

Birch Mtn RCM 5/2000

THE MUGELNOOS

April 2000

Issue # 758



Striking a pose atop Kearsarge Pass

Elderberry Canyon/Onion Valley

April 8-9, 2000 By Tom Marsh

Most of us know Elderberry Canyon as this impressively steep high walled Canyon in the midst of Mt. Tom to the southwest of 395 on the Sherwin Grade. From that vantage point, Mt Tom is a giant upon other very large rugged peaks. Elderberry Canyon looks exceedingly challenging. A world for crampons and ice axes. The Canyon walls could be classified as peaks. This did not appear to be the domain of intermediate skiing. Perhaps better left to those "M" rated leaders with more courage than myself. It wasn't until I reviewed the guidebook of this route that it became apparent this was no more than an intermediate route.

Gerry Holleman and Reiner Stenzel lead a trip through here years ago. Since then this canyon had not been visited by another SMS group. There is good reason for this. The window for skiing Elderberry is quite small. The Northeast facing canyon snow takes longer to transition and the approach is well below the snow line at 5,900 feet. Mark and I decided that this narrow

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MUGELNOOS STAFF

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MUGELMAILER Pat Holleman

NEXT ISSUE

Issue deadline May 20, 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

Meetings

3d Tuesday each month – November – May (except December) 7:30 PM Griffith Park Ranger Station Auditorium

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

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

Leader Needed

Mammoth Area Day Tours, May 20-21

A broken ankle makes it impossible for me to lead this trip as scheduled. Take advantage of excellent snow conditions this spring and assist Paul Harris on these fun day tours in the Mammoth area. I will continue to do the reservations and trip sheet. Please contact Gerry Holleman at 310-374-4654, patngerry@access1.net, if you are an SMS leader who can support this trip.

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Avalanche info for Eastern Sierra

Phone: 760-924-5500

Web: 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 S7 per year payable to "Ski Mountaineers" Due in October. Subscription payments are not tax deductible as charitable contributions

Vote

The following are the candidates for the Board of the SMS:

Susan Livingston
Mark Goebel
Eric Watts
Jim DeRose
Keith Martin
Bahram Manahedgi
Randy Lamm

Please fill out the enclosed card and mail it off by May 16, or e-mail your selection to Reiner Stenzel at stenzel@ucla.edu Vote for up to six. Write ins are OK.

Book Review

TORDRILLO -- PIONEER CLIMBS AND FLIGHTS IN THE TORDRILLO MOUNTAINS OF ALASKA

By Roadman Wilson and Paul Crews Sr. With Lowell Thomas Jr. and Tony Martin.

This book features a history of climbing, including ski mountaineering activity in this remote range about 80 miles west of Anchorage. The only access is by air and part of the focus is on the adventures and mishaps of pilots flying climbers onto the remote glaciers of the Tordrillo's. From the introduction: "This is a history of climbing in the Tordrillo mountains. It is not a guide book, although routes and logistics are described. It is the story of all or nearly all orays into the Tordrillos during the 40 year period 1957-1997. The book is also about flying and Alaskan pilots...." Of interest is a description of SMS member Walt Davie's climb -- the first attempt on Mt. Spurr in 1957. The book can be ordered from:

Todd Communications
203 W. 15th Ave. Ste 102
Anchorage, Alaska 99501
email: sales@toddcom.com

