

RCM 4/99

# THE LITTLE ONION VALLEY

March 2000

Issue # 757



SMS skiers at Parker Lks, Little Onion Valley

## LITTLE ONION VALLEY

Mar. 11-12, 2000 by Reiner Stenzel

Little Onion Valley is located North of Onion Valley in the California Bighorn Sheep Zoological Area. It may be entered only from Dec 15 to July 1, i.e., in the ski season. It's a beautiful remote valley, virtually inaccessible from any other direction than the Oak Creek drainage to the East. One can see it from Hwy 395, just North of Sardine Cyn. Although we had many SMS trips to the regular Onion Valley, this was, to my knowledge, the first one to Little Onion Valley. It turned out to be a challenging but rewarding ski mountaineering trip. We were eleven, Tom Marsh, Angel Ocana, Dennis Landin, David Kaye from Arizona, Craig Connally, Maciek Malish, CobyTefft, Ryan Oldham, Scott Koepke and Estelle Braaf. We gathered Sat, 3/11, 8am, at Grays Mdw Cpgrd where most of us spent the night before, then drove up the Onion Valley Rd to its northernmost switchback (2175m, sorry for then on-metrics, but the Kearsarge Pk topo is not in feet). There a closed dirt road leads to old mines in Sardine Cyn and Little Onion Valley. We left by 9am, skied most of the road, but had to walk on some dry south facing sections. By 10:30 am we arrived at an abandoned mine

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## NEXT ISSUE

Issue deadline April 14,2000. All letters, photos, slides, or articles should be sent to Mugelnoos editor, Don Ralphs, 431 Alma Real Dr, Pacific Palisades, CA 90272. Materials can be sent by IBM disc or e-mailed to dralphs@attglobal.net. If you want your photos or slides returned after publication send a SASE. We can't be responsible for losses.

## Meetings

3d Tuesday each month – November – May (except December) 7:30 PM Griffith Park Ranger Station Auditorium 4730 Crystal Springs Drive, Los Angeles, CA

April 18, 2000. Kurt Wedberg: a presentation "Mountaineering in the Sierras"

May 16,2000 Porter Fox from Powder Magazine will be giving a talk showing slides from his trip to the India Himal:1st Glisse Descent of Yamunouri Pass 17,600' in the Indian Himalaya. Photos by Wade McCoy, Skiers Porter Fox and Jason Tattersall.

## SMS WEB PAGE

[HTTP:www.angeleschapter.org/skimt/.](http://www.angeleschapter.org/skimt/)

Slide Show, Five years of trip reports, backcountry links and much more. Check it out.

### Marmot Gore Tex Jacket For Sale \$ 130

Marmot Thunderlight (ultralight) shell w/pit zips mens lrg Blue(purple)/black 2years old worn 20 days ,like new was \$ 390 new. Call Don Ralphs (310) 454-0703

## WANTED

- PREOWNED SKI MOUNTAINEERING GEAR  
BOOTS-SIZE 10, EXPEDITION QUALITY PLASTIC, RANDONEE BINDINGS AND CRAMPON COMPATIBLE. BINDINGS-RANDONEE, PREFER SKI CRAMPON COMPATIBLE. SKIS-190CM OR LONGER, METAL EDGE TOURING. CONTACT- RON HAKY, 310 545-1602, haky@earthlink.net

### Trezeta Randonee Boots For Sale

Outings leader selling a pair of new boots, Model #TFK201. Any reasonable and maybe slightly unreasonable offer accepted.Contact Mark Presky at 310-398-0366 or Markpresky@att.net

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### Avalanche info for Eastern Sierra

Phone: 760-924-5500

Web: [www.csac.org/Bulletins/Calif/current](http://www.csac.org/Bulletins/Calif/current)

The Mugelnoos is a newsletter published by and for the Ski Mountaineers Section of the Sierra Club's Angeles Chapter since 1938. Send subscriptions and address changes to: Pat Holleman, 1638 6th Street, Manhattan Beach, CA.90266 \$7 per year payable to "Ski Mountaineers" Due in October. Subscription payments are not tax deductible as charitable contributions

## AVALANCHE KILLS TWO BACKCOUNTRY SKIERS IN ASPEN

Four very experienced backcountry skiers departed the Aspen Highlands ski area through a backcountry gate earlier this month. They were headed up the Highland Ridge to access Tonar Bowl. Leaving the ski area through the gate is legal and popular among backcountry travelers. They each carried beacons and shovels.

