

Notes and Correspondence



The Search for Walter Starr, Jr.

On the evening of July 29, 1933 Walter A Starr Left San Francisco for a vacation trip in the High Sierra, starting out over the Tioga Road, destination not known. He had made a tentative plan to meet his father on August 7th at Glacier Lodge, near Big Pine, Inyo County, and when he did not arrive there, after waiting until August 9th, his father left for home with a feeling of anxiety, but with the conclusion that his son had perhaps changed his plans, and had decided not to come out to Glacier Lodge from the high mountain country. Starr was due to return home on August 13th, and when he did not make an appearance at his office on the morning of the 14th, his father became convinced that some serious accident must have befallen him.

The first problem was to locate Starr's automobile. By noon a description of the car had been sent out through the State Police, Highway Patrol, Forest Rangers, and the Sheriffs of Mono and Inyo counties. Meanwhile Mr. Francis P. Farquhar, of the Sierra Club, had located several members of the club known for their ability as climbers and mountaineers, who, with great loyalty and unselfishness, held themselves in readiness to start on the search whenever the call should come.

At about 7 o'clock that evening word was received that the car had been found at Agnew Meadow, thirteen miles over the pass from Mammoth, Mono County, and also that Starr's camp had been located near Lake Ediza, which lies under the east side of Mount Ritter. The fact that the location of the camp was reported with that of the car was afterward explained. It seems that two miners living below Lake Ediza had noticed the abandoned camp a week before, and had reported the matter several times—so they said. Investigation afterward disclosed that knowledge of the abandoned camp was general about Agnew Meadow and it was said to have been reported to rangers. However, for some unexplained reason, no investigation of the matter had been made. Starr's name and address were on papers in his camp outfit, and so identified him.

On receipt of the telegram reporting the car, a wire was sent to Glen Dawson, of Los Angeles, who left soon after, with Dick Jones, by auto for Mammoth. Two cars left Oakland with Jules Eichorn, Lowell Hardy, Whiting Welch, Mike Sutro, Allan Starr, and W. A. Starr, Sr, headed for Mammoth by way of Sonora Pass. Driving through the night, all arrived at Mammoth Ranger Station at about 7 A.M., August 15th, and there found that Chief Ranger Douglas Robinson had started out a searching party of twelve men and camp outfit for Lake Ediza at 3:30 A.M.

Lowell Hardy and Whiting Welch remained with Chief Robinson at the station to act in keeping contact between the searching party and the outside, and to see that needed supplies were sent out. Mike Sutro started back driving Starr's abandoned car. Eichorn, Dawson, Jones, Allan Starr, and Starr, Sr., were driven over to Agnew Meadow, and from there set out on foot for

Lake Ediza with two mules carrying their outfit, and on arrival there, about 3 P.M., found the Mammoth searching party camp established and the men out covering the country in the vicinity of the lake. This party spent the next three days exploring the country below and east of the Minarets and Mount Ritter and the divide separating the Lake Ediza basin and Garnet Lake, and did an efficient piece of work under the direction of Officer M.G. Nicholl, of Bridgeport. It was not considered likely that Starr would be found in the country thus covered; but it at least eliminated the lower country and allowed the men capable of doing the more difficult climbing of the peaks to concentrate on that work, where it was considered most likely Starr had met with an accident while climbing.

Shortly after dark on the 15th, Norman Clyde and Oliver Kehrlein arrived at the Lake Ediza camp, having hastened from Glacier Lodge, below the Palisades, where they had been exploring the glacier. Their arrival made it possible to form four climbing parties, and it was decided to reach the sum mils of Banner, Ritter, and the main Minarets on the first day for possible clues. Starr's camera was found in his abandoned camp and the exposed film was taken out and sent down to Mammoth for development, in order to the pictures which would eliminate the country shown in the exposures the search. During the afternoon a plane carrying Francis Farquhar as observer circled about Banner, Ritter, and the Minarets several times. The flight was repeated the following morning. It was hoped that if Starr were alive a signal might be seen.