SKI MOUNTAINEERS 2000 TRIP SCHEDULE

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

Letter to the Editor: re Haute Route Article

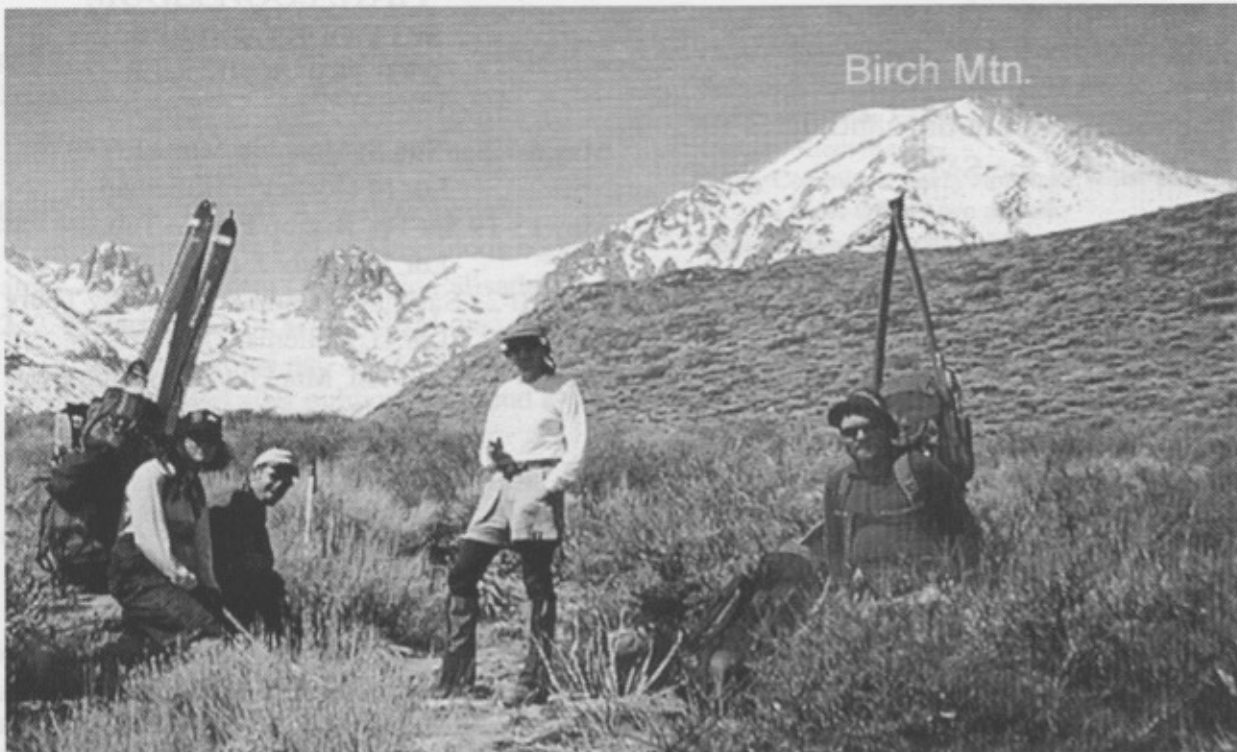
I recently received a letter of complaint from Ruedi Beglinger about the Mugelnoos coverage of our 1999 Haute Route trip. Although the report was written somewhat formally, there was no intention to denounce the guides or the trip in general. Let us make it clear that our Haute Route tour was cherished by all of us and the hardships we faced along the way were considered part of the overall experience that makes this route special. I was personally glad that we were subjected to nasty weather in addition to the blue skies; it gave me a chance to get to know the Alps better and feel the character of this fantastic mountain range.

Ruedi has spent years perfecting this tour beyond the level of the "standard route" used by many other guides. Route selection, added days, options to climb peaks, and the blending of nights in villages and in mountain huts have made his trip exceptional. We especially appreciated the design of the route. Ruedi and his assistant guide led with a high standard of professionalism and safety. Again, those were important factors in choosing his services and we were glade we made that choice.

An additional point needs to be corrected regarding ascent rate. Quoting Ruedi "Our climbing rate was set at about 1,000 ft/hr." Ruedi's letter gave numerous examples of ascent duration between huts and up peaks that were less than or did not exceed his ascent rate limit.

sincerely,
Don Pies,

Ken Deemer, Reiner Stenzel, & Don Ralphs concurring



Susan, Alan, R.J., and Richard on way to Birch Mtn.

