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Lonely Grave in the Sierra

Introduction

California's Sierra Nevada range extends for about 600 kilometers north-to-south, and it is about 100 kilometers wide in the east-to-west direction. The southern-most part of the Sierra is home to the highest point in the contiguous United States, Mount Whitney (4421 meters). Farther to the north, Mount Ritter (4006 meters) and its neighbor Banner Peak (3946 meters), dominate in the central Sierra region. This article presents a story about a grave site hidden near those two peaks. Along the way, we will also learn something about the history of Die Naturfreunde organization in California between the two World Wars.

One of several ways to reach Ritter or Banner is to take a cross country route from Thousand Island Lake via a remote high valley, far from busy Sierra trails. Once above the tree line, at about 3200 meters altitude, unsuspecting hikers may notice a reflection of the sun rays from a metal plate. If they take a short side trip to check the shiny surface, they may discover a grave marked by the metal plaque, inscribed in somewhat broken English:



Plaque at the grave.

*Here rests Conrad - Anna Rettenbacher
Who lost their lives climbing Mt. Banner July 1934
Die Naturfreunde Inc. San Francisco*

Who were the Rettenbachers mentioned on the plaque? Where did they come from and what happened to them? Why did Die Naturfreunde organization get involved?

The full story might never be known. Eyewitnesses are gone, memories lost, records destroyed. Personal tragedy was soon forgotten amidst the global catastrophe of World War II. Careful research, however, made it possible to reconstruct at least some of the events that took place. Many unanswered questions remain, and perhaps you, the reader, may help in finding some of the answers.

Born in Germany

Konrad Josef Rettenbacher was born in Nürnberg on June 4, 1901. He was one of several children in the family of factory worker Josef Rettenbacher and his wife Barbara nee Schmidl. (A different source identifies the parents as Joh. Rettenbacher and Eva Schmidt). In the 1920s, Konrad's parents lived in Woelkernstrasse, in Nürnberg. The elder Rettenbacher may have been of Austrian origin. Konrad and other members of the family were Catholics.

Anna Rosa Hertel, born in Nürnberg on February 26, 1900, was a daughter of Konrad Hertel, a molder, and his wife Margarete nee Busch. Her parents were Protestants. In the 1920s, the Hertels lived at Schlossstrasse 26, in Nürnberg .

Anna and Konrad got married in late August of 1922. He was 165 centimeters tall, and his wife was 5 centimeters taller. There was also a difference in their education levels. Konrad was a musician, and Anna a chemist, but that disparity didn't bother them much. On Christmas Day of 1922, their daughter, Betty Rettenbacher, was born. The little child, however, died in Nürnberg six months later, and there are no indications that Konrad and Anna had any other children.

The times following World War I were rough for German citizens. In order to feed the family, Konrad had to accept a not very glamorous position of a steam locomotive stoker for the Deutsche Reichsbahn train company. Their new residence was close to the train station, at Hinterm Bahnhof 28-B in Nürnberg. Anna has apparently lost her job and she became a housewife. In 1925, living conditions for Konrad and

Anna Rettenbacher became unbearable, and after much soul searching they decided -- like many other people of their generation -- to say goodbye to their relatives and their homeland, and try a fresh start on a new continent, in the United States of America.



Simple grave in the mountains. Photo courtesy of Cody Lewis

Way West

Early on Sunday morning, January 17, 1926, Konrad boarded the passenger ship *Columbus* in Bremen, and set sail for the West. The couple decided that Anna would join Konrad a few months later. Konrad's trip from Bremen to New York took 10 days. He stated to the American immigration officials that he was planning to become a permanent resident, and would stay in New York with an acquaintance, Michael Echter, 320 East 14th Street, Manhattan, until he found a job and his own accommodation. Konrad later moved to 701 East 160th Street in the Bronx. On Saturday, May 22, 1926, Anna arrived to New York aboard the ship *Stuttgart*. From her immigration papers, we know that she was to join her husband who now lived at 1899 Madison Avenue, Manhattan, New York. A year later, Konrad and Anna were still in New York, living for a while on Fresh Pond Road in Maspeth, Queens, then back in Manhattan, at 157 East 96th Street. In March of 1927, they were delighted to welcome Konrad's younger brother, Max Rettenbacher. He was born in about 1908. Max told the immigration authorities that he had worked as bank clerk in Germany, and that he intended to stay in the US 'forever'. However, I couldn't find any other mention of Max Rettenbacher in any historical or genealogical US sources, and I don't know if he had perhaps changed his name, or died, or has returned back to Germany. In 1934, as Anna and Konrad's tragedy was unfolding, the newspapers were reporting that the Rettenbachers only had one relative in the United States, but this relative wasn't Konrad's brother Max.

