



Hiker became separated from group

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Cactus Springs
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By Hal Fulkman

RMRU as you know, is supported entirely by contributions. The majority of these contributions come from faithful individuals and organization! who, year after year, donate time and money, enabling Riverside county to have one of the top ranked rescue teams in the nation. The only thing these unselfish people receive in return is a slight consideration from the IRS and the knowledge that at the most their gift will save someone's life, and at the least it will retrieve a hiker who's compass has a North at each end.

Normally, RMRU can do little more than offer a sincere thank you except on those occasions when we can offer our services to our faithful friends. The Issac Walton League of Idyllwild is one of those organizations that support RMRU by sponsoring the annual pancake breakfast which over the years has contributed to the purchase of much valuable equipment. Saturday, April 15 RMRU was summoned by a member of the Issac Walton League and given the opportunity to reciprocate.

Saturday started with light showers and gave all indications of getting worse. By late afternoon, with the arrival of more rain, I thrilled my family by the statement that there would probably be a rescue by Sunday. No mystical premonition, just a fact of life that when a storm hits Friday night through Sunday after a week of clear weather, hikers have a tendency of getting caught ill equipped.

At about seven, my pager went off and by seven-thirty John Dew, Richard Dew, and myself were riding together, well on our way to the road head which was the Piñon fire station near the Alpine Village on Hwy. 74. We were met there by a deputy sheriff from the Indio station who informed us that a female hiker, Claire Hughes, had become separated from the rest of her group while hiking in the Cactus Springs area.

After a search of the area produced no sign of Claire, her hiking companions decided to return to the road head and summon help. The sheriff went on to say the group was now across the street having dinner, so while other team members were arriving, John Dew, Walt and Kevin Walker, and myself went over to talk with the group. It was raining moderately now and the wind was blowing hard enough to make me wish I had put my rain gear on before leaving the fire station. The leader of

the group turned out to be Ernie Maxwell, a long time member of the Issac Walton League. Ernie told us the group was on a day hike looking for Indian artifacts, with Cactus Springs as the turn around point.

After reaching Cactus Spring they ate lunch and while everybody was resting, Claire went for a walk by herself. When she did not return the group began searching the area, calling her name and blowing a whistle.

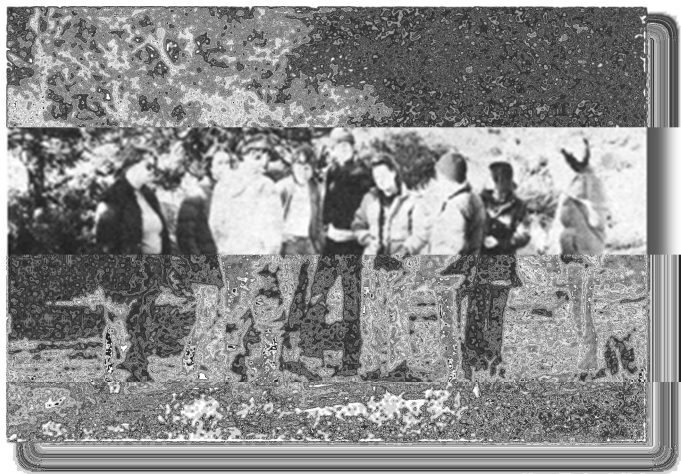
At about 3 p.m., the group gave up their search and started the 5 mile hike back to the highway. Ernie described Claire as a good hiker in good physical condition. She also smoked which meant she was probably carrying matches. That was the positive side. The things working against Claire were staggering. The wind, rain, and cold conditions couldn't be worse, coupled with fact that she had no extra food, wearing light cotton clothing, and unfamiliar with the terrain.

Enough members had arrived at this point to put two teams into the field. Bernie McIlvoy, Jim Hanson, Kevin Walker, and myself made up one team, while Tom Aldrich, Steve Zappe, Steve Jensen, and Darrel Hand made up the second. A mile down the highway and a few hundred yards up a dirt road brought us to the trail head to Horsethief Creek. The wind had increased by this time and was causing quite a problem with the poncho I was wearing. After tying it down with a piece of nylon webbing, we continued on the well used trail to Horsethief Creek.

Upon reaching the creek, the two teams split and checked both up and down stream, waking up campers in hopes Claire might have been with one of them. Meeting back on the trail, we proceeded on towards Cactus Springs. The trail at this point climbs to a plateau type valley consisting of many roller-coaster type knolls. At this elevation our protection from the wind was gone completely, and made shouting for Claire almost futile.

Soon we reached a sandy wash that crosses the trail in such a way that it is notorious for drawing people off in the wrong direction. We immediately found tracks that looked about the right size. They looked good enough that the second team began following them while we continued on to Cactus Springs.

The weather did some strange things that night including wind driven rain coming down almost horizontally. At one point the sky was clear except for clouds miles



Jim Fairchild

With his back to the camera, Walt Walker spoke to a Sierra Club backpacking group about the missing hiker RMRU was searching for. The helicopter had landed nearby and Jim and Walt had walked over to the group who was camped near Cactus Springs.

away, and yet rain continued to fall on us, carried all that distance by the gusting wind. Finding Cactus Springs proved to be a bit tricky due to the way the terrain changed during the heavy winter we had. After a couple of wrong turns, we got in the right streambed and continued our assignment.

At this point we were to follow Cactus Creek to the confluence of upper Horsethief Creek and work our way back down to the point where the stream crosses the trail where the teams first separated. After reaching the confluence of the two streams, we continued on for about another mile, and found nothing encouraging in the way of tracks. The stream at this point cut deeper and deeper into a canyon with steepwalls. Fatigue and the terrain made traveling down the canyon too dangerous in the darkness so at 3:30 a.m. we found a relatively flat spot and turned in for the rest of the night.

By 5:30 a.m. the sun was up and except for some fluffy clouds, the sky was clear. The wind had subsided some but was still blowing at 10-15 m.p.h. The temperature was 38^oF and made it difficult to leave my sleeping bag. After a wonderful breakfast of split pea soup and a candy bar we returned to the streambed and continued downstream.

Ops. Leader Walt Walker had decided to ask for additional manpower, because of details and the weather, from the Hemet Valley Search and Rescue Team and the U.S.A.F. Reserve 303rd Air Rescue Group. Bob Elliot and Bill Woodie (Hemet SAR) remained in base to assist Walt and John. Hemet SAR members Jan Caldwell, Don Oates, and Steve Vaughn teamed up with veteran RMRU member Jim Garvey. Their assignment was to hike to Cactus Springs and then toward Sheep Mountain.

At approximately 6:30 a.m. Don Landells arrived in his Bell Jet Ranger helicopter. Because of Claire's light clothing and the night's adverse weather, we were becoming deeply concerned about her well being. Jim Fairchild and Walt rode with Don, searching the entire drainage that runs into Horsethief Creek. The air search turned up an arrow (drawn in the sand) and a single set of footprints, but no Claire.



"Chopper One" with Don Landells at the controls had just landed at base with a load of searchers. Steve Vaughn, with pack, Kevin Walker, partially hidden, and Richard Dew, with back to the camera, were all involved in unloading equipment.

As they were returning to base

to pick up members of the 303rd group (who were going to search the ridge westward from Martinez Peak) everyone in the field received a radio communication. We had been searching for about two hours, down Horsethief Creek, when we learned that Claire had walked out of the mountains to the desert community of La Quinta. She had hiked to a much lower altitude to where conditions were much milder and spent the night. Within minutes Don Landells located our position and airlifted us back to the road head. After a good breakfast and some round table discussion, RMRU dissolved into individuals and once again the wilderness returned to the way it was before we came.

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.