

Another Family Weekly Exclusive!
A remarkable, shocking, breath-taking
account—the Scott family's own story:

8 AGAINST DEATH IN THE DESERT



Passer-by snapped Scotts before ordeal. Bottom row (l to r) Leland, 4, Duwayne, 5, Bryan, 7. Middle row: Laurene, 10, Diane, 9, and Virlene, 12. Top row: Laura and Viri Scott.

How could they survive in that blazing inferno where "the sun and heat are so terrific you don't find a living thing—not a snake, not a rat, not a toad"?

by Evan Wylie

"WE'LL BE BACK for lunch," Laura Scott had called to her sister Barbara Prescott as the Ford, overflowing with children, pulled out of the Prescott driveway in Moab, Utah, that summer morning.

Down from Salt Lake City for a week-end visit with the Prescotts were Viri Scott, a husky, handsome man in his middle 30s, Laura, his slight, blonde wife and their six children, three older girls and three younger boys, ranging in age from four years to 12. Right after breakfast they had set out for Dead Horse Point, a lofty bluff which affords a breath-taking panorama of the steep gorges and canyons of the Colorado River.

By 11 a.m. the Scotts had admired the view, taken snapshots of the children perched on the Point's rocks and started back toward Moab. All about were scores of little roads made by the jeeps and trucks of uranium and oil prospectors during the prospecting boom which centered around Moab in the early 1950s. They appeared freshly traveled. Spotting one marked "To the Neck" the Scotts, eager for more spectacular canyon scenery, followed it.

Although the road descended into the canyon, they felt perfectly safe. No signs warned the unwary tourist that it might be dangerous. At any moment they expected to come upon a sign pointing to the main highway.

Actually the Scott family was on a road to nowhere. The Schafer Trail, on which they were descending into the canyon, leads only deeper into as wild, desolate and treacherous a region as exists in all of the United States. For thousands of square miles over southern Utah and into Arizona there is

nothing but an unbelievable chaos of deep canyons, lonely giant rock towers, dry basins, crumbling plateaus and naked burning desert. Here man's enemy is not wild beasts but the sun. Blazing with a terrible ferocity, it sends temperatures soaring to above 125 degrees. In its searing heat human tissue dehydrates and shrivels in a matter of hours.

In a short time the Scotts had dropped more than 2,000 feet to the bottom of the canyon and were far south of Dead Horse Point. Abruptly, a sharp metallic clash rang out. Leaping out, Viri Scott saw the car's radiator, bent backward by a rock and gashed by the blades of its fan, spurting antifreeze in a dozen miniature fountains. Before he could rip off a hub cap to catch the liquid, it had vanished.

SUDDENLY AWARE of the frightful heat and strange malevolent silence of the canyon, Scott felt the first fear grip him. Concealing his alarm, he said to his wife, "I think there's still some water inside the engine. It's too far to go back. We'll keep on and get out of here as fast as we can."

He had made perhaps five miles when the car suddenly sank to its hubs in deep sand. Scott battled for more than an hour in the blinding sun before he tore the auto free. Dizzy with exhaustion, he hastily reloaded the children and managed another five miles of gulches and gullies. Then, with a teeth-rattling jolt, the car struck another rock, stalled and rolled backward down an incline. Laura Scott clutched her husband's arm and pointed to a trail of heavy black oil. The crankcase was punctured.

So swiftly had events turned against them that

the Scotts' plight seemed almost unreal: without oil and water the car now could not be driven more than a few hundred yards; between them and Moab lay some 50 miles of burning desert; no one would know where to look for them.

Steeling himself against the bewilderment in the eyes of his hot, dusty, thirsty children, Viri Scott spoke calmly: "Now Bryan... Virlene... Laurene... everybody listen carefully to what I say. Our car is broken down and we're going to have to stay right here until Aunt Barbara and Uncle Bill send some people to get us. You must be very quiet and brave and do exactly as your mother and I say."

For the rest of the afternoon the Scotts crouched in the meager shade of an overhanging rock, eyeing their car baking in the sun, realizing that whatever it contained might count toward their survival. As soon as a lengthening twilight shadow enveloped it, they ransacked the sedan.

There was not a particle of food, not a drop of water. Nevertheless the Scotts got busy. As a full moon rose over the desert, Laura Scott used wire cutters from the tool box to cut two pink blankets into narrow strips. With them she fashioned the letters "S O S" in the sand. Viri removed the spare tire from its wheel, rolled it out onto the desert, mounted a pair of old galoshes on top to have a signal fire ready. He removed the back seat to use as a sunshield, unscrewed the rear-view mirror and put it in his pocket, removed the hub caps and spread them about to catch the night moisture.

The Scott children, with the obedience and discipline often found in large families, helped or sat quietly watching. Only Leland, just four and too young to understand, had begun to whimper. "Me want a drink... me want to go home now."

In Moab, Barbara Prescott had cleared away the Scotts' uneaten lunch, waited all afternoon with growing anxiety. "Bill," she told her husband when he came home from work at 5 p.m., "I'm scared. Something's happened to them."

