

## A HILL TRAMP

Out-of-the-way places have always attracted me. So when a farmer friend spoke of a trip by Landrover to the top of the Old Man Range and thence by the old snow pole track to Waikaia, I promptly made a plea to join the party.

But when several years slipped by and my seventieth birthday was long past, it seemed that I must either miss out or make other plans, and the other plans boiled down to the use of shank's pony.

Asked if he would be interested in the trip, my brother gave a ready affirmative, with one of his sons also a probable starter. So mid-afternoon of the 19th of January found the three of us at the Dumbarton home of Mr. Arnold Bain, all equipped for the tramp.

Motorists on the Roxburgh-Alexandra highway will have noticed near Shingle Creek a signboard which reads "Top of Old Man Range, Dry Weather Road," and at this point Mr. Bain turned his Landrover's pose up hill for the long steep seven mile climb to the top.

On the road up we stopped to look at a ski club hut—the latter a courtesy title, for apart from a wooden door and a pot-bellied stove, it more closely resembled a stone-age man's cave, with a minimum of space and comfort !

Near the top of the range, a large heap of stones was pointed out as the remains of a shelter hut erected after the terrible storm of 1863 when about 30 miners perished on their way in from Campbell's and Potter's Gullies. From here on along the track, regularly spaced heaps of stone and an occasional pole reminded one of the long line of snow poles also erected for the help of travellers after the 1863 disaster.

At the top of the range, at an altitude of between four and five thousand feet, is the more recent shelter hut, whose amenities do not invite a long stay. From only a few chains away we looked down the long length of Campbell's Gully, an uninviting, treeless spot where large numbers of hardy miners toiled in 1863 and later. Feeding in its upper reaches was a herd of Hereford cattle and we were told that these hardy animals winter on the range on whose top there is often three or four feet of snow.

On the top of the Old Man one feels that he or she is on the roof of Otago, for the view is most extensive and one can see all the main ranges from the east coast to the Dunstan, including the Garvie Mts., the Remarkables, the Dunstan, the Maungatuas, the Lammerlaws, the Blue Mts. and the Hokonuis, while lying to the south is the extensive Waikaia beech forest.

Mr. Bain has a mustering hut near the lower end of Campbell's Gully and offered to run us down over a track which he himself has formed. But the day was far spent and as we had a six or seven mile tramp ahead of us, we declined this offer of our kindly Jehu to whom we were already heavily indebted.

Armed with a survey map and careful directions from Mr. Bain, we set off on a track on which a county grader had done some levelling for half a mile or so. At this elevation it seemed wonderful to see the drabness of the tussock relieved by large clumps of mountain daisy and celmisias in full flower. Two red deer had recently passed this way as their tracks were painfully visible for some distance but we saw nothing more of these animals.

A nor'wester shower threatened to spoil our tramp but lasted only for a quarter of an hour. We were on the watershed between the Pomahaka and Waikaia rivers and heading slightly downhill towards the Whitecomb range. The track, now so neglected, appeared to have had considerable use

in the distant past, and heaps of rock indicated where once the snow poles had stood. Occasionally it crossed areas of peat bog and wide pools of water offered formidable obstacles to the passage of any motor vehicle, though I understand that one or two cars have made the trip.

To any motorist thinking of making the attempt, my advice is that of "Punch" to those about to marry—DON'T !

At one point where the track takes an up-hill turn, a number of enormous rocks thrusting twelve or fifteen feet up from the tussock, gave a Stonehenge quality to the otherwise monotonous landscape.

After some miles on a comparatively level grade, we turned downhill to an area once hush clad, but now dotted with blackened trees ; some still standing but mostly fallen and rotting away.

The track now became better defined—tyre marks made by a light truck or a Landrover indicated recent use. It became steeper and zigzagged down a leading spur until a welcome sight appeared, the mustering hut of a Waikaia runholder.

The writer is no stranger to mustering camps but for equipment and comfort this one was outstanding, and we were very grateful to the owner for allowing us the use of it.

Firewood was there in abundance and we soon had a meal cooked over the open fire, our appetites being sharpened by our tramp and the mountain air.

Tired bodies and comfortable bunks were conducive to sound sleep and we awoke to a fine morning, with every prospect of good weather for our seven or eight mile tramp through the bush. The river flowed a few hundred yards below us and beyond that was all "Glenaray" country, one of the largest sheep stations in Southland and Otago, and shearing something like 40,000 sheep.

Passing the drafting yards and sheep dip, we approached the bush and came on what we took to be an old logging track but which we later learned was once a water race, a relic of the old mining days.

We had expected much easier going at the lower altitude but were disappointed as the track led sharply up and down over numerous spurs running from the mountain to the river.

Very pleasant walking though, through the silent beech forest, reminding one that "There is a pleasure in the pathless woods"—and the city's busy traffic seemed very far way. Animal life seemed to be entirely absent and bird life scarce, though a pair of long-tailed cuckoos gave us quite a surprise. Only once before, near the head of the Eglinton Valley, had I seen one of these migratory birds.

Ten o'clock found us near a little bush creek and here we boiled my old black billy, faithful friend of bygone deer shooting days. Several little riflemen, our smallest native birds, appeared to take an interest in us as we had our snack.

We had not expected to meet anyone on the bush road but at its roughest and steepest part two motor cyclists appeared, using legs and feet to help propel their hard used machines up the steep grade. They were from the Piano Flat camping ground which, some years before, my wife and I had gone out of our way to visit.

Leaving the car we had walked for about a mile along the old sawmill logging track, and now I recognised the place where we had turned back and knew that we had not far to go.

The bush thinned out as the road converged on the crystal clear river, the Mecca of so many fly fishermen. Just after noon we came on a good friend who had agreed to meet us with his car and who had had some luck with his rod the previous evening.

Piano Flat is a lovely camping spot and there are a good number of summer cottages there. Many more bring their caravans or pitch their tents amongst the old beech trees every summer, being well catered for by tradesmen from Waikaia, an old mining township, 12 miles away.

Once again we boiled the old billy for lunch preparatory to returning to our homes in the distant city, having each seen new country and thoroughly enjoyed a long but very worthwhile tramp.

—E. SKINNER.