BIRCH MTN SMS/SPS Ski Mountaineering Trip, March 25-26, 2000 By Reiner Stenzel

Birch Mtn (13,665') is a classic ski mountaineering peak in the Eastern Sierra Nevada. It is also a listed SPS peak. Thus, it was natural to have a joint SMS-SPS trip to this peak in the Spring. Five participants came together: R. J. Secor, Susan Livingston, Richard Contreras, Alan Franz, and myself. Three of us were both SPS and SMS members, and all had backcountry skiing and climbing experience. We made the summit, enjoyed the skiing, and had a good time without incidents.

Here are the details: On Sat, 7 am, we met at Baker Creek Cpgrd in Big Pine. In spite of a forecast of an impending weather front, it was sunny and clear, the Sierra Crest was beautifully white, and Birch Mtn was visible in the distance some 9,500' above us. The first challenge was to get to it's base. We drove about 7 mi on a dirt road over washboards to McMurry Mdws, then switched into two 4WD cars to dive through

Birch Creek, through deep muck, over vicious rocks and moguls to the Tinemaha Creek "trailhead" (6,800', no signs, end of road).

At 9 am we started our hike, loaded with usually too heavy packs and skis poking into the sky. We took the faint use trail along the creek. Big mistake, it lead into brush country and then disappeared. For a while we traversed on 30 degree slopes parallel to the creek, then lost patience and muscled up to a ridge high above the creek where we followed big-horn sheep trails through sagebrush country. At about 8,000' there is a sizable forest along Tinemaha Crk. and continuous snow started at its upper end. A trail was spotted near the creek and the group left the ridge. The subsequent struggle through the forest and willows in intermittent soft snow is not remembered fondly.

After this ordeal we had lunch, skinned up and ascended the wide, open creek drainage to about 10,100' where we found a fine campsite on a small plateau. By 5 pm three Bibler tents were pitched. We relaxed and enjoyed our cocktails, appetizers, and dinners, overlooking Owens Valley some 6,000' below us to the East and admiring snow covered peaks some 4,000' above us to the West. Since a big day was ahead we were in bed by 7:30 pm.

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Skiing and glissading down from Birch Mtn



