

Hiker strayed from backpacking class

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San Jacinto Mtns
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By Ron Barry

I had gone to bed early Sunday evening with a head-cold, wanting to get a good night's rest before work Monday. Two hours later, Jerry Muratet is bringing me out of a blissful sleep a woman hiker has strayed from her backpacking class in the San Jacinto back-country. As I stagger around the house sneezing, and gathering my gear, my wife comes to my rescue by preparing my food supplies, filling water bottles, and loading up the first aid kit.

Two hours and a half a Kleenex box later, I arrive at the Idyllwild Sheriff's Office for assignment. Five of us are soon heading up the Devil's Slide from Humber Park: Jim Garvey, Steve Jensen and myself from RMRU, and Don Oates and Mike Kincaid from Hemet Search & Rescue. Our assignment is to contact the two backpacking teachers who are camped at the Saddle, and from there, deploy into two search teams.

Once regrouped at the Saddle, we fan out into the silent darkness calling for the two teachers, Jack and Harry. We locate their camp 200 yards beyond, and the two men are soon dressed and packed. From them we get a more accurate story of our missing lady, Betty Harrison.

It seems this one woman, around 35 years old, was straggling behind as the class made their way from Round Valley towards Saddle Junction. One of the other students had been staying back with her all day, but when she rested at Wellman's Cienega in near exhaustion, the student continued on to catch up with the group, which by now was far ahead. That was the last place she had been seen. She never arrived at Humber Park, so the two concerned teachers told the Rangers about her, then proceeded back up to find her. Jack and Harry arrived back at the Saddle in darkness and were unable to pick up their tracks in the snow so they could back-track.

She had food, sleeping bag and warm clothing, so it seemed she could easily have just bedded down after it got dark on her. Though it was her first time backpacking, Harry assured us she was intelligent and had good sense to take care of herself. The obvious search plan seemed to be to head for Wellman's Cienega on a direct cross-country route, cut tracks in the snow the class had taken, then follow them down towards the Saddle until we caught up with our lost victim.

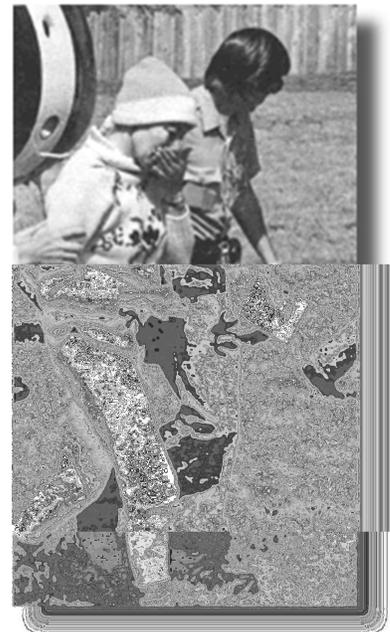
Jim Garvey led this assignment taking Don Oates and Harry with him. I took Mike Kincaid and Jack with me, heading directly towards the Willow Creek trail crossing in a chance she could have strayed down that far. Steve Jensen stayed in a cozy bivouac at the Saddle as radio relay.

Mike, Jack and I skirted quietly around Skunk Cabbage at sunrise. The meadow was a cold, primeval bog, with the trees on the eastern bank silhouetted by a crimson and golden dawn.

Arriving at Willow Creek crossing, we found not a sign of tracks. By now, Jim Garvey and his band had reached Wellman's Meadow, and were proceeding uphill towards Wellman's Cienega in search of tracks in the snow. Our group headed up the snowy drainage of Wellman's Creek, towards Wellman's Meadow.

We had no sooner reached the scenic meadow, when Garvey came across tracks. As if on cue, the San Bernardino Sheriff's helicopter appeared in the ice blue sky, with Art Bridge as observer. Finally, things were coming together. Art soon spotted the tracks that Garvey was on, and began to slowly follow them, cruising at treetop level. This was it, I was sure. Our group joined up with Garvey's and the six of us were weaving through a quiet, early morning forest at an urgent pace.

Jackpot! Art radios that the chopper has indeed spotted and identified our goal - about a half mile ahead of us. The woman is quite all right, but she's in a heavily forested area, so there's no place for the chopper to drop Art off close by. We trudge along through the forest, while overhead the chopper slides by at treetop level - a graceful movement of red and white, with a sudden flash of reflected sunlight. When we reach our lost victim, there's a warm exchange between her and her instructors, Jack and Harry. Though this turned out to be a happy ending for them, I'm sure Jack and Harry will keep a closer eye on novice students in the future.



Jim Walker

Betty Harrison was overcome with emotion, while being escorted away from the helicopter, after having been rescued.

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.