camping at red rock

by Hugh Roberts
photography by Bud McGinnis

If what you're really turned on to is the Beverly Hills cocktail Hollywood celebrity party circuit, I promise you'll absolutely hate the low desert country. But since almost all of us do possess that little touch of loner, you should at least give it a try. To begin with, the Great Mojave Desert is commonly referred to as the Los Angeles entrance to Death Valley. This should give you a tip as to what to expect—mostly miles of miles. Some choose to refer to it as bleak, but if you, like Bill and Billy, can repace your head, slow your life-style a bit, and adapt to desert time (which you'll find measured in milleniums) you can find a different life concept and life-style. It's not only teeming with new life (some very small and almost undetectable) but traces of life millions of years past.

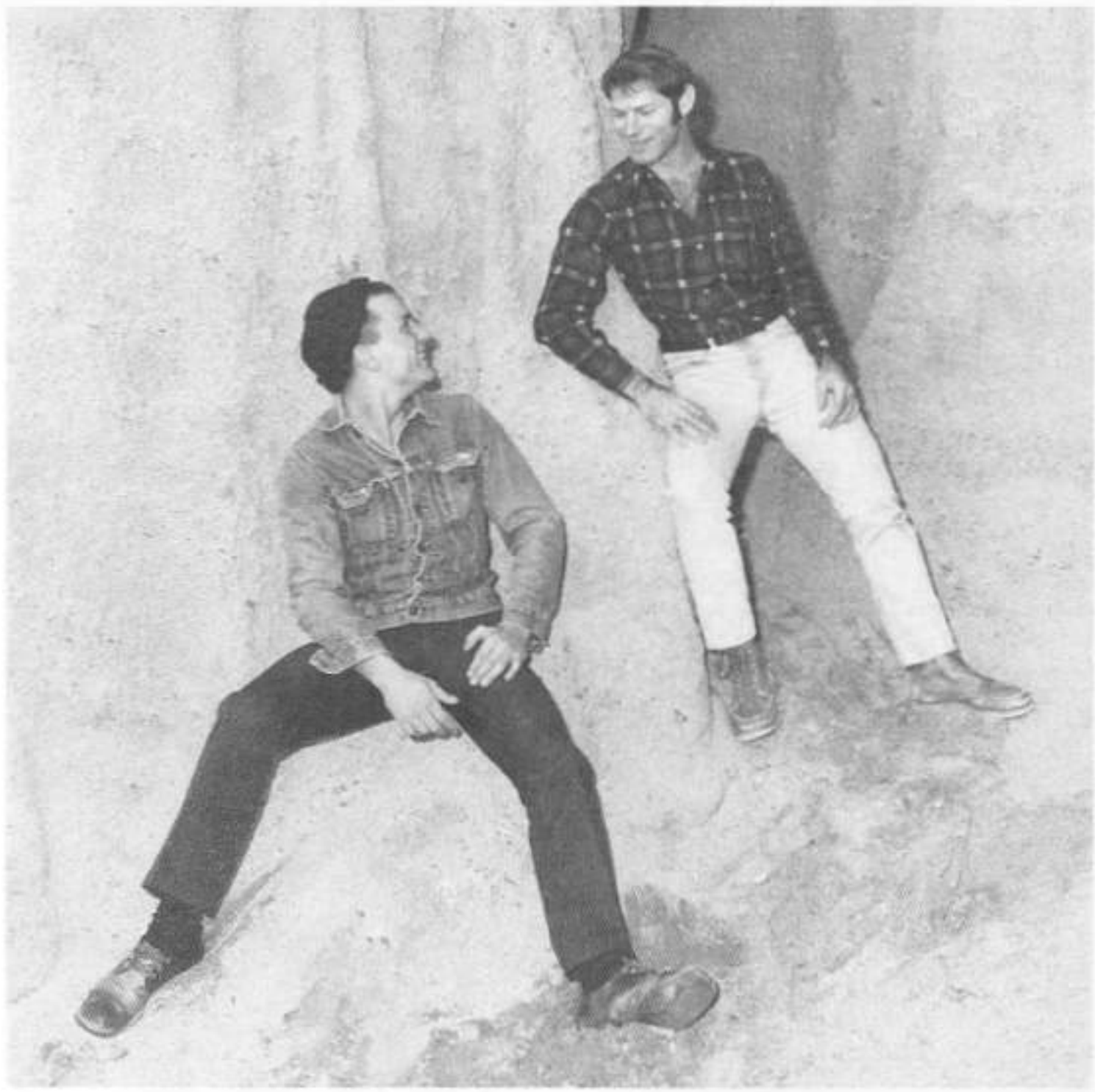
There in Red Rock Canyon you'll find an endless series of self-made, self-activated and self-involving activities to choose from—trail-biking spelunking (rock-climbing), hiking, or just camping out. Bill and Billy chose the latter, deciding on some real desert tripping. Learn a lesson from Billy, take along plenty of warm clothing. Due to some well-meant, friendly, but nonetheless poor advice, coupled with his own lack of knowledge about this kind of country, he brought along only very light clothes. Don't make the same mistake, for just as soon as that sun sets, those shifting sands become more like shifting snow banks in temperature.

