyon turned out to be quite a challenge as the upper part of the canyon was



very steep requiring us to kick steps for 100 feet using our self arrest poles to great advantage. Lower down in the canyon, the snow was excellent. We skied through a forest of Aspen-like trees and had great fun weaving our way through the obstacles. Looking ahead, Bucks Creek dropped into a deep, narrow canyon which hinted of a serious bushwhack. We traversed south to avoid this, intersecting Pine Creek once again and skied out to the campground following our entry route. (Yes, the 8 stream crossings were still there).

We spent the night at the campground as it again snowed much of the night. In the morning, conditions did not look any better. We had planned to do a second 2-day loop in the Monitor Range across the valley to the east, but the storm looked very consistent and wet. We headed for home, postponing the Monitor trip until next year when we will return to Nevada for more obscure ski trips.

### **RUBY MOUNTAIN SKI TRAVERSE (March 1996)** by Rich Henke

For many years I had heard about good powder snow conditions in the Ruby Mountains; so good that a commercial heli-ski operation is based there. The Rubies also had good potential for back country skiing. Since the Sierra in early March still exhibited winter conditions, the Rubies looked appealing. There were reports of lots of snow and it certainly qualified as a 'Nevada Obscure Ski Trip'.

I began the trip from the San Francisco area. Armando Menocal and I drove East to Elko, Nevada where we met Bryan Johnson who had made the long 800 mile drive from San Diego. Our plan was to ski the Ruby Crest Trail from Lamoille Canyon to Harrison Pass. This was a north to south route along the main Ruby Crest for about 40 miles with an expected cumulative elevation gain of 12,000 feet. We placed a car at the bottom of the snow covered Harrison Pass road and talked to some local guides about snow/avalanche conditions. We slept by our second vehicle at 6,800 feet, about 8 miles from Roads End on the Lamoille Canyon road.

The following morning, we skied up the snow covered road to Roads End and then climbed toward Liberty Pass at 10,400 feet. Here we crossed a wilderness area boundary. From noon until the time we camped, we saw many snowmobilers who are the main winter users of the Lamoille Canyon area wilderness area. Their range extended about 3 1/2 miles into the wilderness. There is little enforcement of the boundary by rangers, probably a very practical situation, as I suspect snowmobile users

outnumber backcountry skiers 20 to 1. They caused us no problems

The Rubies are a narrow steep range where one can see many miles in both directions from the crest. The high point and well-known landmark is Ruby Dome at 11,387 feet. However, it is located to the west of the main crest and was not situated appropriately to be included in our ski tour. After crossing Liberty Pass, we stayed high, often directly on the crest and skied over a number of small peaks, a significant one being Wines Peak at 10,893 feet. On day 2, we dropped down to 7,800 feet on the east side where we camped. The following morning we climbed above Overland Lake to a pass crossing back to the west side of the range. We could have possibly stayed on the ridge and avoided the big drop but we were tired of carrying our skis along the rocky wind blown crest. West of the pass, we turned south and followed a series of ups and downs caused by west side canyons. Near Harrison Pass, we saw snowmobile tracks but oddly enough no snowmobiles even though we were ending our trip on a Sunday. The Harrison Pass road seemed to be "just over the next hill", a few too many times but we finally reached it and had an easy ski for the final few miles to our car.

The snow conditions were surprising. The Rubies are skied extensively by Ruby Heli Ski and people who come and spend \$1,400 for 3 days of powder skiing will certainly expect great light powder. However, most of our skiing (with a few exceptions) was on breakable crust. The good news is that the avalanche danger during our 4-day tour was practically zero. We had good weather which was quite lucky since winter storms were present just before and after our tour.

Unfortunately, our car at Harrison Pass had been vandalized. Nothing was taken but someone had broken our rear hatchback window. Bryan and I had a breezy drive back to Southern California. Tune in next year for more 'Nevada Obscure Ski Trips'.

### **CLOUD CANYON LOOP**

or

### **'LET'S SKI 8 UNKNOWN PASSES'**

by Rich Henke

There are always exciting new places to go on a spring tour in the Sierra. This trip was a classic example because our proposed route would cross 8 passes and no one in our 4 person group had ever been across any of them.

Bryan Johnson, Armando Menocal, Paul Brown, and I met at Onion Valley Trailhead early in the morning in mid-May 1996. We left my van in the desert below Mt. Williamson where we planned to emerge 4 days later after 40 miles of skiing. Although Onion Valley is one of the most popular entry points into the Sierra, our route bypassed the normal route over Kearsarge Pass and instead

went northwest over Gould Pass (pass no. 1). In summer this route is sometimes used as a shortcut to the Rae Lakes Area.