The climbers were off at 6 A.M. the morning of the 16th. Douglas Robinson, Jr., and Lilburn Norris, of Mammoth, climbed Ritter by a route up the east side of the mountain, pointed out to them as one known to have been taken before by Starr. They succeeded in reaching the summit and found that Starr had registered there on the 31st of July, saying that he had used crampons and ice-axe, having crossed the glacier. As both were in his camp, it was evident that he had returned safely from Ritter.

W. A. Starr, Sr., and his son Allan Starr climbed Banner, going up the southeast side by way of the saddle and down the west side, searching the two glaciers, and returning around the north and east base of the mountain across the heads of Thousand Island and Garnet lakes. It was found that Starr had not registered on the summit of Banner. Norman Clyde and Oliver Kehrlein climbed up to the glacier on the northeast side of Clyde's (or Highest) Minaret, where they searched the crevasses and bergschrund. Proceeding to upper Iceberg Lake on the east side of Clyde's Minaret, they found what appeared to be a place where a climber had rested on the short grass, and picked up a piece of handkerchief, afterward identified as one of Starr's, which had been used to tie up a cut finger. Clyde and Kehrlein followed a line of ducks which took them up a daring route on Clyde's Minaret. They were recent. One duck had been placed on grass which was still fresh underneath. Climbing to the summit they found no record, although Starr was known to have climbed this minaret before. Jules Eichorn, Dick Jones, and Glen Dawson climbed together from the west side of the Minarets, Dawson reported on as follows:

On the 16th, Jules, Dick Jones, and I crossed Michael's notch to the west side of the Minarets. We climbed a fine high pinnacle on the main crest of the Minarets under the impression we were climbing Leonard's Minaret. We went down a different chute to the one

we went up. We next went up the first chute north of Michael's, finding evidence of a recent big slide. Near the top of the chute we came across a line of ducks and a half-smoked cigarette, of the brand that Starr was accustomed to smoke. We followed the ducks to a point below the two large spires north of Michael's Minaret and draining into Michael's chimney. Jules and I hurried up Michael's Minaret, but found no evidence of anyone having been there since our previous climb with Brem in 1931. Heavy storms made further investigation inadvisable. We went down Michael's chimney roping down over the "ladder with the lower rungs missing." We returned to camp over a big gap north of the notch and slid down a small glacier.

On the 17th, Jules and I went up the second chute north of Michael's chimney. We found the apparent beginning of the ducks. Some were very wobbly. None of them were down. The ducks were usually of three stones, although one at the head of the first chute north of Michael's chimney was quite large. We saw indistinct footprints in one place. These ducks connected with the ones we saw the day before. The line of ducks was made by an experienced route-finder. Jules and I both admired the excellence of the route. We climbed Third Minaret, but found no trace of Starr or of his ever having been there. We returned by a chute between Third and Fourth minaret, the lower part of which was the same as we had come up.

Dick Jones and one of the CCC boys who climbed Ritter (Lilburn Norris) went down to timber in Dike Creek, but found no clues. Jules and I went around Michael's Minaret over a ridge to a lake. We did so in order to climb up the chimney going down east from the portal, since we could only see the upper part from above. We went down to a lake up another ridge from where we could have climbed Clyde's Minaret from the south in a short time and without any great difficulty. We went down a chute, doing a 50-foot rope-down over a huge chockstone (the Minarets are full of chockstones). We met Clyde and Kehrlein searching near Upper Iceberg Lake. We were stumped. As I write this I can't understand it. Lines of ducks lead to near the summit of two major summits of the Minarets, but no signatures on top; Starr usually wrote lengthy accounts in registers I have seen.

We seemed to give up the search rather suddenly. However, I don't know how much value further search would be. It is like trying to find a needle in a haystack. I urged Mr. Starr to let Clyde stay on, and I hope the mystery may some day be solved.

Cliff Youngquist talked with Starr about August 2d at Lake Ediza. Starr said he was going to cross Minaret Pass and climb the north Minaret. I don't know what that means. The news was sent in to Clyde and I don't know what more we could do except perhaps climb the northern Minaret and Leonard's Minaret. However, I don't understand why Starr should climb any small stuff unless he had already climbed Clyde's and Michael's.

