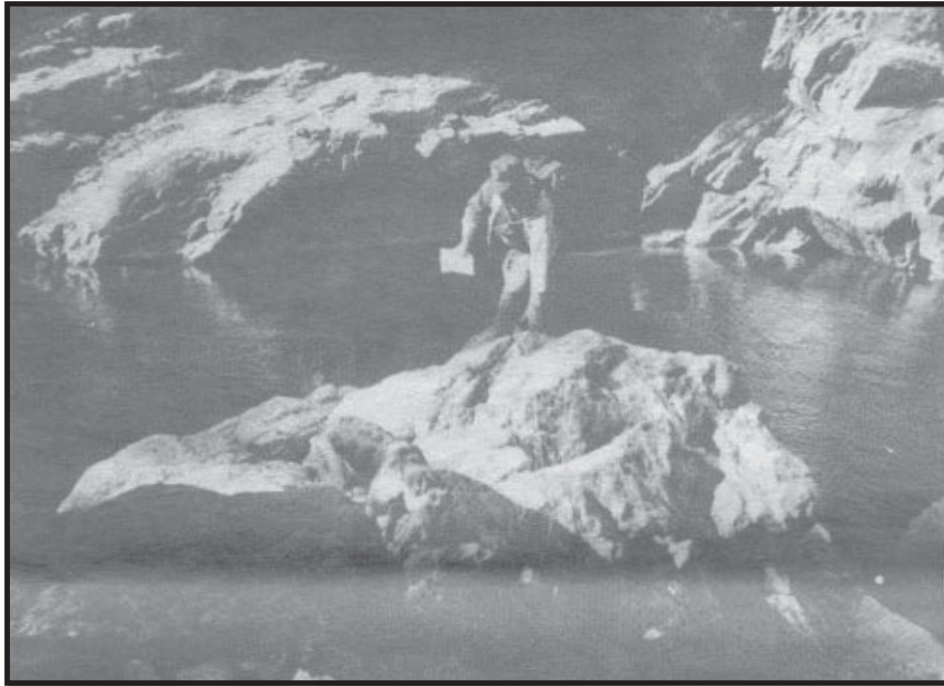


## A Process of Elimination



*A SAR dog team picks its way over tricky footing along the North Fork of the American River, searching for a missing goldminer*

By—Hatch & Judy Graham  
Contributing Editors

Clues to a missing person's whereabouts can come in all shapes and sizes. They can be information gathered by careful (and continuing) interviews of friends, family, and others. They can be a footprint or a SAR dog's scenting alert. And sometimes the best way to find that missing person is to figure out where he isn't.

The call came Thursday night. "Report in to Placer County Sheriffs Office at 0800 hours." Why not right now? The old man was last seen the previous Friday, but no one had reported him for almost a week. We probably weren't looking to save a life.

As we headed toward Auburn the next morning, I was speculating. A 61-year-old man. I hoped he's wandered off from a family outing or rural home. I hoped he wasn't a miner!

We got our initial briefing at the sheriffs office:

- WMA, 61 years; 5-foot, 9 inches, 200 lbs.
- Answers to "Benny."
- Address: General Delivery, Iowa Hill.
- Residence: Last Chance Mine, North Fork of the American River.
- Last seen at the head of the trail down to the mine at 1600 hours (4 p.m. the previous Friday.)
- No known medical problems.
- Weather since his disappearance: two hard rains, otherwise clear; freezing at night.

The missing person report stated that Benny left his mine at about noon on the previous Friday and hiked up the Blue Wings trail to the Iowa Hill store, planning to return to the mine that evening. At Iowa Hill he picked up provisions, including five lbs. of cheese and two wool shirts. A resident gave him a ride back to the trailhead. That was the last time Benny was seen.

The report didn't mention what the terrain was like. It didn't have to. There's only one kind of country where goldminers go missing. One glance at a Xerox copy of the topo map confirmed it.

After briefing, our three CARDA dog teams joined a convoy of Placer County communications van and other searchers for the drive to Iowa Hill. Out of Colfax, the road switchbacks down into the gorge of the American River, North Fork— part of the nation's wild river system. Then it climbs in steep hairpin turns up the other side: one-lane in places, and scary enough that some passengers just close their eyes till they reach the top. No guardrails.

Once a roaring mining town that yielded \$20 million in gold before the turn of the century, Iowa Hill burned down several times, most recently in 1920. Now it's a general store and saloon and a few houses. Our convoy stopped here, and we learned some more about Benny.

