

Sy Ossofsky

Sy Ossofsky, a long-time backcountry skier, mountaineer, and colorful personality recently passed away. His pal, long-time SMS member Walt Davie, remembers Sy...

I first met Sy in 1954. Sy was a classmate of Leo Finegold, who became a member of the Ski Mountaineers. Both were new electrical engineering graduates of Brooklyn Polytech. My first engineering job out of UC Berkeley was at a department of Northrop Aircraft. This group was working on a guided missile called the Snark. Leo and I were assigned to work together on test equipment. The Snark unfortunately never got very far off the ground, as its entire electronic system was implemented with hundreds of vacuum tubes. These were just not that reliable. Jobwise, it was certainly good to be working for our group supervisor, Lloyd Balsam. Lloyd was at that time also manager of the Mt. Baldy Ski Hut!

Leo lived in a garage apartment on Redondo Blvd. Later in the year Sy arrived in his splendid Jaguar Mark 7 sedan. Sy worked for ITT. His job was to install a TACAN system. This was a military air navigation beacon for the use of nearby Hughes Aircraft Co. Hughes rented a site at the very top of the Baldwin hills for Sy to set up his two big trailers of equipment. It was fun to visit Sy in the trailer, with its humming high voltage mercury vapor tubes glowing blue, various instruments fluttering and the big antenna rotating on the roof.

As Alpine skiers, we gravitated to the monthly Mugelnoos meetings just off the Pasadena freeway. There we teamed up with such luminaries as Barbara Lilley, Harvey Hickman, Worthie Doyle, Rich Gnagy.

Our winter weekends were spent on pilgrimages to Mammoth Mountain. In 1954 Mammoth ski area consisted of two rope tows. These required the use of a special rope tow gripper which dangled from one's belt. Riding the rope tow also required grasping the fast moving rope with stout leather gloves whilst water and slush

sprayed the skier from the gloves. Once under way, the gripper was placed on the rope. The skier had to deftly flick the gripper off the rope at the top, lest he crash into the safety gate, which would stop the rope with a lurch, to the dismay of others below on the rope!

Ski weekends in Sy's Mark 7 were usually accomplished at a total cost of \$25. This included \$10 for gas, \$10 for the Saturday and Sunday rope tow tickets and \$5 left over for incidentals. Sometimes the trip was made in Leo Finegold's massive 1948 Packard Custom 8 sedan when the Jaguar was indisposed.



Friday nights found Sy's group camped out behind the screen of the Bishop drive-in theater, which blocked some of the wind. Barbara Lilley would wake us up at 6am with raucous cries. We would cook instant oatmeal on our Primus stoves and depart for the mountain. Saturday nights were usually spent encamped at the Mammoth Garbage dump. This was by necessity as it was the only plowed road away from the village. The rumblings of the garbage trucks substituted for B. Lilley's wakeup call on Sunday mornings. Saturday dinner was cooked on primus stoves situated on a shelf

chopped in a snowdrift. In case of an actual snowstorm we took refuge in the crawl space under an abandoned cabin just east of the junction of Hwy. 395 and the Mammoth Road. Sy sometimes took guests on our Mammoth outings. I distinctly remember waking up under the cabin one snowy morning to find out that the guest sleeping next to me was the head of the electrical engineering dept. at Technion University in Haifa!

As time went on, the Jaguar was afflicted with mechanical eccentricities. Sy was, to me, a superb teacher of auto repair and general machine shop technique. Sy and I would spend long evenings either repairing or creating

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MUGELNOOS STAFF

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APRIL—MAY ISSUE

We combined the April and May issue as there was a lack of trip news to report during April. We will produce a June/July issue for a season end wrap up/summer workout issue so that we have five issues out for this season.

NEXT ISSUE

The June/July issue deadline is June 10, 2008. All letters, photos, slides, or articles should be sent to Mugelnoos editor, John Anderson, 21717 Evalyn Avenue, Torrance, CA 90503. Materials can be sent by IBM disc or e-mailed to jaydeeay@yahoo.com. Electronic photos and articles are preferred and appreciated.

