

Hiker separated from group and lost

October 10, 1983
Live Oak Canyon
1983-031

By Jim Fairchild

Charlotte and five friends, members of a hiking club in Orange County, had planned to go backpacking in the San Geronio Wilderness, but the snow up there at the time changed their plan. Instead, they decided to hike from a roadhead out of Garner Valley, up the Morris Ranch Road. They would hike up to the Desert Divide where the Pacific Crest Trail traverses the entire divide between Garner Valley and Palm Canyon. Starting Saturday morning, they reached Live Oak Spring, in a canyon of the same name, about noon, a bit spread out.

RMRU, at noon on Saturday, was having lunch after a truly brain-stressing session on map and compass. We were on training up at Skunk Cabbage Meadow 7900' el., in the San Jacinto Mts. (See report thereon).

Charlotte's hiking companions re-grouped for a snack at the spring. Then, the three best hikers, taking the maps, continued down the canyon on the trail. Charlotte followed shortly, with the two girls whose feet and legs were problematic, some distance behind. Before long the trail swung north after staying in the easterly flowing stream bottom, and

gained elevation as it headed for Oak Canyon. Charlotte tried to make voice contact with the three ahead, and thought she heard them, but could never catch up. Then she decided to wait for the two slower companions behind. They never came along the trail. Charlotte continued on for a while but failed to find any of them. Still on the trail, she decided to backtrack to the spring, but approaching darkness compelled her to set up camp before reaching there.

RMRU spent a wonderfully instructive afternoon practicing cliffside rescue techniques of individual nature on a forty-foot high bluff at the edge of the meadow. This was followed by our usual gourmet supper. After a social hour bedtime came in the coolness and cloudiness of the evening.

Charlotte ate supper and went to bed, not especially secure in her predicament, but all was well until dawn. Then she packed and completed the return hike to Live Oak Spring. The campsite there is superb with plenty of water, wood, a lot of oaks and large shrubs, and a fascinating variety of plants. The moderately steep canyon sides are

covered with thick chaparral. Not much view, but a fine place to await rescue.

RMRU went right back to practicing on the Cliff, this time to do as difficult a raise of a litter as possible. It took a lot of time, and we went into lunch time. Following the meal it was time to hike out to Humber Park.

Charlotte planned what she would do if a helicopter showed up looking for her - wave her red shirt. But, here it was Sunday, all of it, and no helicopter appeared. It was a long wait, but she determined to stay until found. Her equipment included sufficient food, a roomy one-person tent, a good sleeping bag and insulating pad. She thought about how on Tuesday her youngest of three sons had told her, as he was boarding a bus for Montreal, "Don't get lost, Mom." She had backpacked and traveled a lot with her son. She is an intensive care nurse at a hospital in Orange County.

Charlotte's hiking companions finished the hike by reaching Palm Canyon and ascending out of it at highway 74. They reported Charlotte's status of being overdue to the Indio Sheriff's Station. The situation did not sound very threatening but RMRU was notified to be on standby at about 5:00 p.m. Sunday. It was thought that RMRU should commence the search at 4:00 a.m. Monday, but Walt persuaded the Sergeant in charge to let us get moving about midnight. The callout was made and we assembled at Paradise Corners, at the far east end of Garner Valley where highways 74 and 351 meet.

RMRU left the mountain just before 5:00 p.m. Sunday. As the writer drove off, Kevin said, "Don't say it!" He meant, "Don't say - See you tonight!" Stevie thought it was interesting that we would anticipate a mission.

Charlotte prepared to spend another night alone. She put her pack against the sign by the spring so it might be seen. Her boots were under a discarded, blue air mattress she'd found. She wondered if someone would show up who was not concerned about her welfare, rather, inclined to hurt her.

RMRU was now in a search mode, in its usual time frame - middle of the night. Actually, somewhat late in the night. Walt assigned the writer and Dave Ezell and Craig Britton to go first up a six-mile-long dirt road to a



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EVERYTHING DONE RIGHT - RMRU members Dave Ezell and Craig Britton visit with Charlotte's Gustier after locating her near Live Oak Spring. Charlotte did everything right by returning to the last point she had seen her companions, and then waited for rescuers.

point about two miles from Live Oak Spring, from which we would begin a serious tracking exercise to locate the missing woman. We had a good description on everything about Charlotte and her equipment, except her boot print. The sole print is the most important piece of information we need in a search, and the least often known. So what? We'd find a single print about 5-6 in size, going someplace alone. Doug Henniger drove us up the jumping off place in a Forest Service pickup, and we started hiking. A beautiful night, nice trail, a great motivation provided by a lost person. We yelled "heiloooooo" at frequent intervals, three times about thirty seconds apart. Kevin Walker and Joe Erickson were to follow us after being driven to the end of the dirt road. We had started ahead because of the long time required for a round trip. At the intersection of the Pacific Crest Trail and Live Oak Canyon Trail, we carefully checked tracks, but a wide-tired tote-goat type vehicle had been through, covering most. A few miscellaneous tracks, large and small, were seen. We headed for the spring, a mile away. We found small tracks, some were of running shoes, but one was a lug sole that seemed to say, "Charlotte." It was headed down toward the spring. We yelled a few more times. We soon passed a fire ring and some sitting stumps. We called again. "Here I am, who are you?" In a tent a hundred feet away was the subject of our search and concern. Craig said, "We're the Riverside Mountain Rescue Unit." She then was ultra-glad to see us and we made it clear we were ecstatic over locating her. She got out of her sleeping bag and was going to dress for the hike out. Almost in unison we said, "Wait a minute, Charlotte, you've been in bed since 7:00 p.m., and we've not been to bed at all. Well just bivouac until dawn, fix some breakfast, then hike out." She readily agreed and we turned in after some picture taking.

The writer regained consciousness hearing Dave talking to Charlotte. Wow! That short hour just didn't seem sufficient. Sunlight highlighted the trees and sky, and we bleary-eyed shuffled about to start the stove and pack. Somehow or other, when we contacted Base, it was thought we were hiking then, but no way. Kevin and Joe awaited our arrival at the end of the road. We consumed some nibbles and red zinger tea. Craig set a quick pace up the trail. Charlotte followed very well, but after we left the shady canyon for the warm, sunny hillside, she slowed and we made a few stops. Dave and I delighted in the many botanical wonders to be observed. I reminisced about the two traverses of the Desert Divide it has been my joy and privilege to make during the past year. How tremendously satisfying it is to hike with fellow searchers happy with success, and with a woman who is vibrant and enthused about back-packing - safe and alive!

Kevin and Joe hiked in a ways to meet us, and soon we were in the number two orange pumpkin (van) returning to Base.

At the Garner Valley Fire Station Charlotte was reunited with her companions. RMRU members headed out to resume their between-mission lives.

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.