

FINALE

by Thomas H. Jukes

Norman Clyde died in Big Pine, California in December 1972 at the age of 87. He had lived as every alpinist wants to live, but as none of them dare to do, and so he had a unique life. When he died, I felt that an endangered species had become extinct. For half a century, he had spent spring, summer and fall in the Sierra Nevada, and his winters on its magnificent eastern flanks, usually as the caretaker of some mountain lodge, empty until next season, alone in the untrodden snow. His ascents, nearly all in the Sierra, must have numbered in the thousands.

Climbers today tote horrible little mechanical stoves with blue cylinders of low-molecular-weight hydrocarbons prepared by the petroleum industry on which to warm their pre-cooked freeze-dried shrimp Creole. Norman carried a cast-iron frying pan and some chunks of dead wood in his gigantic old knapsack to cook fresh trout. He was large, solitary, taciturn and irritable — like the North Palisade in a thunderstorm, and he could also be mellow and friendly, like the afternoon sun on Evolution Lake. It is impossible to think of Norman Clyde without remembering the glories of the southern High Sierra, because you were always liable to meet him up there if you wandered far enough. He was a reader of the classics, and carried books with him. He was famous for mountain rescues. His last camp was at 10,000 feet in the Fourth Recess of Mono Creek and he had to cross the main crest of the Sierra Nevada to get to it, at the age of 85. He was the only man I have known who gave himself up completely to a passionate love of the mountains. In return, the mountains spared him a hundred times as he clambered alone to their summits by many a new route. And, they let him die of old age, in full view of their peaks.