

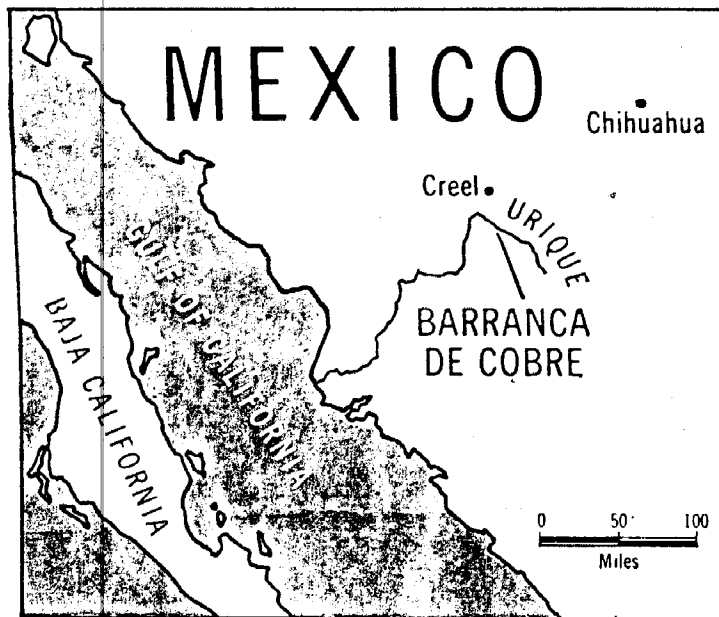


After 10 days of some of the most merciless toil ever carried on in the name of either sport or adventure, we had given up our attempt to become the first party to travel by boat down Mexico's Urique River. We had scaled the towering walls of the Barranca de Cobre (Copper Canyon) that guard the still unconquered stream. Defeated and disappointed but glad to be among people again, we were wandering the little Mexican town of Creel while waiting for a train, when we were informed with wonderful Mexican understatement that "somebody" was looking for us.

The word "somebody" meant that Mexican planes were crisscrossing the

Mary Ellen O'Reilly (above) was one of a group of 15 American explorers trapped a fortnight ago in the wild canyons of the Urique River in western Mexico. Assisted by her father, Sports Illustrated Contributing Editor John O'Reilly, Miss O'Reilly tells the story of her 10-day ordeal

LADY ON A RIVER OF ROCK



SITE OF ADVENTURE was Barranca de Cobre sector of Urique River, a frightening gorge cut through the dry mountain country near Chihuahua.

canyons in search of us, that Air Rescue units from Kansas and Texas, as well as U.S. Army helicopters out of Fort Bliss, Texas, had swarmed to Chihuahua City to join the hunt. It meant that the 302nd Airborne Division had been alerted and paratroopers were ready to fly down and jump into the canyon. It meant that for three days newspapers, radio and television back home had been spreading the news that a party of 15 Americans, including two young women, were feared lost and starving in the wilds of the Barranca de Cobre.

Chet Huntley, a newscaster who lives across the river from my home in Pennsylvania, described the canyon as one of the "most awesome chasms in the world." That may well be true. The Urique flows through gorges that in places are much deeper than the Grand Canyon. The part of the Barranca I saw was a mighty gulch into which some race of supergiants appeared to have heaved thousands of huge

continues

rocks to thwart any boating party trying to run the river.

The Barranca seemed particularly awesome when we looked up at those boulders, some as big as a three-story house, and realized that the only way to progress was to drag our 400-pound Neoprene boats and all our gear up and over them. It became somewhat worse than awesome as our food supply dwindled and we had to negotiate those rock piles on skimpy rations. Hannibal may have gotten elephants over the Alps, but I bet he did it on a full stomach.

We knew the trip would be no picnic, but we felt there was no cause to worry since we were in the hands of veteran rivermen—John Cross, his son John Jr. and Larry Davis. I had run Cataract Canyon on the Colorado and other western rivers with them, and I knew they planned everything in careful detail. In this case, however, the river had kept one secret from the planes that had scouted it in advance of the trip. From the air there appeared to be long stretches of open channel. In reality, that portion of the Urique swept down steep inclines, plunged over cliffs and squirmed through rock piles in a manner that made it utterly unfit for boating.

The members of our party could hardly have been more heterogeneous. From 19 to 70 in age, they included a herpetology professor who somehow found time to pickle a few snakes, a mailman who had never had such rough walking, an automobile mechanic and a man who manufactures wind machines to keep crops from freezing. Their shapes and sizes were as varied as their ages, ranging from Janice, 19-year-old blonde, brown-eyed daughter of John Cross Sr., to the lanky Verne Thurber, who took deep personal pride in his ability to stand the hardships at 70. Not once did he complain.