Camping at Rim Ridge (would you believe?) can be a refreshing rediscovery of not only yourself but our desert heritage as well. So, equipped with those necessary warm clothes and a nice serviceable van or camper (forget the motels in the town of Mojave, they're strictly below par . . . and much of the fun is staying out in the desert), get a grip on yourself—all of

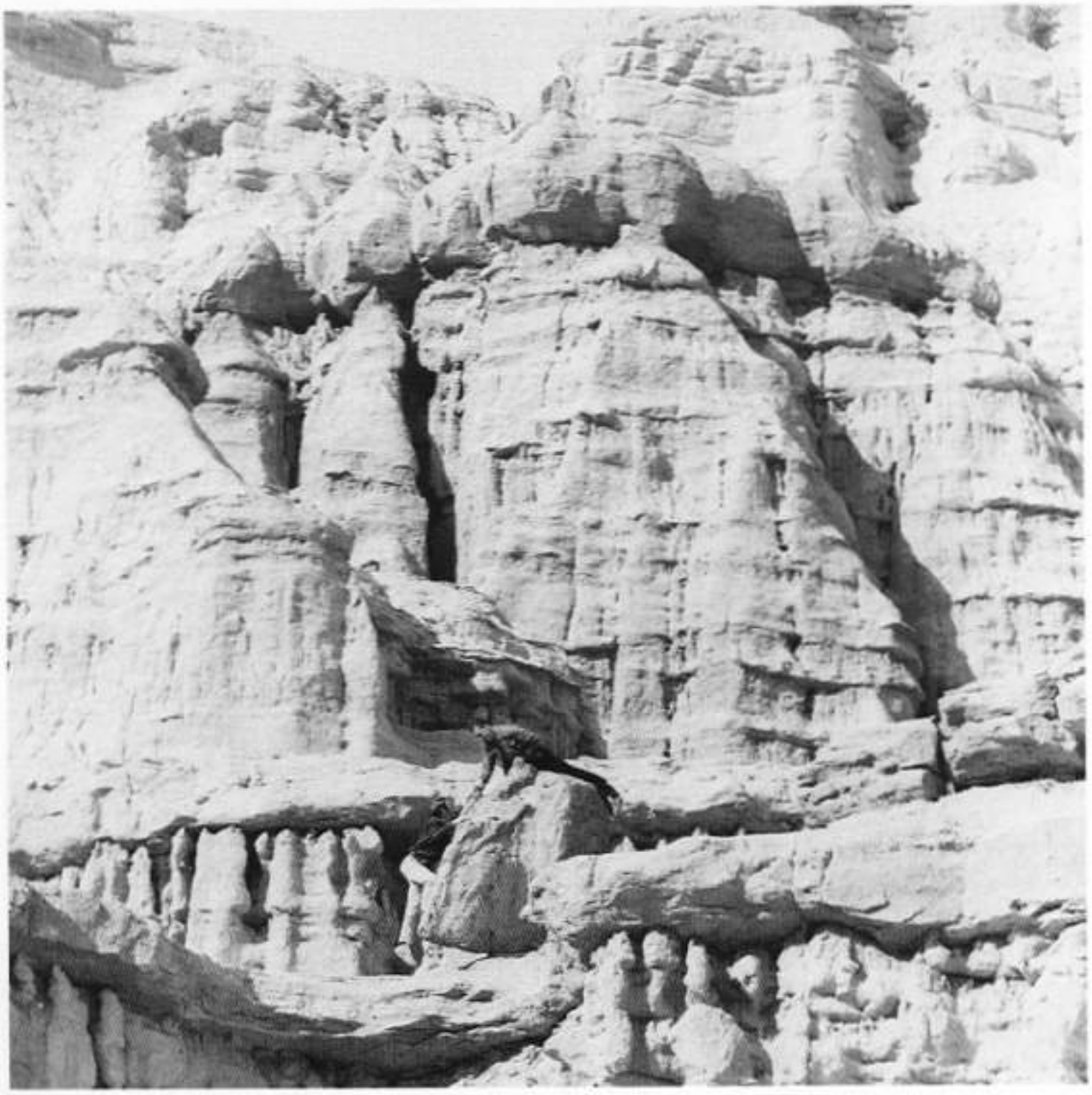
you—wits, survival instinct, and explorer abilities—and get set for fun in your desert discovery.