It is not known for how long have Konrad and Anna stayed in New York, and what were they doing for a living. Eventually, they must have become disappointed by the lack of opportunity for them in New York. The US Census taken in April of 1930 finds them in Lapeer County, an agricultural area of Michigan, 60 miles north of Detroit. Konrad's occupation at that time was listed as farmer. The Rettenbacher's may have made another trip back east, perhaps to Philadelphia, and then, at the beginning of 1932, they turned west again, to their final US destination, California.

California

On Friday, January 15, 1932, Anna and Konrad made a visit to the club house of a local branch of Die Naturfreunde near Muir Woods above Mill Valley, just north of San Francisco. Die Naturfreunde was present in California since June of 1912, when the San Francisco branch was founded by German speaking immigrants. Most of the members at that time were tradesmen, who enjoyed music, dance, traditions from the old countries, and hiking in the woods and hills of the San Francisco Bay Area. The official name used in the early years was Touristenverein: Die Naturfreunde, but the English translation, The Nature Friends, was also frequently used. In November of 1912, one of the members, Wilhelm

Heidelmann, an immigrant from Austria, purchased a property at the edge of Muir Woods National Monument, a scenic forested park featuring giant redwood trees. This lot, later transferred to the Nature Friends, would become the home of the "club house" of the San Francisco branch. The building, in the style of a genuine German/Austrian alpine chalet, was completed by August of 1917, and it still serves as a favorite meeting place for the Naturfreunde members of Northern California. Two other branches of Die Naturfreunde, in Oakland and in Los Angeles, were soon formed, and by the time of the Rettenbachers' arrival to the West Coast, all three California branches had formed a single legal entity, today known as California Nature Friends, with all deeds and properties held by this corporate body. In 1931, a high mountain lodge was built for use of the members near Donner Summit, in the Sierra Nevada, at an altitude of 2100 meters. The hiking trips of Naturfreunde members were now no longer limited to local coastal hills, but also extended to some of the highest mountains of California.

The first registered ascent in the Ritter Range by Naturfreunde members was by Bernard Schmidt and Barney Beyer in June of 1931. They climbed Mount Ritter and stated in the summit register that they were from the "San Francisco Tourist Club Die Naturfreunde". Egmont Schumann and several friends climbed the nearby Banner Peak on October 1, 1931. They identified themselves as a group from "Touristenverein Die Naturfreunde - Tourist Club, San Francisco". In August of 1933, Mount Ritter was once again a goal of visitors from the Naturfreunde: this time, five members from Los Angeles reached the summit.

Konrad and Anna, who apparently had some mountain climbing experience in their past, must have dreamt of adding their names to at least one of those two Ritter Range registers in the coming years. During their January 1932 visit to the club house, they stated that they wanted to transfer their Naturfreunde membership from Philadelphia to the local California branch, and that was quickly approved. Upon their arrival to the San Francisco Bay Area, they also had to find suitable jobs. It didn't take long for them to begin working as domestic helpers in the household of a wealthy couple, Helen and Howard Park. Anna's position soon changed to live-in governess or nanny for the Parks' six children, while Konrad became the family's butler and chauffeur. The Parks' huge mansion was situated in the gentle hills above the Bay, at 252 West Santa Inez street in Hillsborough, San Mateo County. The house has since been demolished, but a picture, that later got reproduced in several newspapers, shows Anna and Konrad on a brick stairway at the property, in front of a pair of French doors that looked out onto a garden.



Anna and Konrad Rettenbacher in Hillsborough, circa 1934.

At about that time, Konrad had filed a petition for naturalization, in order to become a US citizen, but as far as I know, Anna and Konrad's accident interrupted the process, and this request had never been granted. Formally, therefore, the Rettenbachers were still legal German citizens at the time of their deaths.