Tonar (totally narly) Bowl is a 2000ft ,45-50 degree gully with a north west facing aspect. All four skiers were on the face at the time of the slide and were unable to identify the precise trigger that set it off. The slide was considered a hard slab avalanche containing large blocks of cohesive snow weighing hundreds or thousands of pounds. The slide was 75 yards wide, 400 yards long, and ranged from 2 to 12 feet deep at the fracture line. Both men were killed by the trauma sustained.

Another backcountry skier at the scene reported that the previous storm had fallen in the area with a great deal of wind that undoubtedly loaded the slope heavily and contributed to it's instability. An avalanche forecaster reported that the stability was further compromised by conditions much lower in the snowpack. Heavy snowfall in October was followed by drought in November and December. The bottom layer rotted before more stable layers formed on top. The rotten layer of "sugar snow" acts like ball bearings when slabs of the more cohesive upper layers are pulled down the slope by gravity. That is what happened in this case. In the lower sections of the avalanche, the entire snowpack slid, a phenomenon known as a "ground avalanche".

These were the seventh and eighth avalanche fatalities in Colorado this year.

### Avalanche Beacons and SMS Historic Video For Sale

- SOS F1-ND Avalanche Beacon, 457 KHZ, \$168
- SMS Video of members skiing in the Sierra in the 1960s, plus rare skiing footage of Section founder, Walter Mosauer in 1932. \$10.00 (only 3 left)  
Contact Mark Goebel: 714-963-9384

## SKI MOUNTAINEERS 2000 TRIP SCHEDULE

April 1-2 Sat/Sun Eldeberry/ Onion Valley

Ldr T Marsh/ M Goebel

April 29-May 7 Trans Sierra Tour

Ldr R Stenzel/ RJ Secor

May 6-7 Sat/Sun SanJoaquin Mtn(11,600)

Ldr M Goebel/G Holleman

May 13-19 Sat-Fri Bishop Pass to Tabosse Pass

Ldr T Marsh/ J. McGuire

May 20-21 Sat/Sun Mammoth Area Day Tours

Ldr G. Holleman/ P.Harris

May 27-29 Sat/Mon Mts Powell & Thompson

Ldr R. Stenzel/ M Goebel

### HOLLEMANS HONORED

Pat And Gerry Holleman received the Outings Service Award of the Angeles Chapter citing each of their 15 years of service as leaders and members of the management committee of both the SMS and Sierra Peaks Section.

### SNOWCAT VENTURE THROWS IN THE TOWEL

Toiyabe National Forest Bridgeport District Ranger Kathy Lucich has announced that the Sierra Catski "snowcat" proponents had dropped their proposal for a snowcat operation between Conway Summit and Bridgeport. (The "snowcats" in effect motorized, mobile "skilifts", would have carried skiers to high elevations.)

The Forest Service received more than 400 letters in response to the proponent's proposal to conduct their snowcat operation on Dunderberg Peak, Copper Mtn., Eagle Peak and Crater Crest/Monument Ridge..

Based on the comments received, the Forest Service told the proponents that they probably wouldn't allow their operation to utilize two of the roadless areas, Eagle and Crater, which the agency itself proposes for wilderness, but that they would still entertain the snow cat proposal on Dunderberg and Copper Mtn. Apparently the proponents then told the Forest Service they were dropping the entire proposal.