We had postponed the start of the trip by 1 day hoping to miss the worst of a spring storm which had begun earlier in the week. Even with the delay, the weather was still unsettled and we encountered high winds while ascending the pass. We were regularly knocked off our feet as we approached the pass carrying our skis with ice ax in hand. High winds continued as we descended the other side but conditions improved as we crossed pass No. 2, the col between Mt. Gould and Mt. Rixford. We descended to Bullfrog Lake where we spent our first night. It was a very hard day and we had covered only 5 miles.

On day 2, we descended to Vidette Meadows, mostly on foot and then began the long ski up into Vidette Valley toward Deerhorn Saddle (pass #3). Again the going was strenuous, especially at the top, where we had to negotiate 400 vertical feet of loose sliding scree. From the top, we were just opposite Harrison Pass but we turned west and descended to Reflection Lake where we spent our second night. We covered 8 miles this day and it was clear that we would not make our original objective of 40 miles in 4 days.

The following day, we approached Longley Pass (pass no. 4), which was protected by one of the biggest cornices I have ever seen in the Sierra. We climbed past it on the far right side and then had good skiing as we followed Cunningham Creek. We were now in the Cloud Canyon drainage, on the west side of the Western Divide. Looking southwest, we could see the path of the Sierra High Route near the head of Cloud Canyon and Death Canyon.

Our objective now was to turn south staying as high as possible and to cross back to the east side of the Western Divide at Midway Col. To do so, we crossed two small unnamed passes (pass no. 5 and pass no. 6) and eventually turned west, high above Colby Lake. Midway Col was the obvious notch above us. It is just to the north of Milestone Peak which is an unmistakable landmark from all directions. Although we were very tired, we pushed on since the pass was steep and icy even in the afternoon in the setting sun. We certainly didn't want to attempt Midway Col in the morning when the snow would be even harder. It was 7 p.m. by the time we had finally negotiated the 4th class rocky slabs at the top of Midway Col (pass no. 7) and reached the more gentle east side. A short descent brought us to a running stream where we camped our 3rd night.

Our original plan was to ski over Tyndal Col (pass no. 8), just south of Mt. Tyndal, climb Mt. Williamson, and ski down the east face as described in Moynier's book 'Backcountry Skiing in the High Sierra'. We were a little too ambitious on this trip! Instead we took the shortest path out, over Shepherd Pass to the Symmes Creek

Trailhead.

Day 4 was still a long day. As many people do, we too got confused at the bottom of Milestone Canyon where the route crosses the headwaters of the Kern River. We finally realized that we had to follow the Kern Canyon north for quite a distance before crossing and skiing on to Shepherd Pass. The descent from the pass was skiable although all of us were 'wimps' and kick turned the top portion before linking good turns to the bottom. The snow stopped just below the pass and we had a long walk out except for 2 short sections where we put our skis back on. Walking along the trail was certainly better than the bushwhack we would have faced had we descended Blairs Creek on the east face of Williamson.

Our day was still not finished. After finally reaching the Symmes Creek Trailhead after 15 miles and a 13 hour day, we now had no vehicle since our van was parked 7 miles further south. I volunteered to retrieve the vehicle but upon reaching it, found the rear wheels to be mysteriously locked. After trying for an hour to decipher what was wrong I gave up and went to sleep. When I didn't return, Bryan and Paul decided at 3 a.m. to walk 9 miles to Independence where they hired a ride to Onion Valley where we had left the other cars. After retrieving me, we drove to Lone Pine, hired a tow truck and pulled my van to a garage. What had happened? On the way in, my brake drums got wet after crossing a stream and when I set the emergency brake with wet drums and left the car for four days, the brake shoes 'rusted' to the drum. A strange occurrence but one which taught me not to set an emergency brake unless it is necessary.

It was a difficult trip. We skied 38 miles, and climbed more than 15,000 vertical feet, even after we took the 'easy way out'. But it was very scenic and the area west of the Western Divide is seldom visited by backcountry skiers other than those skiing the high route. And we did do 7 out of 8 new passes.

SUMMARY OF ROUTE	ELEVATION (ft.)	DISTANCE (miles)
Onion Valley Trailhead	9,200	0
Gould Pass	12,800	2 1/2
Pass between Gould and Rixford	12,500	4
Deerhorn Saddle	12,560	10
Longley Pass	12,400	14 1/2
Pass W. of Thunder Mt.	11,600	17 1/2
Pass SW of Table Creek	11,500	18 1/2
Midway Col	12,880	22
Shepherd Pass	12,000	30
Symmes Creek Trailhead	6,000	38
Totals	15,335	38

## AVALANCHE BEACONS VERSUS COMMON SENSE

by Rich Henke

Every time I hear someone say that you should always carry avalanche beacons in the Sierra, I think of the fairy tale about the boy who cried wolf. There are disadvantages to insisting that people do something which a reasonable responsible person can see is quite silly. The intent of this article is NOT to dismiss the dangers of avalanches in general but to decry the replacing of good common sense with avalanche beacons. People die in avalanches every year including some I have known personally.

