

Family of five with ten horses overdue

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Pacific Crest Trail
1985-019

By Rob Gardner

The call came in at 1:00 PM on April 19, 1985 that a family of five people traveling the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) with ten Arabian horses was three days overdue to meet with their supplier at the Whitewater junction.

The RMRU gathered at Camp Maranatha in Idyllwild. The Riverside County Sheriff's Office had a Landells Aviation Jet Ranger helicopter dispatched to meet with the RMRU.

It had been storming in the Mt. San Jacinto range for the past three days and the clouds were building up again as another storm was entering over the range from the coast side. The planned route of the family covered over fifty trail miles in Mt. San Jacinto. The Northwest side of the mountain range still had snow and ice hiding much of the trail.

The family of five, Thomas Stewart, Lynda Stewart, and three of their children, Sean (aged 15 years), Aaron (age 13 years), and Stacy (age 10 years) had departed on their planned expedition from the Mexican border to the Canadian border via the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) on April 1, 1985. They were on the first leg of a 2,600 trail mile journey. They initially had fourteen Arabian horses with them. However, due to unfortunate incidents on the first few days of their expedition they had only ten of their horses with them when they entered Mt. San Jacinto. Five of the horses were packing feed, grain and camping gear. The family members rode the other five horses.

As RMRU team volunteers gathered and prepared for search, the helicopter went airborne with team members Rob Gardner (the writer) and Walt Walker. The helicopter was piloted by Mike Donovan. From familiarity with conditions in the mountain observed on other recent missions it was decided that the initial air search would begin at the Desert Divide vicinity. There was a lot of area to search and it was evident that the satisfactory weather conditions could be lost at any time, as head winds of the upcoming storm began to build up.

After about fifteen minutes of flying, some hikers were spotted on the PCT. Mike hovered the helicopter across the trail as Walt jumped out and spoke with the two hikers. Upon return to the aircraft, Walt put his headset on and advised Mike and the writer that the hikers had seen some people on horseback to the South-Southeast. We flew over the trail eventually finding tracks of one horse. We didn't know what to make of this as we

were looking for ten horses. We flew sections of trail which remained snow covered. Eventually tracks of several horses appeared.

Fifteen trail miles later the helicopter came over the PCT trail just above Morris Ranch. The Stewart family was immediately spotted. They were riding south on the PCT, having turned back.

The helicopter landed in a nearby open area near a creek. Walt and I quickly hiked over to the family. They all appeared tired and depressed. They hardly spoke. Mr. Stewart finally offered that the family had suffered several crises while in the San Jacinto range.

On one day two horses had gone off of the trail down a steep slope and Mr. Stewart was unable to get the horses back up. In another incident Mrs. Stewart had suffered injuries to her ribs when a horse stumbled. A third horse was lost on another day when trail broke away and the horse tumbled three hundred feet down the steep mountain side. Mr. Stewart had to hike down and shoot this horse.

The family was riding out with seven horses. They lost three horses in the Mt. San Jacinto range (and had left four others behind at Anza-Borrego).

Mrs. Stewart was flown out in the helicopter due to her injuries. Mr. Stewart, Sean, Aaron and Stacy rode on to Morris Ranch (about two miles) to get water and food for the horses. Mr. Stewart said the horses had gone three days without any food or water. The family had lost a lot of their supplies and camping equipment when the third Arabian pack horse fell down the slope.

Mr. Stewart contracted Landells to enter the mountain the next day to recover equipment but high winds and clouds of the new storm (which lasted three days) prevented reaching the areas where the equipment was left. It was later learned that two of the horses died on the steep slopes near South Peak. The third horse fell on the steep slope just south of Antsell Rock, causing a broken leg, and had to be shot. It is clear that the Stewart family had a difficult ordeal in their days on the PCT of Mt. San Jacinto. Everybody is happy the members of the Stewart family were not hurt to any greater extent. I'll always remember the sad face of young Stacy Stewart, which I saw as Walt and I approached the family, that late afternoon of April 19, 1985.

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.