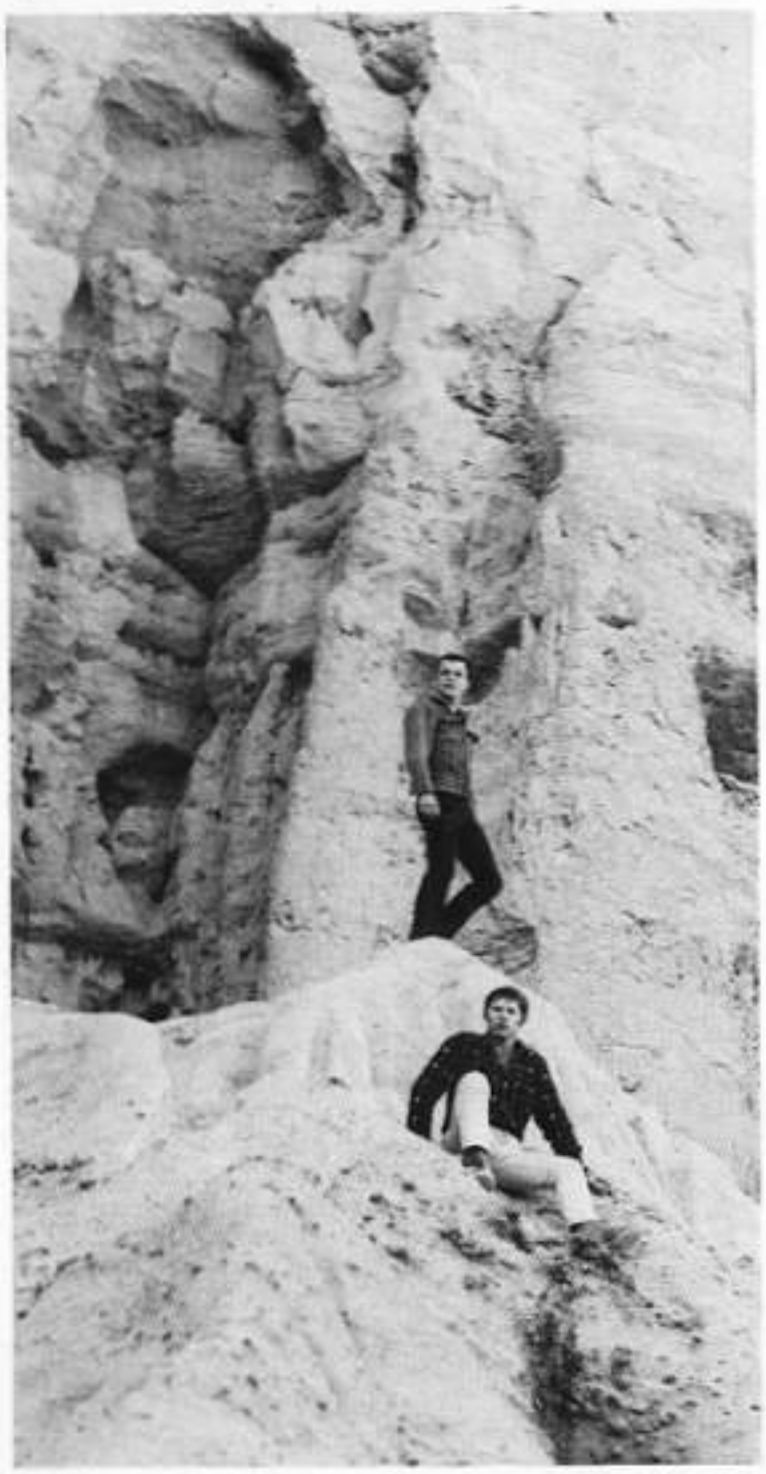
Rim Ridge in Red Rock Canyon palisades itself down into the desert floor in a spectacular layering of sand-fossil-stone history. This natural painting has sand cascaded into some really breathtaking splendor. By climbing a bit and poking around those little wind indented, glacier/water carved sandstone inlets, Bill and Billy discovered bits and pieces of history not just from other times, but other places as well—shells from some distant (maybe even long buried) sea and stones and volcanic rock glacierly pushed from hundreds of miles away. If you have some smattering knowledge of geology, all this layered effect is, in itself, a history lesson—nature's way—all suspended in sandstone rippling. A touch of rock knowledge can also help in uncovering bits of treasure. Between them the two guys not only found some interesting fossils, but a nice chunk of pure jade, several good specimens of petrified wood, a rather large tiger-eye stone, and even a few opals in matrix. All these need only a bit of cutting and polishing for the beginnings of a fine little precious stone collection or even some lovely tie-tack, cuff-link, or ring settings—all with twice the fun and meaning because you really did do it all yourself.

