

Missing 15-Year-Old Hiker

May 29, 1977

Monitor Mountains, near Tonopah, NV

1977-016

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On Sunday, May 29, Kathy Simon left her family's camp in Cottonwood Creek, Monitor Range, Nevada. She was seen moving up Cottonwood Creek Sunday by her stepfather, Ray Eden. Kathy was fifteen years of age, a strong girl and in good condition. Her family had come to this area north of Tonopah a few times before and one could assume she knew the way up the creek fairly well. She had only her fishing tackle and some matches to go with her light clothing, but the days were quite warm, even though the family's camp was at the 8,000 ft. elevation. All in all, it was a routine excursion for Kathy. It ceased to be routine when she did not return that evening.

That night, her father followed her tracks up to approximately the 10,000 ft. elevation at which point he lost them. Ray then went to the sheriff in Tonopah. The next day jeep teams, horseback riders and others were combing the hills around Cottonwood Creek. On Wednesday, the Mountain Rescue Association (MRA) was contacted for assistance and sent what members could be mustered. By Friday, no sign of Kathy had shown up and another call for assistance from other MRA members was sent out.

Saturday morning Jim Fairchild, Ed Hill, Rick Pohlers, Larry Roland, Hal Fulkman and I from RMRU drove to Van Nuys airport to join approximately 60 other members of the MRA from Sierra Madre, Altadena, Montrose and San Diego teams. As the darkness gave way to first rays of light, we boarded an Army Reserve C-130. We found true an observation by a crew member that the C-130 had every noise you'd ever heard as well as some you hadn't! The sun was one hour over the horizon when we landed at China Lake to pick up members of the China Lake Rescue Group. From there into Nevada we were treated to the fine panorama of the East Flank of the Sierra Nevada as well as the White Mountains.

When we landed in Tonopah a line of jeeps awaited us. Within minutes we were driving towards the Monitor Range. When we reached the bottom of Cottonwood Creek Canyon, we were greeted at a meadow by some of the MRA members already there. After a briefing that lived up to its name, we were whisked to the top of Table Mountain in a reserve chopper. Table Mountain was a 10,000 ft. plateau that bordered Cottonwood Creek. Teams of two and three were dropped off at

intervals of a half mile along Table Mountain. Within an hour, Cottonwood Creek was ringed by MRA teams, each with an assignment to work towards base camp. Base camp here was at the confluence of Cottonwood Creek and Barley Creek, the site of the family's camp. So far, the operation seemed well timed, well orchestrated, well planned, well designed to yield results quickly.

As Larry Roland, Jim Fairchild and I moved down the ridge to carry out our assignments, we found ourselves in an area of difficult tracking. We had seen areas like this near Lake Perris in practice training; hard ground and springy turf. We shortly found tracks, but on a jeep road. We were later to discover that this jeep road rimmed Cottonwood Canyon. It was covered with jeep tracks, vibram prints and prints from cowboy boots. The area had been covered, but we were only later able to discover how well. The prints we were told to look for were tennis shoe prints of 8 1/2 inches in length. By midday, we had worked our way down to where a canyon dropped off to the right into Barley Creek. While we had lunch, Ed Hill, Rick Pohlers and Hal Fulkman were working down the ridge to our left, just above Cottonwood Creek, finding, as we did, many prints except Kathy's. They were one of many teams that ended up in Cottonwood Canyon by the end of the day.

Two hours later Jim, Larry and I were in Barley Creek and shortly thereafter, joined with a Sierra Madre team to follow many vibram prints down Barley Canyon. The end of the day found us with one conclusion: the area we had been covering was already well covered. The other teams that reached base camp at the confluence of Barley and Cottonwood Creeks could also reach the same conclusion.

Although day brought disappointment, that evening brought encouragement. We were greeted at base camp by a wonderful meal of home cooking prepared in a fine group effort by the residents of Tonopah. We found that the search had brought people in Tonopah together who ordinarily didn't talk to each other.

That evening, Larry Roland, Jim Fairchild and Hal Fulkman sat down to interview the father and mother of Kathy. Three hours later, they were equipped with a wealth of information much of which should have been in our hands Saturday morning. The key piece of information was that their daughter's print was not 8 1/2 inches long but 10" long. In addition they found that Kathy was a strong girl in good condition. Her parent's instruction had been for her not to follow the stream back when she wanted to return to camp, but to climb a ridge to regain her perspective if she was lost. It appeared from the interview that Kathy was somewhere between where she was last seen and base camp. The end of the interview did not bring an end to certain realizations, however. As the night progressed, one more bit of information that we were already aware of was re-enforced. It was quite cold here at the base of the canyon. We could imagine how cold it would be for Kathy if she were on top of Table Mountain, over 10,000 ft.

high!

Sunday morning our assignments were a little more thought out, but we had only a morning of searching for we were due to be picked up shortly after noon to return to California. We seemed to be fighting time as we worked our assignments, hoping for any sign of Kathy. A storm moving in from the north increased the sense of urgency. Noon seemed to arrive very quickly and within a short period of time, we were back at base. Our debriefing would have served as an excellent briefing.

All but 6 MRA members were flown back to California that evening. These 6, one of whom was Jim Fairchild, stayed to pursue the course of some prints discovered late Sunday. Their efforts did not turn any further signs.

For the Sheriff from Tonopah there was little left but a mystery. When we left he said he would spend that week riding in the hills around Cottonwood Creek, looking for any signs of the lost girl. For Kathy's mother and father, there was little left but memories or perhaps misunderstanding or disbelief. For some of the residents of Tonopah though, some of the jeep teams of Nevada and some of the members of the California Mountain Rescue Association, there remained newly made or recently strengthened friendships and a hope that the next call would bring happier results.

(Editor's Note: Since the writing of this article, it has been learned that Kathy has been found in dense foliage of the canyon. She had succumbed to exposure, possibly before the professional search and rescue teams were even called)

RMRU is a volunteer search and rescue team that covers Riverside County and assists other teams with search and rescue efforts in other counties. Each member purchases their own equipment and takes time off work, without compensation, to participate in search and rescue missions. Team equipment is purchased from contributions from the community. We are a non-profit organization and are funded by [donations](#) from people like you.