MEETINGS

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

SMS WEB PAGE

The link is: <http://angeles.sierraclub.org/skimt/>
Check out the web page for the latest SMS news



Sometimes Life is a rocky road....

Onion Valley Road, April 2008

JA photo

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Calendar of Events

All trips sponsored Ski Mountaineers unless otherwise indicated.

May 3-4 Sat-Sun Ski Mountaineers

TI: San Joaquin Mtn (11,600'): A reliable springtime favorite with great ski terrain and Sierra views. Sat climb and ski peak, just west of June Lk., via Fern Lk., 7 mi rt, 4320' gain. Sat night car camp. Sun we will ski (Esha Cyn, Tioga Pass, or Blue Couloir) wherever the snow is best. Requires strong intermediate or better bc skiing ability. Email experience, phone, & ride share info to Ldr: Mark Goebel. Asst: Randy Lamm

May 20 Tues Monthly Meeting Meet your ski friends, discuss trips and be entertained by slide/video program.

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new Jaguar parts in my father's little garage shop at 824 Rimpau Blvd. Sometimes my father would finish up Sy's parts in time for the following weekend ski outing. Sy's Mark 7 eventually succumbed in New York while Sy was on a trip to visit his mother, Lily, who owned an apartment house in Brooklyn. Sy had earlier been touched by the tragic death of his older brother, who just out of medical school, was killed in a rollover accident in his 1949 Ford Convertible. Sy was never fond of convertibles for that reason. Sy at that time bought a new Jaguar 3.8. This was a hot little sedan which although smaller handled the Mammoth trips with more aplomb.

Sy's father, a tailor, died during these early years, leaving Lily alone in her apartment. Lily would visit Sy in Los Angeles now and again. She was the quintessential Brooklyn mother and my family delighted in hearing her Brooklynese witticisms.

Somewhere along the line, Hughes Aircraft recognized Sy's talents and Sy joined that company, working on military cockpit displays, among other things.

The ski tour schedule continued throughout the 60's. I carried Leo Finegold's heavy 16mm camera and filmed parts of these outings. Eventually the resulting movie was released by the Sierra Club Ski Mountaineers under the title "White Horizons" It is available from the SMS on a DVD. This film best commemorates Sy's considerable ski expertise. During the summer months, Sy would tow my little waterski boat to Colorado River venues with his Pontiac wagon, which replaced the Jag sedan.

One memorable trip was the Memorial Day 1962 trip up Lake Mead and into the lower Grand Canyon. They were accompanied by Charlie and Dorothy Hill, in their little outboard, the Galinipper. On that trip, Sy and I decided to motor upriver and shoot some of the rapids. Charlie and Dorothy remained camped in the lower river. Shooting the rapids upstream was exciting and challenging, as the pair soon found out. My boat

plunged under a standing wave. The boat overturned very quickly. Sy and I were thrown into the river wearing only life jackets, thoughtfully provided by Charlie as a last minute farewell offering. We spent a full afternoon swimming rapids downstream. I stayed more or less with the floating overturned boat and Sy disappeared in the distance.

Swimming the rapids wasn't too bad, but the accompanying whirlpools soon became menacing. These sucked one into its whirling center maw and pulled us under. The water changed from brown to black and the end seemed near. Luckily the whirlpool would dissipate and the we would pop up elsewhere.

As night fell, I thought Sy had drowned and vice versa. As it turned out, we separately swam onto respective small beaches and covered ourselves with warm sand for the night. I got up in the morning to see Sy floating past clinging to a big driftwood log which effectively straddled the whirlpools. I grabbed a similar log and we floated out to Charlie's camp, where we were rescued. Charlie and I later found the boat pulled upon an island beach in the lake. Charlie towed the boat down the lake. Sy and I trailered the boat home, disassembled the engine, cleaned the sand off each and every part put the engine back together, made minor repairs to the boat and used it on further water ski trips. No more rapids, thank you.