## Alta Peak - Ski Mountaineering

By Reiner Stenzel Feb. 11-13, 2000

This trip was a classical ski mountaineering adventure: We did a winter peak ascent on skis. We were five SMS'rs, three of whom were also members of the California Mountaineering Club (CMC).

Since the SMS does not permit peak climbs with ice axes (the only safe way) it became an unofficial trip. Ironically, few of the climbers ski (the only way to travel in deep snow) and no other CMC people joined, making it essentially a SMS trip. Besides these quirks of clubs we had a great time, as the report shows.

I had won the Pear Lake Hut lottery with 5 spaces over a long weekend. On Fri morning, we (R. J. Secor, Barahm Manahedgi, Mark Vogt, Alan Franz, and I) met at the Lodgepole Visitor Center to pick up the hut key and wilderness permit. A snowstorm had dumped a foot of new snow on Thursday, and we had to wait till 8am for the snow plough to clear the road to the trailhead at Wolverton. By 9:30 am we started our 2,000', 6mi ascent to Pear Lake. In summer time it's an easy day hike, but in a foot of new snow it's a workout for those who break trail.

At lunch time we were at the Hump (9,500') when the clouds of the next storm rolled in. We skied past Heather, Aster and Emerald Lks, and took the low level trail to the hut due to potential avalanche hazard. Everyone carried beacons and shovels and we had a pair of radios between the first and last in the group which invariably got spread out due to different skiing/climbing rates. By 3:30pm, in a growing winter storm, we reached the cozy Pear Lake Hut (9,200') where the backcountry ranger Jeff had already fired up the stove. It snowed all night long, dumping another 2 feet of fresh snow.

Saturday was our planned peak ascent. Got up by 5:30am, saw heavy snow fall, went back to bed. By 8am someone discovered a speck of blue sky. An hour later, I was ready to leave the hut with Alan and Mark to break trail to Alta Peak. The sun broke through and we seemed to have a window of opportunity for a peak ascent. Breaking trail in 2-3 feet of Sierra "powder" is a 1000 kcal/hour job. It's



Alan Franz above Pear Lake

impossible to do this trip without skis since one would sink to the stomach with each step. While we lost calories, Barahm and R.J. gained some from a late pancake breakfast, as described by radio, but an hour later they also followed our tracks. We ascended the slopes East of Pear Lke, followed the inlet creek drainage, and skied up to the ridge at about 200m East of Alta Pk. The snow coverage was so good that we could continue to ski on the South side of the corniced crest to the base of the summit block. There we left our skis, ascended with ice axe, and climbed short section of Class 3/4 icy rocks to the summit (11,204'). All along our ski ascent we watched the growing clouds and gambled who would win on the summit. Well, it was a draw: Wind, whiteout and snow flurries greeted us on the summit so that we started our descent ASAP.



Reiner, Alan, and Mark on the summit of Alta Pk in near whiteout conditions

The skiing down was a bit tricky due to the flat light and unconsolidated deep snow. Equal weighting and ski tips up was mandatory for turning in the steeps. Due to the whiteout conditions we more or less followed our ascent route except for an exciting chute down to Pear Lake. By 3 pm most of us were back at the hut, and we kept in radio contact with R.J. who was slowly descending with kick turns. We were so lucky with our winter peak ascent which fitted just in between two winter storms.

After some hot tea in the hut, the tele-markers (Alan, Mark, Jeff and I) carved the virgin snow South of the hut before we all settled down for dinner in the hut. Another group of skiers, scheduled to arrive by Sat pm, never made it up in the deep snow. Dinner was a delight, Barahms shared some Persian specialties with us, and we toasted the climb with my vodka from Moscow. Around the fireplace, Barahm shared his world philosophy with us, R. J. gave us a sample of sarcasm, the rest played cards or loafed around. It was another night of continuous snowfall. Sunday morning we cleaned the hut and skied out by 9am.

Normally, it's a pleasure to ski down, but in 3' of heavy new snow it's a real workout.