Relaxing at basecamp



On summit of Birch Mtn: Reiner, Susan

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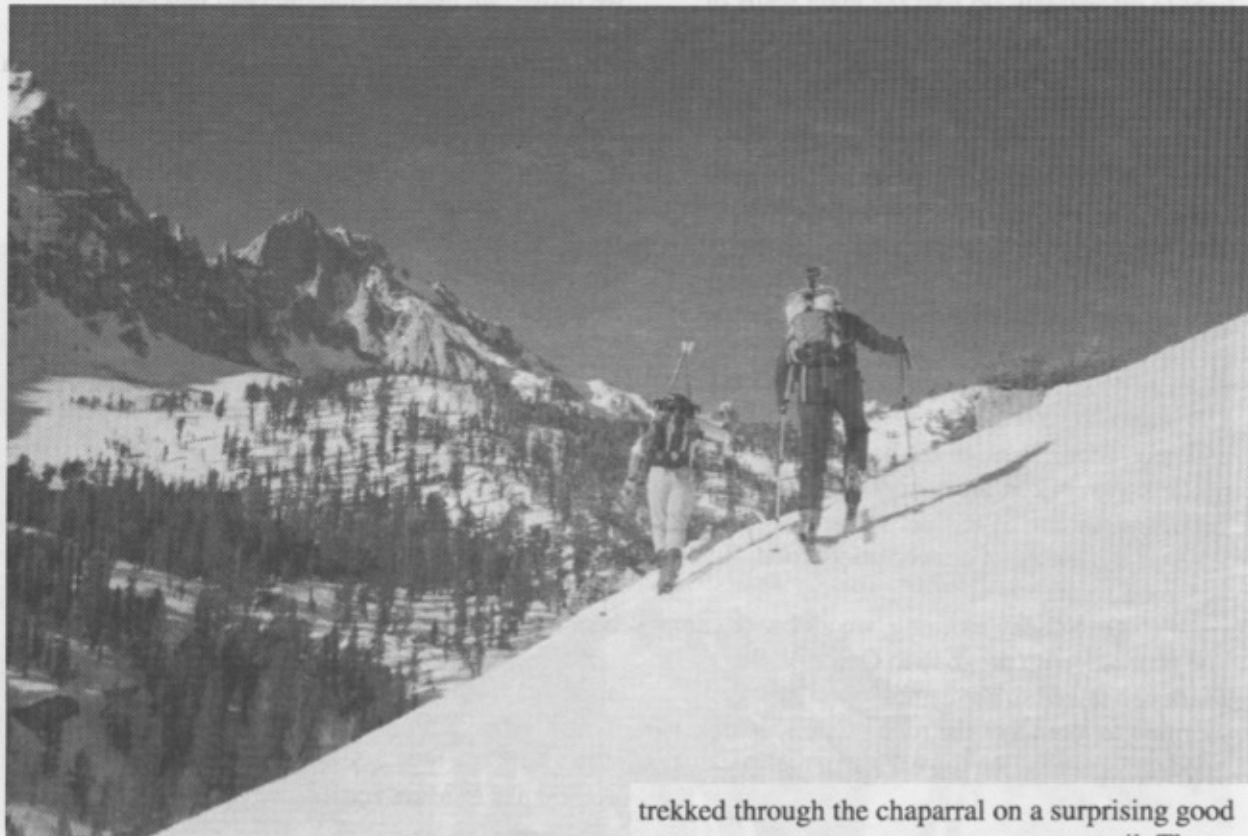
Sunday's wake-up call was at 5 am (not universally appreciated) and we were on our way about an hour later. The snow was frozen solid and four decided to climb on foot with ice axe and crampons. I used ski crampons and had no problems skiing all the way to the summit. High clouds covered the sun and dimmed our hopes for soft snow. R.J. and Susan were concerned how to ski down the steep frozen slopes and opted for an SPS-style peak ascent without skis. We followed the Tinemaha Creek drainage West to about 11,500', then turned North and ascended the southeast slopes of Birch Mtn all the way to the summit (13,665). It was a LONG climb and the group arrived between 11 and noon. Since it was Richard's first climb this year he decided to forgo the summit, enjoy the skiing and saving some energy for the way down. We had two radios to stay in contact when out of sight.

The spectacular summit view from Birch Mtn was worth all the effort. We had a 180 degree panorama of white Sierra peaks around us. The 14,000' peaks of the Palisades Range and Split Mtn were close by. Surprisingly, the earlier clouds had vanished and we were blessed with sunshine, no winds, and the prospect of soft snow. After signing the peak register, taking many pictures, enjoying a high altitude lunch, and calling home with Susan's cell-phone, it was time for the descent. Alan and I

telemarked down from the summit and later met up with Richard.

Guidebooks (J. Moynier, P. Richins) describe the ski runs appropriately as advanced (black diamond, 30-35 deg). It starts on wind slabs near the summit, followed by transitional snow and finally soft spring snow where carving tele-turns becomes a pure pleasure. Except for crossing some rockbands we had continuous snow for the 3,500' ski descent to basecamp. While we skied our hearts out others regretted to walk down or glissaded and got a wet cold rear end. By 2 pm we were all back at basecamp, snacked while packing, and left by 3 pm. Skiing down with a full pack in super soft spring snow is another acquired skill. In telemarking, the weighting of the rear ski makes all the difference between a faceplant or a nice turn. Somehow, everyone got down to the snowline, although walking (postholing) was not an easy option. Having paid our dues near the creek, we remained high on the ridge and walked through thousands of sagebrushes down to the cars arriving by 5 pm.

One could feel the 12 hr, +3,500', -7,000' day of ski mountaineering. On the drive out one car got nearly stuck in the McMurry mud. We rejoined for a nice dinner at P.J.s in Lone Pine which was a bargain compared to what our cars swallowed at \$2/gallon. A late drive home concluded our adventurous weekend in the mountains. Thanks to everyone for the camaraderie and for R.J.'s assistance which made this restricted trip possible.