There are any number of other collection trip items like sun-bleached bones (if that's your bag), or pieces of wood (resembling driftwood) brushed by all that wind-blown sand. Since the area and lay of the land is right, enough patient looking is sure to produce any number of precious and semi-precious stones. Certainly gold and silver ores are in abundance, and because of that glacier action, who knows what else. It's all there for the taking, but do learn to use a bit of restraint, for hard lessons in the near past have taught us that it takes man only a few years to destroy what nature took ages to create. Take only what you really want. Pick and choose with care.



If collecting is not your bag, there are other attractions on such a trip. Try aloning it for a bit of self-cleaning solitude. Here there is a large area designated for trucks, bikes and campers, but most everyone seems to be out somewhere else doing their own particular trip. This leaves you lots and lots of time and space for freedom—both the physical kind and the mental variety. You see, the desert does have this strange quieting effect. All the city hassle, now so far behind, seems so trivial. All those super-important things that weighed so heavily on you, now sink into oblivion, right along with





man's artificially created time concept—minutes and hours here return to their natural state of days and nights, sunrise to sunset. This, for me at least, is perhaps the desert's greatest gift.

Naturally, we can't ignore all the fun of the desert, like all that collecting and discovery already mentioned, and for that I suggest you take along a buddy even with a friend of your family along (you'll also find some of the quiet, loner bit remains. It's true of almost everyone who seeks out this area, so chuck any ideas of cruising, and get yourself on an inner trip). The variety of experience is almost endless. It all truly is what you make it. So decide on a fun time, if you will, grab a bunch of blankets, a portable stove, a few convenience cookout foods, then slip into something warm and comfortable, grab a trusty compass, by all means leave your watch at home, and git!

