



Teacher and students overdue

April 06, 1978
San Jacinto Mtns
1978-014

By John Dew

At exactly 2100 hrs. (9:00 P.M.) Thursday night the pagers came alive with their familiar piercing whistle. We were informed of the number to call in order to respond to a search in Idyllwild. Eight children (4-6th graders) led by one adult male teacher were in the mountains and should have been back to Humber Park some hours earlier.

A group of students who were camping at Maranatha for the week from a school in Irvine had hiked toward Saddle Junction, which is at the 8000' level. They had started from Humber Park in the morning.

The group had arrived at Saddle junction in time for lunch. They had eaten lunch and then divided into two groups. One group of children and their leader, a lady teacher from the school, departed the Saddle headed for Humber. The other group with the man teacher started hiking downhill towards Skunk Cabbage Meadow. They told the first group that they were going to make a circle down around Skunk Cabbage Meadow and return, arriving at Humber about five o'clock. When they had not arrived by six the Sheriff was notified. He knew that people are often later than they expect to be and decided to wait a little longer, giving them an opportunity to get back if they had just been detained for some reason, without alerting a whole rescue team if there was no need to do so. Also, two adults from the group hiked almost to the Saddle looking for them.

When they had not returned by 8:30 p.m. the decision was made to call the team. By the time we arrived at the road head in Humber Park the weather from the beautiful day had departed and was replaced by angry looking clouds which were covering the sky. The wind was coming up and it looked like a miserable night was ahead of us.

The first six men to arrive, Walt and Kevin Walker, Hal Fulkman and Jim Fairchild, Don Chambers and I had donned our packs and were on the trail.

We knew it would be a simple mission, just going to the Saddle, meeting the group and leading them out. HOW WRONG WE WERE!!!

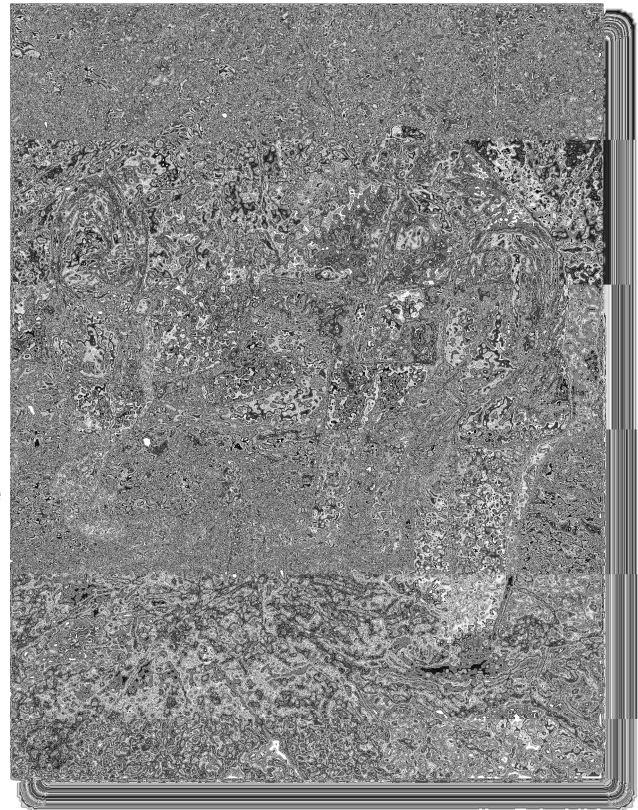
As the team was approaching Saddle junction the wind picked up, the clouds began losing their moisture in the form of snow, and there was no response to our shouts. We

left Hal and Don at the Saddle as relay and proceeded toward the meadows further into the mountain. The more we hiked, the more severe the weather became and soon our concerns were for the children we had thought would be so easy to find.

Soon we were following tracks. From the number and various sizes of the tracks we felt sure they would lead us to the subjects. The pace for us was fast. There were two reasons. The snow was soft, so deep tracks were made. It was snowing very hard and these tracks would soon be harder to follow. These children would be in very serious trouble if they were not found soon, especially if they had no fire and warm, dry clothes. (We hurried even faster at that thought). Soon the snow was so heavy it was almost impossible to see where we were going. It was a heavy, wet snow and our clothes became soaked. At about 0300 hrs. (3:00 a.m.) our hearts sank and we became alarmed as we watched the tracks disappear before our eyes, being filled and covered by the intense snow storm. We had no place to look. The tracks had wandered around in every direction. We were well below Reed's Meadow, and any move or change of direction would only be a wild guess on our part.

We were very cold and wet and had not taken time to properly care for ourselves, (food, water, warmth) in our eagerness to find these kids. However, when we lost the tracks in the deep snow we decided that we must stop for awhile and try to dry, warm, and rest until daylight. We also hoped the lost group might see the light from our fire and make themselves known. At daylight, just an hour from where we had stopped, we regrouped, met some other team members who had hiked in later, and started to Caramba Camp, the farthest camp on the mountain, just in case they had gone that way. They were not there. Other team members had been sent to other possible places where they might be. The CR-MRA teams were called. Sierra Madre and San Diego teams responded with many people. Helicopters were called in as the clouds were breaking up. One was Don Landells' Jet Ranger and the other was a big twin rotor military bird from the Marines.

We who were at the north Caramba helispot were picked up at 11:15 a.m. Friday, just twelve hours and fifteen minutes after starting up the trail the night before. We were being air lifted to Base



Jim Fairchild

This picture actually tells the story quite well. John Dew, Kevin Walker, Walt Walker and Jim Fairchild (who was shooting the photo), were cold, wet and tired. They were attempting to dry out and warm up around the fire after searching most of the night for the missing teacher and his students.

Camp for rest and food. Our replacements would be brought back in. Don Landells and Walt were in the front seats and Randy Beaty and I were in the back seat. We were all looking as we headed towards base. Just below Reeds Meadow I spotted some fresh tracks and told the others. As we turned to circle back we all saw the word "HELP" clearly stomped out in the snow that covered the meadow. Along with the word we could see a man and three children. Don landed in the meadow and we climbed out and went over to the people. It was the missing teacher and three of the students. He told us he left the other five (some of whom were not in good condition) around a campfire and was hiking out for help. We loaded the four into Don's helicopter and he took them to base. Shortly the big twin rotored Marine chopper landed and picked up Randy and I, Walt waited for Don to return. Don came back and picked up Walt and they headed for the area where the other five children were at.

Circling the area, Don and Walt looked for a helispot. Don finally headed for an open area on a rather steep hillside. He was able to put the front end of each runner down in the snow and Walt jumped out and headed towards the children. Don was going to pick up Jim and Kevin at Caramba and bring them back to help Walt. As he flew away the children were already hiking through the snow towards Walt.

Walt descended the hill and met the children. He quickly asked them how they were. They responded that they could hike up the hill, but mentioned that one of the girls did not have any boots. So while Walt carried her up the hill, Don circled overhead. When they all got to the impromptu helispot Don came in and once again put the runners into the snow. Walt loaded all five children into the machine and they were flown to base.

While Don returned to pick up Walt, Jim and Kevin, other rescue team members were picked up by the Marine bird. Another mission completed and a happy team returned home rejoicing that the kids had been found in time.

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.