Heading up to Kearsarge Pass

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window would be around the first part of April. It looked like our predications may have been correct as we awoke to a clear calm day on the desert with snow lines protruding well down the mountain to the desert floor. All the elements for fine spring skiing were present. Cold night, predictable warm temperatures, abundant snow and calm winds. There was a feeling of excitement in the air. The feeling you get when the stock you bought just had a favorable news release.

On Saturday Morning, 14 of us meet on the edge of the town of Rovana. We were Mark Goebel, James Eric Lane, John Anderson, AnneMarie Schober, Wally Drake, Randy Lamm, Jan St. Amand, Angel Ocana, Scott Koepke, Craig Connally, Jim DeRose, Reed Moore, Fred Reed and myself. Randy arrived first and managed to attract the attention of the resident dog. At that point we all took the short drive to the base of Elderberry Canyon.

After a short drive to the base of the canyon at 5,900 feet, we all packed skis and

trekked through the chaparral on a surprising good trail. The only hard

part was negotiating though the willows in the creek. After passing through a narrow slot in the canyon, we reached the snow line at 7,100 feet. At this point, it felt good to take the skis off the back and begin the ascent on boards. This may have been premature as the snow was quite firm and some of us with narrow skins experienced some slippage. In any case the approach was quite gradual and long. The altitude was certainly felt as we ascended past 10,000 feet. Some of us reached the upper bowl at 10,500 feet at about 12:00 noon.

The snow on the north facing slopes was quite hard and wind packed. The snow on the south facing slopes was softening up to a fine corn texture. A number of us proceeded to the ridge with a pre-arranged turnaround time of 1:00 PM. The ski down from the ridge was deemed fabulous corn. As we proceeded down the canyon and collected the others on the way we experienced various conditions from soft pre-transitioned to hard pack. Surprising, the better skiing up high was on the North Facing hard pack where you did not sink in the heavy muck. By the time we reached 9,000 feet, we were in wonderful "hero" corn. It was a sheer de-

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light to effortlessly ski past the giant walls of the canyon. We were all able to ski down to the 7,100 foot level, giving us a 3,500 feet of decent.

We all reached the cars safely at about 3:00 PM with high spirits and the satisfaction of a fine backcountry ski day. Our destination for the night was Upper Gray's campground on the road to Onion Valley. Mark and I planned this destination after careful consideration of snow conditions in early April. Some of us arrived at the campground at around 5:00 PM and proceeded to build a fire with hot beverages and good food. Some of the group took this opportunity to soak in the concessionaire hot springs just south of Bishop. All and all, we had a pleasant evening of conversation, food, fire and good weather.

On Sunday morning, we all broke camp and proceeded up the road to Onion Valley. Mark had talked to the campground host that morning to learn that the road was impassable a good ways before the top earlier in the week. As

we drove, we noticed that the road had been plowed. To our delight we were able to drive all the way to Onion Valley. This was quite a contrast from the day earlier. At this point, we were able to ski right from the cars at 9,200 feet.

Mark lead the way up towards Kearsarge Pass. The group kept a good pace as we ascended the 2,500 feet to Kearsarge Pass by 11:30 AM. The views from Kearsarge Pass were enjoyed by all. Mt. Brewer sat ominously to the Southwest. Kearsarge Lakes were still quite frozen over. After a short lunch we all removed the climbing skins with anticipation of a great decent. Some of the group, lead by Mark skied to Pothole Lake, while the rest of us enjoyed the fine south facing skiing to the East of the Pass. We experienced outstanding conditions as we weaved our way on the south part of the canyon. The last mile to the cars was on silky corn. We were back by 12:30PM.

As we readied for departure, smiles were apparent from this second day of fine backcountry skiing. All and all a wonderful weekend in the sierra's with the best that this region has to offer. Special thanks to Mark for leading this trip with me.

Mugelnoos

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