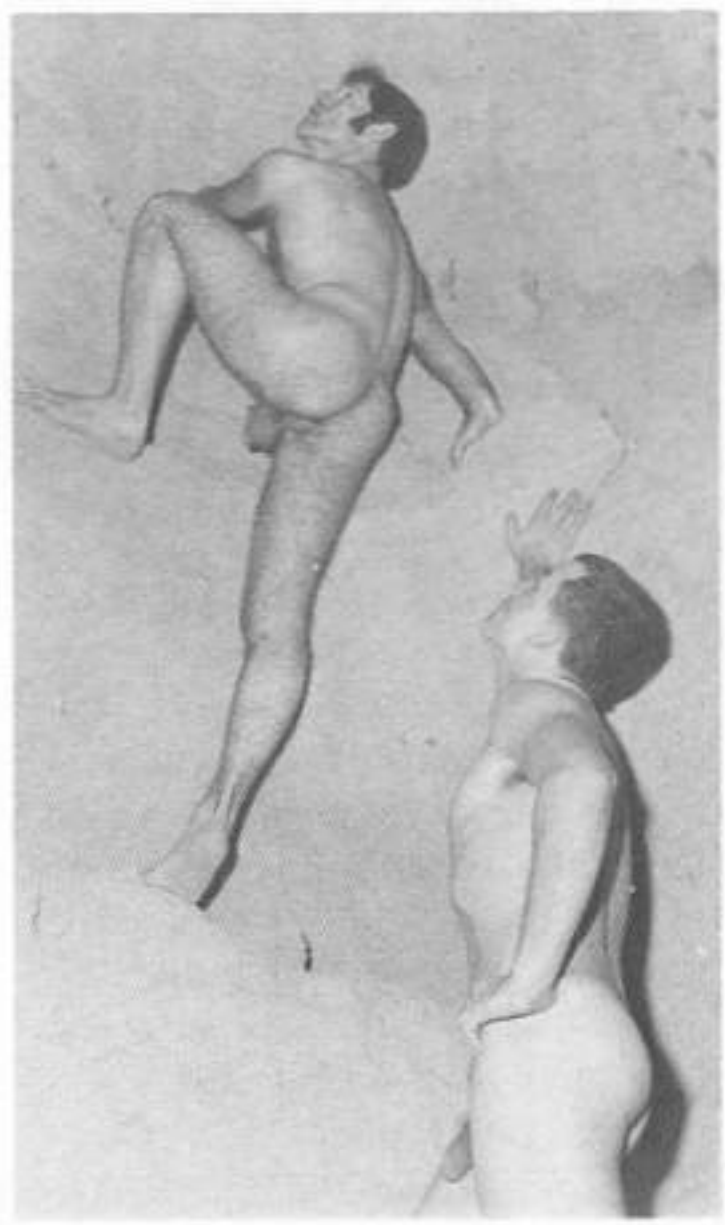
The guys drove up the canyon on a small super-bumpy road in their well-equipped van. Although there were a few other cars and campers present, no people seemed to be in evidence. These breathtaking weird sandstone forms fingered the sky. They parked in the rapidly lengthening shadows of these tall sand towers, and after all the appropriate gasps and wows, Bill and Billy got their gear setup into a serviceable grouping. Bill, knowing a bit about this kind of terrain—he's a veteran camper—chose a spot for the fire, digging a deep hole and surrounding it with large rocks, well away from the sparse desert vegetation. The next order of business was collecting wood and starter brush, dropped away from the mesquite, yucca, Joshua trees, and sage (which is about all the plant life you're likely to find, and that's pretty spaced out). Having set up the fire wood for their return, they began an exploratory romp. The rock collecting they did was a breeze. Far less easy was the climbing. It seems all those sand palisades offer little resistance, but are very inclined to be terribly crumbly. Regulation rock climbing equipment is next to useless. They found their greatest assets here, outside of the compass, to be simple caution and serviceable shoes. After a couple of minor slips, they carefully examined every hand and foothold, since a fall to the desert floor could easily have proven fatal. This still didn't stop the general mood of frivolity. Dangerous? So what! It was all worth it for a stance on one of those high sky-touched mesas overlooking the entire horizon flung desert. Here, bleak is beautiful.

Next, again carefully slipping down the sides of the sandforms, they began slipping into those lit-

tle rippled inlets for a bit of further exploration. These odd indentures are their own reward, pulling you back into some historical past as well as your own childhood concept of a safe, hidden-away, no-one-can-find-me thing. It's rare to come upon this kind of serenity, unexpected especially in our hustle-type world, so the moment could and should be savored. It makes the whole trip worth it.