The following April, Sy was filing his tax return and found a deduction allowance for "shipwreck" in the fine print of the IRS forms. Sy duly claimed expenses for his lost camera and gear stowed in the boat. This claim caused a tax audit. The IRS claim was that it did not apply to landlocked lakes. Sy countered this by asking whether a body of water patrolled by the US Coast Guard would qualify as a genuine shipwreck venue. The auditor said this would be allowed. Sy then produced documents stating that Lake Mead (at that time) WAS patrolled by the US Coast Guard. Sy got his deduction!

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Sy then entered an expeditionary phase. He led expeditions to Mt. McKinley in 1963 and to Mt. Logan in 1965. For the latter trip, Sy made tents and overboots for the group from Dacron Sailcloth, using his inherited tailoring skills and his heavy duty sewing machine. This equipment held up very well in storms encountered on the Logan trip.

Sy and I did another scary boat trip in 1965 to San Miguel Island in Walt's new 16ft I/O boat. Edie Warren (later Davie) completed the crew of three. Two friends of mine accompanied in another (19ft) boat. Forty miles into the 45 mile trip from Santa Barbara, we ran into 20 ft rolling waves. Sometimes the boat would surf smoothly down the backside of the waves. Other times, the boat would completely rise out of the water. The ice chest would leave the deck and float in midair. I could look across at the other boat and see the entire boat hover in mid air, followed either by a smooth recovery or a resounding splash. San Miguel was at that time a US Navy bombing range. The Cuyler Harbor beach had a large threatening sign "US Navy live bombing range. Keep out". Sy and I paddled ashore in my little inflatable kayak, trailing a line which they tied securely to the sign post, thus back up the anchor straining in the wind. We hiked all over this Island, looking at the old farm house (later torched by vandals), the huge lumber pile on the West end and the seal and sea elephant colonies.

Sy married his first wife, Anita, in 1966. They honeymooned in the Swiss Alps by climbing the Matterhorn. In June, 1968, Anita was tragically killed during a 3rd class climb on Mt. Macadie, just north of Mt. Whitney. This happened just a week before Edie and I were married. A year later, Sy married Ellen Siegal, a computer programmer. Some time later they decided to leave their employment, move to Bishop with his 1965 Jaguar XKE 4.2 coupe and live off the land. They bought a nice home in Bishop and eventually the vacant lot next door. They worked really hard at this lifestyle. Ellen won prizes at the County Fair for her preserves and pickles. Sy tended a small flock of goats and sheep. Sy, a long-time friend of Dave McCoy, became the Bishop High School Ski Instructor and taught hundreds of Bishop kids to ski.

Sy and Ellen had two sons in the 70's, Bill and Michael. Sy became a wizard of mechanical last resort in Bishop, repairing machinery no one else could. Sy's accumulative habits got the better of him, and over the years his farm became the resting place of all manner of antique machinery, metal stock, ski equipment and auto parts. Sy and Ellen eventually divorced and began separate

living in Bishop, Ellen with her Steinway and Sy with this ever increasing accumulation. Sy acquired a turbo-charged Maserati sedan which was to prove his undoing. Sy had a bad accident in 1999 when the Maserati went off the road and flipped over 3 times. Sy was 6 months in hospital. After that, Sy mostly remained home and tended his pursuits. Bill and Michael both married and moved away.

November 15, 2007 a big 80th birthday party was held for Sy at Jill Kinmont School in Bishop. Many of his friends were present. Charlie Hill sent Sy his life jacket from the 1962 boat upset. This was ceremonially presented and pictures were taken of Sy and Walt wearing their old lifejackets. Walt showed the "White Horizons" movie in which Sy really is the star. The best scene is Sy cutting graceful slalom tracks in unbroken snow down the face of Alta Peak, Sequoia.