Benny and his twin brother Frank were favorites at Iowa Hill. They'd lived 59 of their 61 years together (the odd two years were concurrent stints in different branches of the military.) For the last 20 or so years, their home was a little cabin at Last Chance Mine.

While the initial report indicated Benny was in good health aside from being overweight, followup interviews gave a different picture. Last summer, he'd confided to a friend that he'd experienced intense chest pains and nausea while cranking up a generator. The steep climb out of the river gorge and back down could easily be too much for him.

His brother and townsfolk had hiked the Blue Wings trail several times looking for him, without success. But they weren't sure Benny had gotten on the trail; dozers had cleared firebreaks the previous summer and obliterated the trailhead. Benny hadn't been down the trail for over a year. When Frank guided us to the place Benny was dropped off, and then tried to find the trail, he got confused himself and started down the wrong side of a hogback ridge (this hogback became an important feature in the search.) He admitted he's missed the trail on another occasion, too.

Friends told us that Frank was unflappable. Benny, on the other hand, "could get lost if you turned him around twice." And, if lost, they judged he was likely to panic.

Our initial assignment was to run the Blue Wings trail and check both sides. Dog teams went first, followed by other searchers on foot and horseback. The trail runs in long switchbacks through Douglas fir along the northwest side of a major ravine east of the Last Chance Mine. In some spots the edge of the trail sheers off; Benny could have fallen. Or, if he's suffered a heart attack, he could be concealed in brush off the side of the trail.

This was early January, and the eastern ravine and slopes feeding it were north-facing. That meant they were in shadow all day, and scent would flow down. Our job was complicated by the fact that scent from searchers on the trail (including locals bent on finding their friend), as well as from the command post (set up on a helipad directly above the trail), was all draining down into that ravine.

The dogs alerted and led us to other searchers; they also gave unexplained alerts at other places below the trail. We continued to the bottom and regrouped. At the mouth of the drainage the dogs gave pronounced alerts, leading handlers partway back up the slope.

The dog teams checked around the cabin where Frank and Benny lived—a pleasant, sunny spot on a flat by the big river—then worked west, downstream past a second cabin. Between the cabins, near the base of the steeper side of that hogback that came down from near the head of the

trail, dogs alerted upslope but couldn't follow through.

The teams searched farther downriver, along a narrow trail several sheer hundred feet above the water. On a steep slope covered with leaves and wet, mossy rocks, one misstep off that one-sided trail was forever.

With night approaching, searchers hiked back out of the canyon.

Next morning, three more dog teams joined the mission. While two teams began searching brush-covered mine tailings around the place where Benny was last seen, the remaining teams lined up for a corridor sweep parallel to a firebreak down the west side of the hogback.

These handlers were soon funneled to their left, toward the west, and away from the sharp ridgeline. To their right, the normally 75-percent slope broke off abruptly in cliffs. Handlers found their tracking sticks could be lifesavers for preventing falls.

They also found they were really doing a visual search. In such steep country, they couldn't direct the dogs into the right places for picking up scent from the cliffs. One handler identified a possible footprint but couldn't confirm it was Benny's.

Meanwhile, the other two handlers finished their first assignment and headed down to the river. At the mouth of the eastern ravine, the dogs again showed keen interest, leading their handlers upslope to the trail and then across to a sheer dropoff. Again, they found nothing.

Handlers regrouped at the bottom. Their dogs had given multiple alerts in two areas: the bottom of the ravine and between the two cabins below the hogback. There were at least two possible explanations for the ravine alerts: scent from searchers on the trail and at the command post, or Benny, who might be anywhere on the slopes feeding into the ravine.

Four dogs and handlers now set out to search the ravine as thoroughly as possible. The other two headed up the ridge above the second cabin, west of the hogback.

Searching the ravine proved to be a real test of dogs'—and handlers'—agility. In many places the sides were too steep to navigate, and the bottom was a series of boulder-steps down, with deep pools requiring dogs and handlers to run (or inch their way) along slick rocks, walk inclined logs, or just jump.

The ravine search came up negative. So did the search up the ridge. That left the cliffs in between, below the hogback, where the dogs weren't able to search. And by this time, that was the handlers' best hunch as to where Benny must be. The search boss suspended operations for the night and made plans to put searchers down the cliffs on ropes Monday morning.

The folks at Iowa Hill didn't want to wait. They knew now where Benny wasn't—all the places the dogs had searched. They got to the rocks ahead of the Sheriff's rope team and spotted the body of their friend, almost invisible at the base of a 300-foot cliff. The area was so difficult that the Sheriff hired a helicopter to airlift the body out the next day.