Summer of 1934

The school year in 1934 ended early in June, and Park's children, then ages five to fifteen, were ready for a refreshing summer break. The family departed for a vacation home near Lake Tahoe, in the mountains, in mid June. Konrad and Anna accompanied Mrs. Park and the children, while Mr. Park stayed at home, busy with his banking and brokerage affairs. The Rettenbachers must have looked forward to that trip. Everything was much more relaxed in the mountains, and their daily chores looked different and more interesting. They would have probably even found some free time for brief hiking trips near Lake Tahoe occasionally. The most exciting event of this summer season was to happen for them at the end of the vacation period: they had gotten a permission to take an entire week off for a trip to the Ritter Range.

One day at the end of July, perhaps on Saturday, July 28, after Mr. Park had finally joined his family in the mountains, the Rettenbachers left Lake Tahoe by car, and kept driving until they have reached the ranger station at Tuolumne Meadows, on the main road through Yosemite National Park. A park ranger later remembered talking to them just before they had started their trip on the beautiful John Muir Trail. The trail would lead them through Lyell Canyon, then over Donohue Pass and farther south, already out of Yosemite, all the way to the foot of the Ritter-Banner massif. The ranger, John Bingaman, was possibly the last person who saw Anna and Konrad alive.

July had turned into August, and the Parks, now back in Hillsborough, waited for Anna and Konrad to return from their trip. By Tuesday evening, August 7, there was still no word from them. That was supposed to be the start of a busy period for the Parks, with various social obligations, including a birthday party for their ten year old son James, and a week filled with various other tasks related to the forthcoming school year for the children. The Rettenbachers would have been assigned important roles in many of those activities. Why weren't they back? After apparently waiting for a few more days, Mr. Park finally decided to report the couple missing to the police on Friday, August 10, 1934. He also must have talked to some members of the Naturefreunde during the week, because by that Sunday, when the search officially commenced, several experienced climbers from the San Francisco/Muir Woods branch of Naturfreunde, headed by Wilhelm Heidelmann, were already in the mountains. At first, the search was led by Yosemite National Park personnel. However, it soon became clear that the Rettenbachers had crossed the Yosemite border on their way south, and the coordination of the search effort was therefore transferred to the Sierra National Forest headquarters in North Fork. Even before the search had officially started, on Friday, August 10, Forest Service employee Gilbert Davis reported seeing an abandoned camp site near Thousand Island Lake. This alpine lake, at an elevation of almost 3000 meters, sits at the foot of

Banner Peak. In his report, Mr. Davis said that the dishes were left upon a table near the tent, but that no people were around. It took a while for this information to reach the headquarters, but when it finally did, it was quickly confirmed via radio that Davis' description matched the features of the lost couple's tent.

By Monday, August 13, the search was focused on Banner Peak and on Mount Ritter, which could both be reached from the abandoned camp site in a day hike. Three groups were involved: The Sierra National Forest team from North Fork led by the district ranger Benjamin Mace, another group of searchers from Inyo National Forest that started from Mammoth Lakes, and finally, the Naturfreunde team coming from Tuolumne Meadows in Yosemite. They all converged to the northern part of the Ritter Range. The North Fork team carried a bulky portable radio, and this was the first time that a radio was used in a search-and-rescue mission in the Sierra.

One of the first things on the searchers to-do list was to check mountain registers on the summits of Banner and Ritter, and see if Anna and Konrad had left any notes therein. Three Naturfreunde climbers ascended Mount Ritter: Otto Lirsch and August Rohmann visited the peak on Tuesday, August 14. Their note in the register reads: "From head of Thousand Island Lake to Banner/Ritter saddle, then up couloir on east slope to ridge near summit. Crossed to north slope zig-zagging to summit. This climb is part of a search for Mr. and Mrs. Rettenbacher, lost in this region since about August 4th." The register was also signed a day later by Herman Cramer, who checked a different route to the summit. He identified himself as: "Member of Touristenverein Nature Friends and Sierra Club San Francisco." At least one of the Forest Service people similarly visited Banner Peak, and wrote: "Dell McBride, August 13, with searching party for the lost couple". However, neither group was able to find any clues. Whatever happened to the Rettenbachers, it was concluded, it probably took place during their ascent, before they had ever reached a summit.

