

By Peter Jensen

Illustration by Larry Ashton

Baja in their backyard

Every library should be like our Natural History Museum's. Its tall windows face south over El Prado in Balboa Park, where plumes of spray from the big geyser-fountain blossom and fall, arcing rainbows over a circular pool. Located high up in the original museum wing, this library is a sanctuary of adventures undertaken, successes and failures, fortunate discoveries as well as lifelong forays into what makes the natural world tick. The stacks are orderly and up-to-date but carry the weight of a century of curiosity. A man in a bowler hat might emerge from deep in some book-lined canyon festooned with Dewey decimal graffiti, and you would not blink at the anachronism: perhaps this Van Winkle was the ghost of Mr. Klauber, San Diego's self-taught expert on rattlesnakes, or the artist Valentien, his smock smudged with pastels from a new botanical illustration.

I was in the museum early one morning on a writing assignment, familiarizing myself with the institute's early years. Distractions, however, were everywhere. Of most interest, I kept stumbling into books pertaining to Baja, that bony finger that beckons so many San Diegans southward, including me. My own shelves at home sway under almost 3 feet of Baja books, from Steinbeck to Erle Stanley Gardner, Aldo Leopold to Ann Zwinger and La Jolla's meticulous Baja historian, Harry Crosby.

When a custodian back in the stacks turned on a vacuum cleaner and began making a hell of a racket, I took a break and wandered over to the librarian to talk about — what else? — favorite Baja books. We half-yelled at each other over the droning Electrolux.

I soon mentioned a little volume I had called *Baja Adventures By Land, Air and Sea*, written by Marvin Patchen. Seems he and his equally adventurous wife, Aletha, had seen Baja using just about every mode of transportation, from their early Alaskan camper/truck to helicopter, amphibious vehicle, small plane and even two Grumman aluminum canoes lashed together with two-by-fours to make a kind of double outrigger.

I told her it would have been fun to meet Patchen, because he was doing things in the '50s and '60s that pre-

dated the current mania for "adventure travel" by about 30 years.

She pointed at the man vacuuming the stacks.

"You're in luck," she said. "That's Marvin Patchen."

I soon learned that this hard-working custodian was doing his usual selfless volunteer work at the museum. He and Aletha would drive "over the hill" from their house in Canebrake, a cluster of private lands located amidst Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, to help at the museum.

I introduced myself and we had a delightful rambling talk about magazines, their casita in the boulder gardens of Catavina well down the Baja peninsula, canoes and hot springs.

Like so many Baja aficionados, the Patchens let you bond with them through your own tall tales and memories of desert-

country night skies where the stars are so numerous and bright you can barely pick out the Big Dipper.

I left the library that day with an invitation to drop in at Catavina "any time," for I had received the Patchen seal of approval: They tell you where they hide the key. Hundreds of visitors have used that key. Recently, many years of comments in the guest log have spawned another Patchen book, *Baja Outpost: The Guestbook from Patchen's Cabin*. It reads like a combination road novel and collection of love letters from a long-past high-school sweetheart. Chances are any San Diegan would recognize a few names among the many who have holed up there for the night.

You have your choice as a San Diegan when it comes to a Baja California that's down where the boojums dance and the cactus crawl. You can consider it too hard to get to, too remote, too dangerous. Or, like the Patchens, you can consider it blessedly hard to get to, remote, hardly dangerous at all, and as enthralling as a favorite opera or novel that goes on ... and on ... and on.

And some night, on a lonely beach somewhere, you'll spot a campfire with two shadows beside it. It may be the Patchens. Or it may be one of a thousand other San Diego couples like them, drawn to a desert by a sea where the world's voice doesn't come to you through television speakers, but in the calm murmur of surf, a chorus of moonlight, and snapping sparks that spiral up and mix with stars. ■