In spring conditions, experience has taught me that avalanche beacons are not needed in the Sierra for the type of skiing I do. My trips are typically long distance, multi-day ski mountaineering expeditions - not one day trips searching out the last remains of winter snow on north facing slopes.

Quite the contrary in winter conditions. Snow tends to be lighter and colder, and the air temperatures are colder. Light dry powder remains longer and does not tend to consolidate as it would under warmer conditions. Many people have taken avalanche courses where they learned how to do a careful analysis of the boundaries between different snow layers. Well, the conclusion is simple. Avalanches are a real concern in winter conditions almost anywhere.

Let's look more carefully at spring conditions, first in Utah, Colorado, and Wyoming, and then in the Sierra. In the Rocky Mountain states, the spring season is usually shorter. Because the snow is dry and light, winds tend to blow it off of high exposed ridges more than in the Sierra. My best trips in the Rockies have been at the beginning of April when the long distance touring season is quickly coming to an end. However, avalanche danger has been present every time I have skied there. I have almost always worn a beacon. This has been true even though snow depth has usually been low. The saving grace is that the snow tends to be light, so there is some chance of being dug out if buried.

To evaluate avalanche danger in the Sierra in spring conditions, it is important to understand the uniqueness of Sierra snow. About the time that the snow is disappearing in the Rockies, the spring season is just getting underway in California and often extends into June or July. Sierra snow is deep, heavy, and wet and when warm weather arrives, sometimes as early as mid-March, powder snow is only a memory, and has been replaced by something affectionately called 'Sierra Cement'. This is the base of a wonderful surface called corn snow which occurs when just the top layer of snow melts each day before

freezing again at night. Corn snow conditions turn beginning telemarkers into confident turning machines. Ski manufacturers probably dislike these conditions immensely because in spite of all the advertising, one can ski this snow quite well with 'last year's' skis and boots.

There are two situations where Sierra spring snow can avalanche. The first case is if a late season storm occurs, especially a cold one. Fresh light dry snow on top of an icy layer of Sierra Cement is obviously likely to slide more easily. However, this danger does not usually last very long. Warm temperatures return quickly to the Sierra in the spring and the snow settles amazingly fast. In these circumstances, a safe approach is to stay put for a day after the storm and let the snow settle and consolidate.

The second situation is a supersaturated wet snow avalanche. Late in the season, sometimes as late as June, when steep snow becomes very saturated with water, slides will occur originating from below rocks or cliffs high on a mountainside where lots of melting has occurred. Such an avalanche will happen only once in a particular location and is more likely during the heat of the day. These avalanches are deadly. They are so heavy and consolidate so quickly that it is very difficult to dig into them. I would never trust my life to a beacon in these conditions. Always be aware of this risk and avoid being in the path of a wet snow avalanche.

Other than these two examples, Sierra snow in spring conditions does not avalanche. I have skied for hundreds of days in spring Sierra conditions and have rarely seen avalanches, even after storms. When you teach a new backcountry skier to always wear a beacon, and then take this person to the Sierra in spring conditions where the probability of an avalanche is essentially zero, who can blame the beginner for assuming that you don't know what you are talking about. The following year, this skier goes to Utah and is killed in an avalanche. It is much better to teach common sense than to cry wolf unnecessarily.

I have often heard it said that "no one has ever died because they wore a beacon". Is this true? If someone crosses a slope wearing a beacon that they would not have crossed had they not been wearing one, and if they were buried in an avalanche, I would say that they died because they wore and trusted a beacon. Maybe I am unusual, but having a beacon on is a minor consideration when I have to decide whether or not to cross a dangerous slope. Detours are safer than beacons. I just don't have much confidence that if I am buried, I will be dug out before I suffocate. This is especially true for wet snow avalanches.

Where is the data? Does anyone know what percentage of people wearing beacons who have been buried have been dug out and how many have died? Is the percentage 50%, 5%, 1%? How about in spring conditions in the Sierra? Do you know of anyone who has been caught in a Sierra spring avalanche, other than during a storm? I am willing to be educated if someone can point me to



some convincing data. Until then, I will leave my beacon at home for Sierra spring tours, and take common sense with me as I pass through the mountains.

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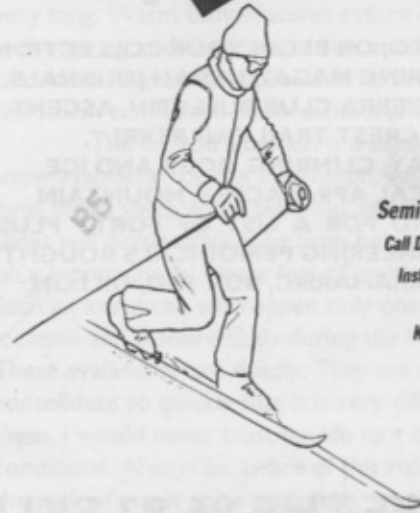
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