By the 18th, Clyde, Eichorn, Dawson, Kehrlein, and Jones climbed and searched the east face of Banner on the theory that Starr might have tried that route which had been climbed but once before by Jules Eichorn. In the late afternoon all walked out to Agnew Meadow with Mr. Starr, except Norman Clyde, who remained at the Lake Ediza Camp to continue the search alone on the Minarets. The boys of the Mammoth searching party had already given up the search and had returned to Mammoth.

Norman Clyde reported his search on the succeeding days, August 19th to 25th, as follows:

Aug. 19th: Went up to ridge north of Iceberg Lake leading westward toward what appeared to be Leonard's Minaret, followed ridge westward to base of this Minaret and across a glacier north of it to a wide "U"notch; climbed the Minaret from the notch, but found no evidence; passed through notch and skirted base of Minarets on west side until abreast of Michael's notch through which I passed and returned to camp. Came to conclusion that Walter had not been north of Michael's notch; became somewhat suspicious of the northwest face of Michael's Minaret when I examined it with glasses.

Aug. 20th: Searched carefully around lake on Minaret Pass for trace of a bivouac. Finding none, descended to the lake beyond the pass and searched about it. No evidence of any kind found.

Aug. 21st: In camp.

Aug. 22d: Ascended to the east base of Highest (Clyde's) Minaret and thoroughly searched about the base of that Minaret. Followed the line of ducks (found in the previous search) leading up the northeast face of this Minaret. Found that they terminated on the arête running northeast from the summit. Continued to summit and examined cairn carefully for evidence, but found none. Followed a zigzag course down the mountain alternating between the northeast and north faces, using glasses frequently and examining the glacier bergschrund carefully with them. Conclusion: Convinced that Walter had climbed to the summit, in spite of that no evidence found there; convinced that he did not fall or otherwise come to grief on the northeast face of Clyde's Minaret, and that there was little reason to think that an accident had happened to him on the north face; but if one did that he had fallen into the bergschrund, which was possible, but not probable. I considered the Highest (Clyde's) Minaret and Minarets north of Michael's notch eliminated.

Aug. 23d: Went around over glacier southeast of Highest Minaret, through notch and around to cirque south of the Minarets, examining all faces carefully with glasses, seeing nothing. On return climbed Minaret immediately southeast of notch, then passed through notch and searched about.

Aug. 24th: In camp. Concluded that in the time available Walter Starr would in all probability have contemplated climbing both the Highest (Clyde's) and Michael's Minarets.

Aug. 25th: Left camp early, climbed up through Michael's notch and continued southwest along the west base of Minarets to the southwest base of Michael's Minaret. Ascended a cliff in the west face of the Minaret at first to look around but presently concluded that a ledge would probably lead from this shoulder into the upper portion of Michael's chute, so I continued climbing. Found a ledge and followed it around into the chute, the floor of which is reached just above a forty-foot drop-off. Continued up to within about two hundred feet of the notch, at head of the chute, and then began to climb the face. Abandoned this and

continued up to notch, and from there climbed to top of Minaret. After remaining on summit about half an hour sweeping the other Minarets with glasses began the descent, constantly scanning the northwest face. Arriving at the notch examined that face from there but saw nothing. Walked out a few yards along a ledge leading northwestward and looked up. Saw the body lying on a ledge about fifty yards distant across the head of the chute in a southwesterly direction and slightly higher than the notch. Returned to Mammoth and wired the news to Mr. Starr.

Jules Eichorn, Douglas Robinson, Jr., Lilburn Norris, Ranger Mace, and W. A. Starr, Sr., returned with Norman Clyde to Lake Ediza on August 29th. The next day they climbed to the west side of Michael's Minaret. Eichorn and Clyde were successful in climbing to the ledge where the body lay. Starr had met instantaneous death by a fall of some three hundred feet from near the top of Michael's Minaret. On a narrow ledge below lay his watch, badly damaged, with the hands standing at 4:30. On a narrow ledge above was evidence of a large rock having recently struck. This, with other evidence, pointed clearly to the fact that a large slab of rock must have broken away as Starr clung to it in climbing, and, hinging outward at the base, had thrown him clear of the face until he struck the ledge several hundred feet below. It was fitting that the body was entombed on the ledge where it fell. The earthly remains of this lover of the Sierra have become a part of the mountain.

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