I was a picture of confidence and grinning excitement when I walked into El Capitan Motel, our gathering place in Chihuahua City, and met Antonio Joannis and Eduardo J. Mendoza, our Mexican agents. Joannis took one look at me and said, "You are going down the river? No. No. No. You are just going to tell them goodbye." When I insisted, he pointed to Mendoza, saying, "He lives in the barrancas and he wouldn't go down the river." Mendoza just laughed. These sagacious Mexicans wouldn't think of going on the trip; but without them we

would never have gotten onto the river or gotten out again.

The Urique gave us our first rebuff before we had even embarked. We rode in trucks to the river, only to find that we had to spend almost the entire day roping our boats and gear down 150 feet of steep hillside. It was late and we were tired, but for morale purposes we decided to move down the river to a good camping spot. We were on the river at last, and spirits were high as we ate our canned chili and rice pudding. We had gone only two miles, but we'd show the old Urique the next day. That two miles was just about as much as we made on any one day during the whole trip. Some days we did not make more than a quarter mile.

Our glorious start the next morning was stopped short by a waterfall, where the river slid down a 45° slope. While the men put four oars under each boat and carried the boats down one at a time, Jan and I carried the rest of the gear for the quarter mile of the portage, making 10 trips to get it all down. At the time, we thought it was pretty hard work. But compared to what was ahead, this portage was child's play. Around the very next bend was another waterfall. This one plunged 25 feet straight down into a bluish-green pool. We had to rope everything down, including the boats and ourselves. I began to wonder whether this was a boat trip or a mountain-climbing expedition.

It was long after dark when we crawled into our sleeping bags, the Urique roaring by in moonlight almost as brilliant as the Mexican sun. That continual roar thrilled us at first, but later as we toiled over the big rocks or lay curled up on patches of sand between them, the sound took on a note of challenge.

The third day we began cutting down our rations. We had realized that we would be long overdue in reaching the food Mendoza was to have waiting for us at El Divisadero, a point where the Urique runs through canyons 7,000 to 8,000 feet deep. Jan and I did most of the cooking, and most of what we cooked was pancakes. We ate them twice a day, including sandwiches made from pancakes and canned meat. Once we made 15 pancake sandwiches from one can of Spam. I never again want to eat anything shaped like a pancake, much less cook one.

Verne, our 70-year-old retired mail-

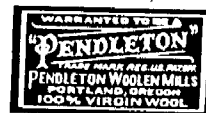
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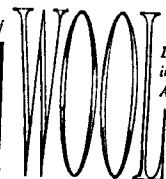
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man, was always cheerful and did his share of the work. He told us halfway through the trip that part of his stomach had been removed, and that what he had left couldn't hold much at a time. John Sr. decreed that Verne, but only Verne, could eat between meals, an extra pancake during the morning. Verne protested, but we made him eat it.

The day after we went on short rations, the going got even rougher. Morning found us gazing out over a weird jumble of rocks that reached up the sides of the canyon in mighty taluses. We could not go around and we could not go through. We had to go over. We named it El Tapón de Piedras Grandes (The Plug of Big Rocks). John Jr. scouted ahead and informed us that this formation extended for about two miles. For the first time we felt really discouraged.

We were no longer members of a float trip but a crew of fanatics bent on carrying 82 pieces of gear and four heavy boats over an endless pile of massive

rocks. At times we formed a human chain, passing those 82 pieces of gear from hand to hand. Once I jumped into the river to save some life preservers, a curious reversal of procedure. At the end of the first day in the plug we had made hardly more than a quarter of a mile, and our food was getting lower.

James Dean and Larry Davis, two of our boatmen, were given a day's grub and sent ahead to get food at a mine by the river where Mendoza was waiting by prearrangement. We expected them to get back the same day but, as we learned afterward, they did not even reach the mine for four days. During those four days they had to take to the river and swim 20 times because of cliffs rising sheer from the water. Jim sprained two of his toes. He was in shorts and his legs were scratched and full of the fly bites that plagued us all. Their last meal was a piece of candy and some chewing gum. On the fourth day Jim was too weak to continue, but they agreed to stay together

and wait it out. They were dozing on the sand when they heard the shouts of two Mexican miners sent by Mendoza. Jim was carried out of the canyon on a mule and taken to the hospital in Chihuahua. It was his description of our plight that started the big search.

Meantime, we were still battling the rocks, but now in an even madder fashion. At a place we named El Portal del Diablo (Devil's Gate) we deflated the rafts and rolled them into bundles like big logs. With some of the men pushing and some pulling, we moved them over boulders 30 feet high, just like ants wrestling with their outsized burdens.