Sy passed away in March, 2008 and is presently cutting tracks beyond the White Horizon.

And that is how I shall always remember him, cutting those tracks in fresh powder snow.

Walt Davie 4/14/2008

Valerie Mendenhall reads from "Woman on the Rocks"

Valerie Mendenhall Cohen, daughter of Ruth and John Mendenhall, attended the SMS meeting on April 15 to read passages from the book and talk about the life of her parents. Ruth Mendenhall was the editor of *Mugelnoos* for several decades!



Ruth autographs "Woman on the Rocks" for fellow mountaineering author Craig Connally and his daughter.

PEAR LAKE #35

In anticipation of ski season, there are the early ski magazines, but a win in the Pear Lake Hut lottery held in early November can really add a highlight to the upcoming season. This rugged, stone sided hut, located in Sequoia National Park, holds only 10, and is reached via a strenuous (depending on the amount of trail breaking required) 6 mile trek with a climb of about 2000'. The hut is situated near timberline at 9200', just down stream from Pear Lake.

Above the hut is 11,240' Alta Peak and its sharp edged ridge that extends eastward to Moose Lake. One easily accessible point on this ridge has been designed Winter Alta and is a favorite day tour from the hut. The view from this point is breathtaking to say the least. To the east extends the Sierra Crest and the peaks of the Great Western Divide. Midway, Milestone and Table Mtns. are three of the more prominent. Far to the north is Mt Goddard, and to the southeast, the rugged Black Kaweah. Add snow and the peaks are even more dramatic.

We cancelled dates obtained for the Hut in 2007 due to the drought of snow. Rocks lurking just under the surface do not make for fun. A trip there in 2006 was marred by high winds that created a mountain covered in breakable crust and a high avalanche hazard. We sat in the hut watching banners of snow blow vertically off the peaks. Why we like to go in early winter is for the opportunity to ski powder on the many fine north-facing slopes between the hut and Winter Alta, and also between widely spaced trees on slopes nearer to the hut. Unfortunately, so does everyone else. Usage of the hut (especially mid-week) has increased greatly in the last five years, thus the lottery. Blame it on the Internet. Too many trip reports posted with photos of folks having a great time.

So one day in early Nov I held my breath when an e-mail from the Sequoia Natural History Association (they operate the hut in winter) arrived, and cheered when it announced confirmation for two nights in the hut in early February. I immediately imagined myself making powder turns below the ridge of Winter Alta. But wait; first a good amount of snow has to fall. Remember that lousy winter 2007. Of course we sweated through the rest of Nov and Dec waiting for a good Sierra dump, but

finally it came and dumped and dumped. On the bright and sunny day that Bahram Manahedgi, Jim Garvey and I drove in to Wolverton Meadows, our starting point to the hut, we gaped in awe at the towering snow banks. Well over the top of the cars, getting out of the parking lot would be the first problem. Clicking into our skis in the lot, we found a weakness and skinned out over the wall of snow. The hut is equipped with propane cooking stoves, pots, dishwear, padded bunks, wood pellet heater, and solar powered lights. No need for heavy packs on this trip!

We followed a well-packed trail to the hut, reaching it in about 5 hours with a break for lunch. A short distance after passing the trail's high point, The Hump/Heather Gap, we encountered 4 Bay area skiers on a daytour from the hut out looking for the "goods". Judging by the tracks they left from the day before, they had struck gold. From the hut we explored the nearby woods, NW of Pear Lk, and found easy turning slopes of settled powder. After several laps, we retired to hut and dinner. Since we weren't carrying snow camping gear, we brought real food, and Chef Bahram prepared us a feast.



Jim, Mark and Bahram at Skiers Alta

On day two, another mild day, we skinned up 2000' to Winter Alta, had lunch and took in the view while the Bay Area boys shredded a steep chute further along on the ridge.