Ranger Jeff showed us a shortcut to the Hump, and everyone shared in the arduous trail braking. After a short lunch break at the Hump in drifting snow, the skins came off for the ski descent though the forest. It takes good balance to ski with full packs through deep wet snow. The group got widely spread out but there were plenty of tracks and sweeping R.J. had the radio. Snow changed to freezing rain. By about 1:30 pm the first reached the cars, which were snow-covered bumps at the side of the road. After half an hour of shoveling we got them freed to start.

Then came a radio call from R.J.: "I am getting hypothermic", end. This was to be taken seriously since hypothermia and avalanches are killers in wintertime. So I quickly prepared hot tea in a thermos, Alan packed dry clothes, we got back into our wet ski gear and ascended the trail. He was spotted after half an hour coming slowly down the trail in wet clothes. Hot drinks and a power bar gave him a boost, he walked out the rest of the trail, exhausted but ok. So our adventurous winter trip ended with everyone accounted for and leaving gladly by 3pm. On the way home it rained more or less continuously from the Sierras to the Pacific. La Nina seemed to be over.



(Continued from page 1)

near the South Fork of Oak Creek (2400m) and entered Little Onion Valley. The first task was to find a snow bridge to cross the gushing creek which involved some serious bushwhacking. Then came the workout of a 600m ascent to our campsite 3100m .

By 12:30pm we started to set up camp near a stand of pine trees which provided wind shelter and was away from avalanche runout zones. The views were great: In the West was a wall of steep mountains engulfed in spindrifts. To the East was Owens Valley and the distant Great Basin. We were blessed with sunshine and abundant snow from recent storms.

In a community snow kitchen we cooked and ate and relaxed, greeting our late arrivers. The ascent took its toll and the last ones arrived for dinner. In-between, we skied the surrounding slopes, but after 4pm the soft spring snow turned into breakable crust and the fun was over. Dinner extended into the late evening with a beautiful sunset, later moon light, stars, and the tiny lights of Independence below us. The temperatures dropped and it became a chilly night.

On Sunday we awoke to sunshine and clear skies. We were blessed with highpressure weather, i.e., spring time snow conditions. With light daypacks we ascended Little Onion Valley toward its westernmost end. It is blocked by steep walls and snowfields. Last February, I stood on the ridge North of Sardine Lake, looking down into the valley, but unable to descend into it with my four legged companion. The view into beautiful Little Onion Valley inspired this trip.

We continued to ski over the Parker Lakes, but took timeout for avalanche beacon tests and dug a snowpit to evaluate the snow stability. With the assurance of good TG snow, we ascended some steep slopes leading to the base of Mt Mary Austin (3978m). However, at 11am it was too late for a peak ascent. So we lunched on the rocks, enjoyed the view of Dragon Pk and similar "aiguilles", and finally got ready for the ski rundown to camp. The snow was just right for carving. The run down to the



Digging a snowpit to test the stability of a steep slope. Snow depth more than 12 feet.

Parker Lks was exciting. The randonne skiers (Angel, Coby, Maciek) enjoyed it so much that they did it twice. Further below, the firm base gave way to soft, grabbing snow which required careful balance on telemark turns.

By 12:30pm we were back at camp, lunched, and packed up. Then it was another 3,000' ski descent with full packs in soft spring snow. Definitely, wide skis pay off in spring mush. We got again spread out but stayed in frequent contact with our three radios. It was a relief for us telemarkers that the randonneers had their struggle, too. Maciek took a particularly interesting face plant on a snowbridge where his sunglasses fell into the creek and were never seen again. Earlier, Tom lost his radio in a fall but luckily found it. Finally, it was easier cruising on the mining road and by 3 pm we were all back at the cars. Dave and Dennis signed out earlier and to stay another day in the mountains. We were all pleased with the trip. Although it was a challenge at times, we all enjoyed the weekend blessed by beautiful weather, a great scenery, and a fun group of people. My special thanks goes to Tom for his assistance in leading the trip.



Barahm at his car after returning from Pear Lake Hut.

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