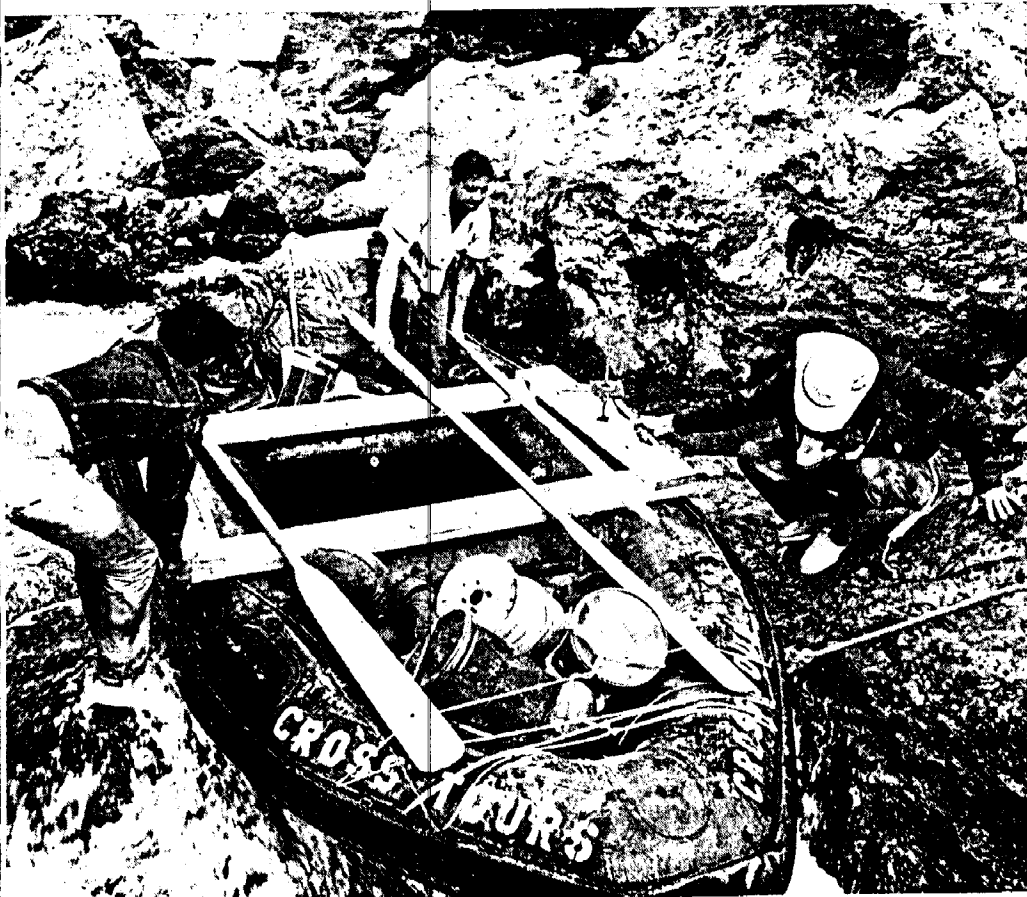
Attempts to catch fish with hooks and lines from our survival kits failed completely. We ate some cactus apples, but I got one of the spines in my tongue and another in the roof of my mouth. Pancakes became more and more repulsive.

Seven of our group were Mormons. Each evening just before we ate our meager meal they held a sort of service. Verne would begin by reciting a parable designed to bolster our spirits. Usually it was about somebody who was worse off than we were but came out all right in the end. I must confess that some of us were more concerned over the waiting food than the outcome of the parable. When Verne finished, someone said grace and then we would eat.

Some nights I'd wake up and watch the brilliant moonlight on the towering cliffs. Lying there, I'd wish for some way to outwit those rocks and get down to the open water and subtropical lushness said to exist downstream. The Mexicans all had been so wonderful to us that to give up would be letting them down. My grandfather, Edward S. O'Reilly, had been a great friend of the Mexicans and had fought in the revolutions to liberate Mexico. He had almost died of thirst a couple of times while crossing the desert of Chihuahua. He was regarded as foolhardy, though he was smart enough to stay away from the rivers that cut through the canyons of the Sierra Madre.

One day a plane flew over us, but at an angle from which we knew we could not be seen. In hopes that the plane might return, we built a big fire, throwing green bamboo to make a smoke signal. Some of us got out mirrors to flash. Spreading a big tarp on the ground, we wrote *comida* (food) on it in big letters. The plane did not come back.