"Oh, honey, I'm sure they're all right," Prescott

replied. "I'll go out and round them up."

For two hours he searched around the deserted lookout. Then he drove back to Moab and called Sheriff John Stock. In a few minutes Stock had flashed an alarm to highway patrols and was on his way to lead a search of tourist scenic attractions near Moab. Says Stock, "Even we natives are afraid of that White Rim canyon country. This time of year the sun and heat are so terrific in there that you don't find a living thing—not a snake, not a rat, not a toad."

By radio telephone from his car he called Glen Haren, operator of the local flying service and member of the Utah Air Police. "We may have some people down in the canyon," he said. "I'd like to fly with you in the morning."

IN THE MOONLIGHT, the steel cool to their burning bodies, the Scott children slept draped over hood, fenders and roof of the car. Viri and Laura Scott made every moment of darkness count. Sighting on the North Star, they marked in their minds every ledge and rock that might provide a few minutes of shade from the sun.

In the desert the day comes with a rush. By 5 a.m. it was daylight. By 7 a.m. the Scotts' battle for survival was begun. As the sun found the car, Laura and her children crept under an overhanging ledge and lay still. Down in the canyon Viri braved the merciless heat and he knelt and flashed the Ford's mirror futilely at high-flying jet bombers. Soaking his road map in a spray of gasoline from their camp stove, he ignited it and tucked the burning paper around the galoshes and spare tire. He was still laboring to get his signal fire going when a small plane appeared. Furiously Scott punished himself in the sun to build up his beacons. He burned the galoshes and the tire's inner tube. The pyre gave off a plume of black smoke, but an errant breeze directed it into a shadow beside a canyon wall. The plane vanished and he waited in vain for others.

To counter the despair that now filled their hearts

the Scotts turned to another weapon. Steadfast Mormons, they had molded their lives to the tenets of their religion. In their temple Laura played the organ. Viri was a member of the priesthood.

"Come, everyone," he now said. "Let us have a word of prayer together." Kneeling in the dirt the children and Laura joined in as he prayed to God for the strength and will to survive the day. From then on, whenever he sensed that hysteria was seizing his family, Scott would say, "Come now, children, let us pray together."

Since dawn the search operations in Moab had been pressed with desperate urgency. But as the day wore on distant dry thunder squalls made the desert air so turbulent that rim searching was out of the question. Search parties were restricted to the ground. Over all hung one inescapable fact: if the Scotts were stranded in the desert without water, they would be dead or dying before the sun set the next day.

In the scorching heat of the canyon, the Scotts crouched motionless under their ledge, peering into the sky, straining their ears for the sound of auto or aircraft engine. From her pocketbook Laura took her lipstick and coated the blistered, swollen lips of her husband and children. To their mouths she held spoonfuls of the bitter radiator fluid. On their faces she patted rouge from her compact.

Absently thrusting his fingers into the dirt, Viri started violently: it was cool. Sitting up, he cried, "Laura, children, get down into the dirt. Cover yourselves with it. Rub it on your arms and faces—never mind how dirty you get!"

Digging feverishly with their bare hands, the family scooped, scraped, showered each other with handfuls of dirt as one would with water.

The cat and mouse game with the sun continued. Minute by minute the shade shrank as the sun's rays reached deeper under the ledge. As the children cowered closer together, Viri said, "I'm taking up too much room. I'm getting out."

Raising her head, Laura saw her husband in the

scorching sun, scrawling "HELP—WATER" on a huge flat rock. He brought branches ripped from a bush cedar to the children. "Peel the bark and suck the wood," he said "There may be a bit of moisture."

By midday the canyon was an inferno. After a day and one-half without water in the searing heat, the children were dehydrating rapidly. No moisture showed on their bodies. Throats parched, tongues and lips swollen, they lay listlessly still.

VIRI SCOTT and his wife now undertook a measure they had put off as long as possible. Earlier, in matter-of-fact tones, they had announced everyone would urinate only into the empty milk pail. It now was about half full. Dipping her children's shirts and blouses into the pail, Laura bathed their bodies and faces with the fluid, wrung out the garments and replaced them on the children. The desert breeze blowing through the damp clothing cooled their chests and arms. Filthy with dirt, foul-smelling and weirdly theatrical in their lipstick and rouge make-up, they lay under the ledge like animals, numbly enduring the suffocating heat and pitiless glare of the sun.

In mid-afternoon Viri Scott was roused by his children running toward the car. They squirmed into the sand beneath and waved to him to join them. Scott was too weak to move. He had become afraid of the car. With a small amount of gasoline still in its tank and a few drops of water inside the engine block, it teased, "Get in... drive me... anywhere... get the kids out of here!"

The night before Scott had resolved he would not drive no matter what happened. To leave was certain death. "Don't let those kids get away from you," he shouted to his wife. Keep them in the shade. I'll throw stones at anybody who moves!"

His cracked voice had a frenzied quality to it, and Laura Scott realized that her husband, exhausted by his struggles in the desert sun, was sinking into delirium. If there was an atom of

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