

Kid on the Sweetwater

by Vic Head

Three miles to the east, Bell Bluff was almost black against the dawn. The kid's bare feet were drenched with dew as he entered the kitchen with a jar of pollywogs from a puddle in the almost dry bed of Deer Creek. Green slime and pollywogs couldn't survive unless it rained soon. "Not likely," according to old Brother Tate, perhaps 88, with back so bent his chin was never far from his knees. "Creek trickles a bit every second or third winter."

Raymond was fixing flapjacks and bacon. He'd been a cook in the Royal Navy, wandered America doing odd jobs, then joined the Kosmon Fraternity's religious community in Sacratro Valley as mechanic and cook. Now the kid's feet slipped on linoleum, glass shattered and pollywogs wiggled much to Raymond's disgust. The cook seized an eight-quart kettle and kicked it, football fashion, across the kitchen. Sister Mary, close to 80, held the frightened kid in her arms, rebuking Raymond with a pleading look. The cook looked chagrined and silently cleaned up the mess.

By mid-morning, while Brother Ed was weeding the vegetable garden grown with water provided by a 70-foot high windmill and water tower, Bell Bluff had turned to pale lavender grooved by dark gullies. And by high noon the kid could see the change to brick red and granite gray, perhaps the truest colors of the rocks. To the north was the orchard, then the slope increased to a long ridge topped with balancing rocks.

Years ago the ranch had been a haven for orphans chosen from San Diego Orphanage to be brought up in the beauty of God's country, deer and mountain lions and all, but by now all had flown the coop, one a nurse, another a mechanic—business man—school teacher—, and the four old members were left alone. It had been after the kid's childhood diseases and two operations ("please God don't ever let them put an ether cone over my face again!") when the doctor told the mother that if she wanted him to live to grow up she should take him out of school and let him run wild for a year. Thus at age 8 he found himself here with no other children, running barefoot on this intermittent tributary of the equally intermittent Sweetwater River, 30 miles east of San Diego in the mountains 15 miles north of the Mexican border.

Wandering over a bridge and west a half mile, he found the Denny Ranch and a new companion—10 year old Mary Denny. A few weeks ago Mr. Denny had shot a skunk in his milk house, followed by weeks of regret, but the pervasive aroma of the Denny Ranch was a new and not totally unpleasant experience to the kid. Sometimes, barefoot boy and girl would hold hands and run past her house and on under a grove of giant live oaks to a long granite ledge. She would scrape away the leaves to reveal a line of eight metates. It was fun to pretend they could see the ghosts of eight squaws still sitting grinding corn with their mortars and pestles. It must have taken generations to grind some of these metates seven or eight inches deep.

Across the dry Sweetwater River bed they would hunt for arrowheads and bits of pottery in an ancient burial ground, and laugh when they found two shards whose broken edges fit. Might they ever glue enough pieces together for a complete clay vessel? But they were soon diverted by a horned toad, really a tiny lizard almost as wide as long. He'd sit on your hand a while and then—zrrp! He was away and out of sight among the shards.

Once they came face to face with a six-foot diamondback rattler, always a gentleman, giving adequate warning. Old saying: "Don't worry about a rattlesnake you hear in a tree, but if you hear a locust on the ground, watch out." Of course, Sister Mary had a rattlesnake kit—wooden box, alcohol and swabbing cotton, razor blade to lance an "X" and permanganate crystal and gauze. This snake moved on to hide in the Manzanita.

He loved to watch Sister Mary skim the almost solid c-r-e-a-m from the overnight milk pans—yummy on hand-held shredded wheat. She let him push and pull on the churn handle till the butter came. But when the cows wandered onto the willows the milk was bitter for a week.

Just before sunset, Bell Bluff gleamed like a mirror, then faded to royal red. Some nights were long in his cabin. Once he heard a baby cry, only a coyote yapping at the moon, Brother Ed told him. Once a tremulous la-la-la-la-la—only a raccoon wickering near the corn patch. Once it was sight, not sound, a black figure against a star-filled sky. Holding a revolver? Seconds turned to minutes before he gave vent to screaming terror. Finally, the light of a coal oil lantern, and Sister Mary led him across to the ranch house and tucked him in with her and slowly sobs subsided. Next morning the figure proved to be a familiar cactus near the open cabin door.

And so began a year of near-wilderness experience with all its danger and all its joys, long treasured memories.