Sixteen days had passed since Konrad and Anna had last been seen, and the hope of finding them alive was all but abandoned. To all involved, it became clear that the search was now turning into a recovery rather than a rescue mission. According to newspapers, Forest Service officials got in touch with a lady that was only identified as "Mrs. J. H. Fox of San Mateo, the only relative of the missing couple in the Unites States". Somewhat unusually, even before Konrad and Anna's deaths were confirmed, the officials pressured Mrs. Fox to authorize the burial of the couple in the high mountains, and she gave them the permission. I was never able to find anything more about Mrs. Fox or her relationship to the Rettenbachers.

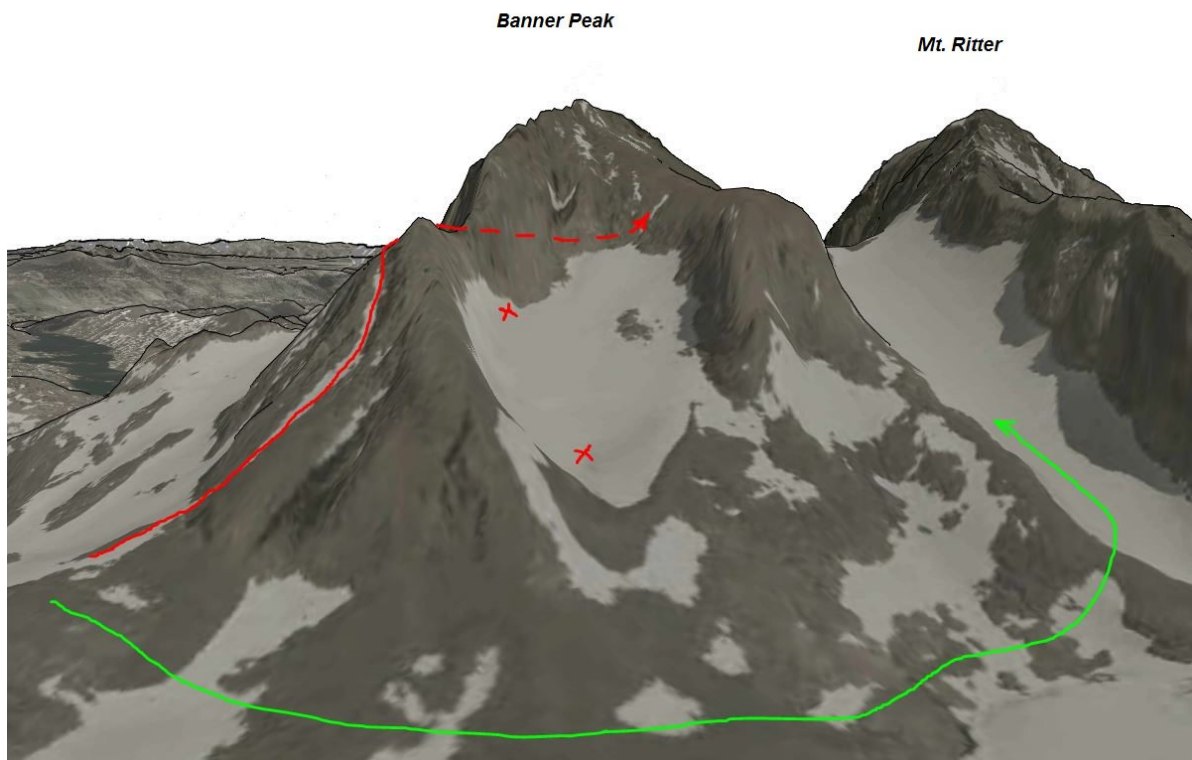
Norman Clyde

Norman Clyde, a well respected mountaineer, has reached the search area on Tuesday, August 14, in the late afternoon. Norman was not only one of the best known Sierra climbers at that time, but he had already participated in several difficult searches in the mountains. Just a year earlier, he had led the search for Walter "Pete" Starr in the same region. Immediately upon his arrival, Clyde interviewed the members of the Naturfreunde in order to get some information about the missing couple. Many years later, when Clyde was preparing a story about this accident (the text remained unpublished), he wrote: "Replies to my inquiries were conflicting. Some were to the effect that the Rettenbachers were daring and at least reasonably skillful climbers; others intimated that they were cautious and perhaps little beyond the tyro stage as mountaineers. Apparently, they were in the habit of taking along a light rope, which they used only occasionally on especially difficult spots". Clyde also talked to ranger Mace, and learned that a row of recently built 'ducks' had been discovered day earlier, roughly along a line between the abandoned camp and the top of Banner Peak. A 'duck' is a heap of rocks erected to indicate a route followed by climbers. Despite the fact that the ducks might have been left by another party, and that a direct line from Thousand Island Lake to the summit of Banner was not a path that anybody familiar with the Ritter Range would follow (the usual route first goes farther west, around the mountain, not directly up), Clyde decided to check the ducks first thing in the morning.

On Wednesday, August 15, Clyde reached a faint row of markers near the base of the great shoulder projecting westward from the summit of Banner Peak. The lower part of the shoulder was very steep but it would have been scalable for skillful mountaineers. A wide notch on the crest of the shoulder may have looked attractive to climbers who didn't know that a better and much easier approach to Banner Peak existed on the opposite side of the mountain. Only after reaching the notch would the climbers have realized that this was a dead end. Clyde decided to climb to the notch, and see if he could find any other clues along the way. Near the notch, Clyde spotted several more ducks, and saw possible footprints in weathered surface material. Once at the notch, Clyde could see the upper part of Banner Peak, but it also immediately became apparent to him that it was nearly impossible to reach the summit from that place. The crest of the shoulder above the notch turns into a knife edge broken by pinnacles and gendarmes.