By now the sun had started to sky-dissolve behind all the tall mesa towers, and a brisk wind, self-whipped across the flat desert land unimpeded by hills, houses, or tall trees and only stopped short in a sand whirling whip in front of this jagged ridge, ice-fingered right into the guys. Hand-thorned memories of mesquite wood gathering for that fire were quickly asserted, and were pressed to a swifter need by Billy's light clothing, causing him ridges of goose bumps to match the mountains. They stone skipped back, accompanied by the rhythm of chattering teeth, to the fire-hole location, and all its promises. A few matches brought the promise to warm reality. The brittle dry tumbleweed burst into friendly flame. Quickly added wood, assisted by close cuddling under a couple of the warm blankets, edged off the wind's sharp chill. A touch of discomfort . . . which can have such advantages.

After the chill was fire-dismissed, came time to care for stomach's growl. A pan of bubbling water was quick-converted into steaming mugs of black-hot coffee (you should try the great concentrate they used: seven cups of water per pound of coffee brewed and steeped for a full day. It has a rich full body instant coffee can never match. Use it about the same.) Other fires began dotting the rapidly blackening purple shadows, and the smells of food criss-crossed the natural desert



scents. It's true, you know. Food really does taste better outdoors. Nothing anywhere can approach it—be it McDonald's or Chasen's. It must be a universal feeling for their quickly cooked/burned food was quickly pounced on and devoured at lightning speed. Contented sighs then followed contenting cigarettes close by the crackling fire which provided warmth and just enough light to form a bejewel-splashed pattern on the walls of the ridged mesa behind. Their return to nature's time became complete under that star-dotted blue-black sky. Strange. In cities stars seem only a memory, but here they are so very real. This cross-twinkle path of pinpoints of light, accented by a live vibrant hum of unseen desert life (which can only be heard if you're very still and totally stunned), found our boys slipping back to an almost animal-like primal need, to seek shelter and sleep at day's end. The van with its soft mattressing and piles of warm blankets was the easy choice in preference to nature's wind-howling exposure. Man is still indeed in need of many creature comforts.

The van does provide a touch of civilization's seemingly necessary enclosures for us. Of course, if you're very brave, and if you really want to reach out and grasp nature firmly on its own terms, you might try a sleeping bag, and search out one of those semi-protected inlets. Most of us would prefer the van's confines, I'm sure. If you do sleep in one of these travelers, like Bill and Billy, pick up one of the readily available brochures on the do's and don'ts like: No fires inside, EVER! Don't attempt to leave the motor running all night for warmth. Always have one window open just a crack, no matter how cold, to let in fresh air and help the circulation. Remember, to keep warm, blankets and a buddy are much more fun.

The complete return to nature's time arrives full circle with eyes opened in a full-wide-awake at the sun's first over-the-horizon peep. I hate to sound like one of those corny travelogues from the Forties, but, really, in order to appreciate sunrise in the desert, you gotta be there. The sky and sand look exactly like God went crazy with a finger paint kit. The sounds are from some long-ago almost-remembered childhood, when the world was a stiller and happier place. And there are birds—flocks of birds. How long has it been since you've seen birds in huge flocks in the city?

The burned-out fire just lies there, a cold bed of coals. But it needs only a little coaxing and prodding to resume its fiery, friendly life of cooking and warming. The soon-steaming coffee, merely delicious the previous day, was morning's blessing, and was followed by a breakfast both filling and fulfilling. Billy was quickly bundled into some of Bill's more appropriate warm clothes, and a morning spent in quiet walking followed. Having gone along this full natural circle, the morning seemed best given to quiet thought and contemplation, stopping for only an occasional discovery/examination.

The previous night had dumped a hard snow on the higher peaks that surrounded them, and the nippy winds swept over them as it pushed out to the desert. Cold hands and faces soon had to return to friend fire.

Sorting began, all the collected rock and wood were slowly and carefully examined. The rejects were returned to the desert for reclamation by either the sand or another collector. The slow pace of the sorting gave evidence to the reluctance to leave, but cold winds and stinging sand helped hurry that slowing process. Leaving time was now. The van was repacked with gathered treasures carefully folded in blankets. Old friend fire was then covered with sand and drenched with water in some strange ritual burial.

The same super-bumpy road led Bill and Billy back to the proper world of proper minutes and hours—a seemingly more safe and secure world—but certainly a far more sterile one than the desert with all its bleakness. Still, all the houses, paved streets and electricity in this more familiar world would never erase the fun, or the discovery, or even the chill of this desert weekend.