We followed a more moderate line, and enjoyed turn-after-turn down the powder filled bowls below. What a great day, mild temps, great snow, and only 7 people on the hill! The only tracks on the slopes, which surrounded us at least 180 degrees, were ours. We skinned much of the way up again, and tracked up a new and steeper line, before descending the lower slopes on the way back to the hut. The last slope, west facing, frozen in the morning, was now a layer of crusty, ski grabbing snow, and a preview of our descent back to Wolverton Meadows the next day.

It is good that Bahram needed to be back in LA by early evening. This forced us to depart the hut by 7:30am. The skin track back to The Hump went quickly, and then the fun began. Initially our descent into the woods on the

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DEATH MARCH + SARDINE CANYON

Saturday was only a death march for the Mugelnoos editor: out-of-shape, poorly prepared (hiked the two to three miles in ski boots and wound up with gigantic blisters. Everyone else seemed to enjoy the day of aerobic exercise

When Randy and I first planned this trip, we figured that Onion Valley Road would be open all the way to Onion Valley. It was always opened before, even in some of the wetter years by the 1st of April. Maybe the County figured that opening up a road was not worth it for the few backcountry skiers that venture up this time of year. After we heard that the road up to Glacier Lodge road was open to the lodge, we changed the plans for Saturday to Big Pine Creek. The night before the group arrived at the campground west of Big Pine. It was a big group indeed with Randy Lamm, Mike Rector, Bahram Manahedgi, Paul Gerry, John Anderson, Jim Garvey, Reed Moore, Micky Bozyola, Alysa Vos, Ken Deemer, Jim Derose, Kat Seiple and I.

We met Alvin at the trailhead with his group of harder core skiers attempting Mt. Kidd. After a slow start, we start out on the North Fork trail of Big Pine Creek. Reed led most of the way into Big Pine Creek basin with a trail walk for the first 2-3 miles along south facing slopes. The snow was fairly hard and intermittent, so it wasn't too hard to walk with the skis on the back. Not that an extra 6 pounds on your back makes a big difference. More for the folks that carried ski boots while walking in sneakers.



*Up the North Fork of Big Pine Creek
Mike Rector photo*

After getting to First Lake we finally were able to put the skis on for continuous snow. The lower route had better coverage with more North facing slopes and a lower profile to the sun. The route followed the lower trail just above 2nd and 3rd lakes. The optimistic objective of the day was Sam Mack Meadow. Given all the dis-

tance from the cars, it took a fair amount of time to get to the approach to Sam Mack. Reed attempted the route up, but found the snow a bit sugary and sticky. We all took a break right below the approach enjoying the warm sun and calm winds. More weather for a summer backpack than a spring ski. Ken, Micky and Alysa did a climb up the steep north facing ridge of Sam Mack finding good conditions. The rest of us started the descent back with the idea of staying in the drainage. The lakes were well frozen over for a fast traverse. We were greeted with a variety of obstacles at the exit points of each of the lakes. At Third lake, we did the limbo under a walk way (old mining railway bridge). By the time we got to Second Lake, we had to veer to the left of the dam at the confluence. We had to search for the best route to the North side of the canyon for the best coverage. Bahram had the right idea of descending before the cliff ridden drainage. The snow was icy in spots from the shade of the trees on this North Facing slope. After getting to the bottom of the drainage again, we did indeed; follow the North side of Big Pine Creek. It took a number of stream crossings to stay in the snow. It was soft and manageable, for the most part. After a couple steep traverses and more creek crossing, we finally hit the snow line. For some this extended to the large waterfall (ambient a few dry patches walking on skis). By the time we got to the cars it was 6:30PM. A long day for a day ski. After a quick drive down to the Owens Valley, Mike, Kat, Randy and Ken and I met up at one of the Keough Mud holes for a pleasant soak and beer. The water was not hot, but with balmy air, it was just what

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west side was on snow still somewhat frozen, and would support us if skied carefully with snowplow and stem type turns. Balance was critical, a light pack helpful. Some of us were more successful than others. The further we descended, the wetter and heavier the snow became. Kick-turns and traversing became our survival mode. Once down to the Alta trail, we pointed our skis down a narrow packed trench left by earlier snowshoers and tried to stay upright. Really a knee twisting luge run. Finally, a sharp left turn, and in a few feet we were back at the car. Before leaving The Gap, I looked back to the east, and thought about my many trips through this gateway to the backcountry. This was number 35. It never gets old.