On the other, south side of the notch, the shoulder dropped abruptly in precipitous cliffs for several hundred meters to a small and steep glacier (Northwest Glacier). A party at the notch would have three possibilities: give up and come back the same way they came, try to descend the cliffs to the south and end up on the glacier, or try traversing to a serrated ridge above the glacier that perhaps would lead them

all the way to the gentler southwest slope of Banner. "A fine place for an accident", wrote Clyde in his notes later. Clyde then climbed a pinnacle near the shoulder in order to reach a small ledge from which he could see the entire face of the glacier below. Far below, he noticed a dark object lying on the surface of the glacier. This was ominous. Clyde pulled out his binoculars and immediately recognized the broken body of a man. It was Konrad. But where was Anna? Were her remains still hidden somewhere on the rocks, or had she also fallen onto the glacier? Clyde decided to leave his vantage point and to follow an incredibly dangerous route down to the glacier. Once he reached it, he proceeded across the frozen snow and with his axe cut his way up to the glacier's uppermost crevasses. As his head came over the rim of an icy platform, his eyes fell on the lifeless body of a woman. Anna was found.



Northwest Glacier on Banner Peak (center). The green line shows the usual route to the summit of Banner. Red line is the one probably followed by the Rettenbachers. Red crosses mark the likely positions where Clyde had found their bodies. Computer generated image courtesy of <http://caltopo.com/view/>

What happened and why?

Anna and Konrad were clearly not familiar with the usual route up Banner Peak, and they chose a dangerous, dead end approach. After several hours of difficult climbing, they found themselves on rocks, many hundreds of meters directly above a steep glacier. The right decision would have been to turn back and try a different route another day. However, the safe southwest slope of Banner Peak appeared to be so close, just one jagged ledge away, and perhaps they simply could not force themselves to go back.

On the icy platform where Clyde found Anna's body, rocks laid heaped up. Some of them may have been gradually dislodged, long after the accident, but there is also a possibility that Anna and Konrad had been caught in a rock slide high above and hurled to their deaths. Clyde summarized the accident with the following words: "They had not been roped together. If they were not caught in a slide, in all probability one had slipped, or a hand or foothold had broken away, and in the effort of one to rescue the other, both had plunged down the rocky face of the mountain to a common death. They both struck the icy platform. She, a small woman, remained on it, while his greater momentum had carried him on down the glacier. Their bodies now lie interred in a meadow, in a full view of the peak on which their climbing career had come to a sudden and tragic end".