By now, Larry and Jim had been go-



TRAPPED BETWEEN BOULDERS, three of the river runners battle to squeeze their boat, marked with name of expedition head, through a narrow channel in Barranca de Cobre.

four days, and we had no way of knowing they were just being found by the Mexicans. At a conference that night we decided to abandon two of the boats and as much gear as we could spare.

Next morning we sent John Jr. and Ernie Moore ahead to scout the canyon, but told them to be back by 1 p.m. While they were gone we began stashing gear in a cave—extra clothing, cooking equipment, water cans, everything we thought we could do without. We carried up the pretty rock samples we had collected. I left behind my only skirt. Professor Wilmer W. Tanner, who had been sent along by Brigham Young University, left some of his precious pickled snakes and frogs.

John Jr. and Ernie were gone 15 minutes beyond the hour set for their return, an anxious 15 minutes for all of us. The prospect that they might disappear like Larry and Jim was almost too much. When they did get back they reported nothing but more rocks below. We were standing there, trying to decide whether to go on or give up, when four human figures wearing the breechclouts and blouses of the Tarahumara Indians appeared on a cliff above us.

Magic of Mendoza

As the Indians started down, we all dashed back to camp to meet them, zooming over big rocks without hesitating. After an exchange of friendly gestures, we got nowhere in conversation until we mentioned the magic name of Mendoza. Then they grinned and nodded vigorously. John Sr. gave them fishhooks and some other trade items he had brought along, and three of the men gave them their machetes. Two hours later, two Mexican miners showed up with food in the packs that Jim and Larry had taken out. They told us what had happened to them.

The next day we put the Indians to work helping take our gear out of the cave again, and soon we were on our slow way. Jan and I and the Indians formed a chain to move the gear. This delighted the small, darkskinned men, especially when we were in position to toss small items. When I would throw something to them they would catch it deftly and laugh as they tossed it on. To them it became a sort of game. When there was nothing to do, each Indian would climb onto a big rock, roost there in a squatting position and gaze out across the

vastness of the canyon. All our elaborate gear seemed silly when I realized that they had come down to look for us carrying absolutely nothing.

Finally Mendoza came down to our camp grinning and waving. Larry was right behind him. After exchanging greetings, we were told that more rocks were below and that we would have to climb out of the canyon with the Indians toting our gear. We took one last look at those endless rocks and agreed to the climb. At that point the canyon sloped up steeply, but between two towering cliffs there was a dip in the rimrock marking a pass. It seemed a long way off, but we wanted no more of the river.

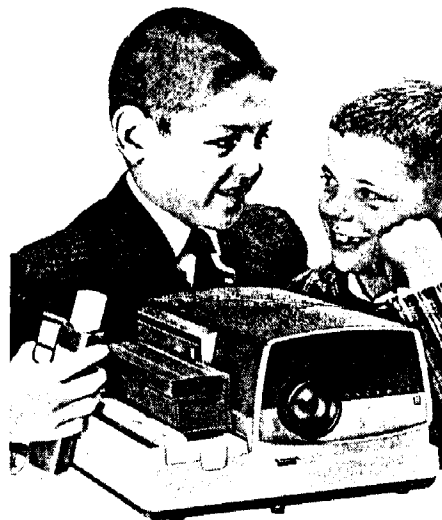
If it had not been for the Indians, we probably could not have made it. They alone knew of the trail that snaked up the cliff. Without them, we would have had to pick our own way up the towering rock walls. Strung out along the trail in single file, we began our retreat from the Barranca de Cobre, the line of weary boaters lengthening as the going got steeper. Most of us suffered from blistered feet.

Each one of us carried a canteen, but nothing else. For five miles we climbed that trail, which seemed designed only for goats. At one point as we toiled upward the Indians passed us, each carrying a 60-pound pack of our gear. Suddenly I realized that it was their third trip of the day. These Indians get their endurance from running immense distances across the deserts. Sometimes they have races from village to village, and the entire audience runs along to watch. As I climbed the last stretch of the trail my feelings could best be expressed as, "Viva Mexico! Viva the Mexicans and viva those wonderful Indians."

By the time we got over the rimrock some of us were near exhaustion and we were all eager to rest our feet. It was after dark when we made camp in the high country. Jan and I absolutely refused to cook dinner. John Jr. and Larry cooked it, and we all turned in. During the night I woke up shivering in the cold, thin air. My air mattress had gone flat, so I built myself a small fire and sat beside it, thinking of our adventure. When the others woke up they stayed in their sleeping bags, joking now about our bizarre trip. Then and there we formed the Overland Boaters Association, an organization that does not need water for boating trips.

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