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the doctor ordered. Needless to say, it was a late dinner by the time we got back to the campground.

The next day dawned as clear and warm as the day before. Randy and Ken had driven up the Onion Valley road on Friday to within a mile of the Onion Valley trail head. The important point is one mile as the "crow fly's". Much further than the spot the ranger had mentioned. Mike explained to me the nuances of road closure postings between various agencies. In this case, it meant we don't maintain the road past the stated closure, but if you want to proceed, go for it! Rocks littered the road on the way to the closure point, but the folks before had



Alysa on her first SMS trip. Having fun yet?

cleared enough of a path to get a vehicle through. After getting to the snow, we realized the snow on the road was no going to let us proceed and that one crow mile did not sound that appealing (unless we could sprout some wings). Especially given the elevation gain on the road of some 1,300 feet. Lucky for us, Bahram knew that Sardine Canyon would have snow. So we drove back down the rocky strewn road to the big switch back at 7,500' where the dirt road goes north along about a mile to the bottom of Sardine Canyon. I remember this from a trip with Reiner to Little Onion Valley several years ago. The slopes along the dirt road approach were blackened and scorched from a recent fire. So much so that the ski boots collected a far amount of moon dust. Feeling like astronauts with the tiny town of Independence in the distance we proceed to the narrow notch of Sardine Canyon.

The snow had deep sun cups and was littered with a lot of avalanche debris and dirt for the first mile through the narrow canyon. The higher we ascended, the more the canyon opened up. When we started up around 9am it

was warm at the bottom of the canyon. Skinning up it was more like traversing thru the Khumbu glacier stepping over 6" sun cups. As we proceeded up into the middle of the canyon the snow smoothed out. After about 700' of vertical we noticed a path on the north side of the canyon (south facing) which was dry and appeared to be an old mining road. This would have been an



Bahram all twisted up after the Death March
JA photo

easy walk up if we had noticed it earlier. Probably would have had access if we had walked just north of the bottom of Sardine. We continued up. Around noon the wind picked up and cooled things down. The snow which was starting out soft and had potential of coming up instead was during hard and almost icy. The soft sun cups were turning hard and our skins were not gripping so well. Another group of skiers from Bishop were ahead of us and they appeared to have made it to the top of the canyon (we later learned they had started out at 7am). Most of us topped out at a broad bench at about 10k. The snow on the climbers right side of the canyon was softer while on the left it was icy. We could see the Bishop skiers coming down making long turns. Above and to the left were the North slopes of Kearsarge Peak. There were obvious Couloirs coming down from the summit into Sardine. These would be the slopes where it would be possible to link up a car drop off at the dirt road switch back, take another car and car pool up to the OV parking area and climb the south east ridge of Kearsarge Pk to the summit. Then drop one of the north west couloirs down to Sardine for a 7k vert run. As the wind picked up the group pulled skins and headed down. About 700' from the bottom the sun cups were too gnarly to continue skiing and most put skis on pack and walked down to the snow line and out on the dirt road. We got back to the cars around 2:30 and headed down into the warm Owens Valley and back to life's routines in LA.



**PRIVATE TRIP REPORTS:
SEND 'EM IN**

"Back in the day" SMS group trips were the norm and massively well attended. Today, with inexpensive and extensive transportation and probably tighter time schedules, a lot of our backcountry skiing is done on private trips. If you take an interesting private trip, let Mugelnoos know about it. It's not much of an effort these days to type it up on the computer and email it and some digital pictures to me. We all need the beta.

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