Lonely grave

Finding the remains was only the beginning of a long and dangerous process. Clyde suggested that a special rope, long enough to reach from cliffs to the bottom of the glacier, be brought from the headquarters. It took a day or two for a 250-meter long rope to be brought from North Fork. The crushed bodies were then lowered by the rope and tackles to the foot of the glacier and then to a nearby pass. The remains were then carried in canvas bags over talus to a grassy meadow below the pass, where a shallow grave had already been prepared. A newspaper reported, based on the radio messages from the place of the accident: "Bodies of Mr. and Mrs. Rettenbacher were laid to rest in mountain meadow yesterday. Funeral rites were performed at sunset by the nine mountaineers who risked their lives that the burial might take place. There was no minister to pray, no relatives to weep. Nothing but hardy men to bare their heads and mumble a word of farewell over the remains of humans that most of them had never known in life. Among the nine were Norman Clyde, several Forest Service people, and four members of the San Francisco German Hikers Club, with which the Rettenbachers had been affiliated".

Not forgotten by Naturfreunde friends

The winter of 1934/35 was a difficult one for the members of the Naturfreunde in the greater San Francisco area. The situation in Europe, where most of them still had families and friends, was worsening by the day. It is apparent from written records of the Naturfreunde meetings during that winter that the leadership of the organization kept a firm line between the few communist supporters to the left and an even smaller number of possible sympathizers of the national socialism ideology to the right. In addition, the violent deaths in the mountains of two of their members were still fresh in everybody's minds. Photos from earlier years, showing Anna and Konrad attending the Oktoberfest parties in the Muir Woods club house were painful reminders of the great loss. It was decided that funds would be collected among the members for a bronze tablet for the grave site. Additionally, a large gathering and proper farewell from Anna and Konrad, involving the San Francisco, Oakland, and Los Angeles groups, was scheduled for the forthcoming summer.

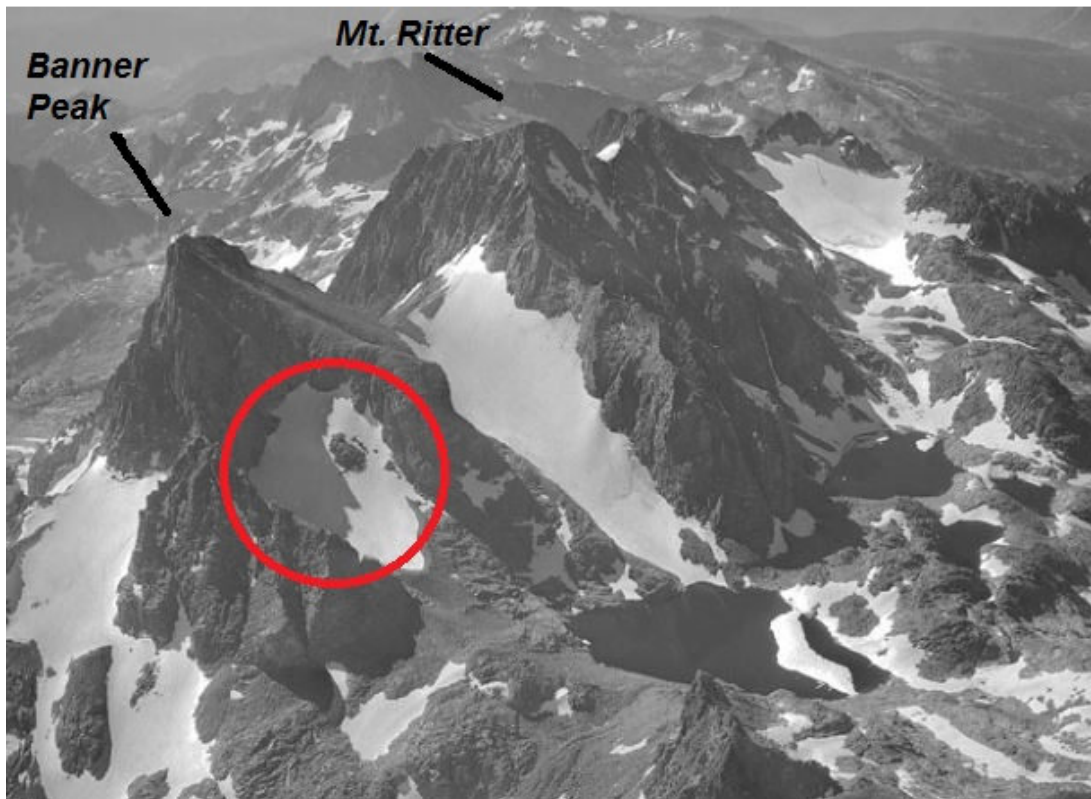
On July 13, 1935, a group of 32 adult members and 4 children began their trip to Thousand Island Lake, where they would establish a large base camp. On one of the following days, a religious service and placing of the plaque took place at the grave site. Accompanied by the cornet player Bernhard Fischer, those gathered sang traditional German songs in memory of the young couple. Several members even climbed Mount Ritter and Banner Peak, and adorned the mountain registers on those two peaks with the "Berg Frei" Naturfreunde stamps.

