

SIERRA NOSTALGIA

Mary Gates, a 50-year member of Sierra Club wrote an interesting memoir of her activities in the club.

THE SIERRA CLUB: YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW

In September 1954 I migrated to California in a '41 Ford Coupe, accompanied by a brother. We bought sleeping bags and traveled "blue" roads, camping often outside one-room schoolhouses, where we had a pump, outhouses and a tornado cellar. In Salt Lake City we were invited by a guard at the State Capitol to sleep on the lawn in the daytime.

I settled in San Jose and in October, with two friends, cycled on country roads through the prune orchards to the rural village of Los Altos. We then pushed our bikes uphill to Hidden Villa Ranch to stay at the first purpose-built youth hostel in the USA. Frank and Josephine Duvenek were also ardent supporters of the Sierra Club. (Wallace Stegner wrote a biography of Josephine Whitney Duvenek.) Since we three were the only hostellers, Josephine invited us to attend a Sierra Club slide show in the massive living room of their spacious ranch house. This was my first contact with the Sierra Club, which I never envisioned I would ever join.

In 1955 I moved to Carmel Woods on the Monterey Peninsula and lived in a board-and-batten one-room cabin. I went on hikes and car-camped with friends. In 1957 an enthusiastic backpacker moved into the cottage next door. She outfitted me with an army surplus pack and a liner of an army sleeping bag. I started off carrying forty pounds, but, nonetheless, I was hooked on backpacking in the Los Padres National Forest.

In order to join the Sierra Club in those days you had to have two sponsors to write a statement about your character. We drank the water and cooked on open fires. There was no prohibition on consumption of alcohol. We always had happy hour before dinner and a sing-along during the evening. From May to November we did not need tents. We just put our bags on plastic and a tarp over us to keep our bags dry from condensation. Sometimes we had individual or group commissaries when we might have steaks for dinner. These trips were deluxe. The backcountry of Yosemite was not so much used.

At that time the Monterey Peninsula SCers belong to the San Jose Loma Prieta Chapter, but in the early sixties Monterey formed its own Ventana (Window) Chapter. We had easy, moderate and difficult day hikes and backpack trips and canoe/kayaking. Sometimes I was the only woman backpacker to places like King's Canyon and Sequoia. A friend asked if I was worried about sleeping next to all of those men. I replied that I would rather sleep next to a man I knew than a bear I didn't.

In 1959 I went on my first weeklong trip with Sierra Club to the Ritter Range on the backside of Yosemite. The second was in Yosemite's high country. As new, lighter equipment became available, you were only allowed 18 pounds of personal gear. This was weighed at the trailhead and if you were overweight, you had to leave items out to get the weight down. The scenery was, of course, magnificent.

One of my favorite winter hikes with SC was a ski hike with skins on the bottom of our skis. We went from Badger Pass (6,800 feet) to Ostrander Lake (over 10,000 feet.) Mary Curry Tressider liked this excursion and used to go on a private trip in a snowmobile every winter when she was quite elderly. She sent in a couple from the Curry Company as cooks and caretakers of half of the federal cabin. It cost \$15 for a cot with clean sheets and blankets, a hot drink on arrival, a huge dinner, a lumberjack breakfast and a packed lunch for the return downhill trip back to the Badger. Mary Curry married Donald Tressider, President of Stanford. This union was great for both the Sierra Club and Stanford University.

Joining the Sierra Club opened the doors to the kind of outdoor life that I had never dreamed of in my wildest fantasies. I met such wonderful people from all walks of life. In our Ventana backpack group we had a surgeon and a hod carrier, just to show the wide range. I learned the basics of rock climbing from Dave Eichorn, who was in the first group to scale El Capitan in Yosemite. I learned how to belay, rappel, and chimney climb. Knowing these simple techniques has been useful and has given me confidence.

I am also impressed by the part Sierra Club has played in promoting conservation and the expansion of the wild lands of the USA. Sierra Club is the largest private recreational and conservationist organization in the world and I am proud to be a member.

Mary Gates