A couple of years later, World War II began, and the memory of Konrad and Anna slowly faded away. After the war, several groups from the Naturfreunde tried to find the grave site, but not all of them were successful. The older members were no longer actively hiking, and there were apparently no reliable written sources describing the location of the burial place. However, some members did report finding the grave. For example, a group that came to the area in 1981 successfully located the meadow with the grave site.

Eighty years have passed since the tragic accident. I don't know if Konrad and Anna still have any living relatives in Nürnberg or somewhere else in Germany, or even in the United States. Perhaps some of the readers of this article could help in locating them?



In the summer of 1981, a group of Nature Friends from the San Francisco Bay Area visited the Rettenbachers' grave site. Pictured are two members with the Naturfreunde banner standing by the grave, and Banner Peak towering behind them. Photo courtesy of Alan H. Weller



Banner Peak (left) and Mount Ritter (center) from the air. Northwest Glacier, where the bodies were found, is circled in red. Photo by Austin Post, USGS.

Anna and Konrad were laid to rest in one of the most beautiful and most remote areas of the Sierra Nevada. In an average winter, four or five meters of snow covers their grave. During those times of year, this is a land of vast, silent peace. In early spring, rosy finches return to the snow covered remote valley at the foot of Banner Peak. They survive by foraging seeds, and picking up frozen insects off snowbanks. Larger animals follow soon. As the snow cover thins and tiny wildflowers appear on the undulating meadows, the summer hikers arrive to the area. Some of them pass near the lonely grave, heading up, towards the high peaks, chasing their own dreams.

Sources

Sketchy information about Anna and Konrad's early days in Nürnberg is based on their "Meldekarten" in the "Einwohnerregister" in the *Stadtarchiv Nürnberg*. This was kindly sent to me by Ms. Monika Rettenbacher from Vienna (not a relative of Konrad and Anna, just sharing the same last name). There may be much more information in the *Stadtarchiv*, including Konrad's and Anna's photos, but I don't have access to that material.

Lists of outgoing passengers from the port of Bremen during the 1920s are available (free) at <http://www.schiffslisten.de>. Similarly, immigration data from the Port of New York are available (for a fee) at <http://www.ancestry.com> -

The unpublished manuscript of Norman Clyde's story "The Vanishing of the Rickenbackers" (sic!), is available for inspection in the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Other information about the search for the Rettenbachers can be found in California newspapers from August of 1934.

Minutes from the meetings of the San Francisco branch of the *Naturfreunde* held during the winter of 1934/35 are archived in the library of branch's club house, near Muir Woods, above Mill Valley.

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Note added in proofs:

After this article had been completed, a few original pictures from the 1934 search in the Ritter range and two photos from the 1935 dedication of the Rettenbachers' memorial have been located. I am grateful to Klaus-Dieter Gross for bringing those photos to my attention. Some of the newly discovered pictures are reproduced here for completeness.¹



August 1934: Searchers with two makeshift stretchers approach the glacier.

¹ Taken from "Nature Friends SF High Sierra Trips Album," a documentation of mountaineering events of the San Francisco local from the 1920s onwards; thanks to Phil Greer for providing the scans.



August 1934: Stretchers are dragged over the snow field.



July 1935: Memorial plaque is placed on the grave by the Naturfreunde group. Snow is still deep in the remote valley. Two ice axes and a bouquet of spring flowers commemorate Anna and Konrad.