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Travel and Ascents South of Banff

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OTHER companions having failed, Edward Feuz, Jr., and the writer set out from Banff on August 8 last to revisit the scenes of a trip made nine years earlier and to push farther south than we did then. We were capably supported by "Scottie" Wright, an experienced and obliging man, who had been game warden for some years at the Spray Lakes. He looked after the pack train consisting of twelve horses, including five horses for the riders, who, in addition to the three already mentioned, included a cook by name of Curley and a youth, Ray York.

On the third afternoon the party camped immediately north of Palliser Pass, at about 6,125 ft., on the very spot where Feuz, the writer and a friend had spent several days in 1919, and whence the first ascent of Mt. Sir Douglas Haig, which dominates the Pass, had been made. A steep ascent of some 700 ft. leads to the summit of the Pass, 6,836 ft., and thereafter follows a very sharp descent, which, being without windings or zigzags, is trying for pack horses and a little dangerous for riders. Several of the animals fell down and got tangled up in the fallen trees, which, however, were not so barrier-like as on our earlier passage. From the summit of the Pass to the Flats of the Palliser River, the drop is nearly 2,000 ft. The Flats present rather tame scenery, except for a glimpse of the Royal Group, and are very tedious to travel over.

On the fourth afternoon we made camp, partly by good luck and partly through sound judgment on the part of Feuz, about a mile above the junction of Joffre Creek with the Palliser River, and, as we discovered after settling down, within 100 yards of the trail leading up the lateral valley. The traveling on the following day was for the most part very steep and rough, and in places very

arduous. Alongside the turbulent creek, the trail was extremely narrow and insecure. The writer's horse slipped, fell over the bank, and nearly landed him in the stream. Although higher up there were signs to indicate that a party had been over the trail at least part of the way to Sylvan Pass as late as 1926, yet it was obvious that it is very seldom traveled. At about half-way to the Pass it emerges on a grassy slide, and our perplexities were increased by losing it on re-entering the wood on the farther side.¹ The reason for this, namely, that the trees were blazed on their upper sides only, was not discovered until our return journey to the Palliser. Our camping ground was at approximately 7,400 ft., 2,500 ft. above the River and about 250 ft. below the summit of the Pass. It was a lovely spot, covered with thick grass and dotted with clusters of fine larches, but not an ideal camping place owing to scarcity of water and unevenness of the ground. Our tents were pitched immediately west of the great wall of Mt. Joffre, which rose some 3,800 ft. above us; from them we could see Mt. Assiniboine and had a fine view of the Royal Group, while the outlook from the Pass was superb. Mt. Nivelles, however, which was one of our objectives, remained for the time being invisible.

After a sudden change of weather, which precipitated a fall of snow around the camp and brought a day of enforced inactivity, the sky cleared a little and Feuz and the writer set out on the 14th to explore the neighbourhood and prospect a route to Mt. Nivelles. Four hours' steady going over side hills under the massif of Joffre brought us to a wide couloir up which we scrambled to a col south-east of, and some 1,800 ft. higher than, our camp. Here we saw Mt. Nivelles very clearly and at no great distance by air line, separated by a small glacier from the wall on which we stood; but the smooth and precipitous rocks of at least 1,000 ft. barred any approach to the ice. It was obvious that in order to reach the peak we should have to move over Sylvan Pass and approach it from the south. Before doing this, we decided to attempt the unclimbed Mt. Mangin, 10,030 ft., immediately northwest of Joffre and within convenient distance of our camp.

Accordingly, next morning, we set out at the rather late hour of 8.20, owing to the uncertainty of the weather. The lower part

¹ It was found again much farther on, after we had passed through a most difficult tangle of fallen timber.

of the route, a huge couloir on the west side of the peak, was visible from camp and presented no difficulties; but after reaching the rocks the climbing was unpleasant, owing to a north wind and the covering of fresh snow which rendered one's fingers distressingly cold. The rope was put on at 9,500 ft., although it was not needed except for a short and stiff bit consisting of an exposed chimney about 200 ft. under the summit, running directly above a narrow ledge below which the rock was undercut. It seemed to be the only means of ascent through the last rock-wall. Above this it was very easy going to the surprisingly spacious summit, reached at 12.45, on which an hour and a half were spent in delightful sunshine, and whence the far-reaching views in all directions, disclosing for us new peaks, lakes and glaciers, provided a mild excitement. Leaving the summit shortly after 2 P.M., we reached camp again at 5.15.

A longer and more arduous climb than the foregoing was provided by Mt. Nivelles, 10,620 ft., accomplished two days later, after we had transferred ourselves and baggage over Sylvan Pass down the White River and up the gulch of Nivelles Creek. The four miles of trail and trailless ground traversed required as many hours. Our objective was not visible from the camp, 5,800 ft., but we knew well its position and could infer the route of approach.

Although we had planned to make an early start, yet owing to preventable delays we did not set out until 6 A.M.; and not until after three hours of steady ascent over tedious and disagreeable ground did we come into contact with the base of our peak. Another hour and a half were consumed before we were seated on a scree-covered shoulder of it at approximately 9,400 ft. Shortly after this we used the rope, as the slope became precipitous and its narrow ledges were covered with gravel which fell very readily away from it.

Stimulated by a cool wind, we bore to the left and proceeded up a steep couloir on the southwest side, thereby circumventing several prominent rock towers which jutted out from the ridge. At the top of the couloir we came out just under the second highest point of the mountain. Turning this on the left by a traverse under the summit ridge, we faced a short and steep chimney which brought us to the narrow summit at 12.55 P.M. Here again we had splendid views of the peaks seen from Mt. Mangin, and in addition could now more clearly define some of those prominent to the south. The atmosphere was of unsurpassable clearness; an unusual absence

of smoke had characterized this season in the Southern Canadian Rockies.

After some refreshment and the building of the usual cairn, we left the summit at 2 P.M., varying the route of ascent after the first few hundred feet, in order to make use of a couple of couloirs filled with small stone and gravel, which facilitated the descent. Thereafter, down to 8,800 ft. we were helped by patches of snow which at this time of day were in good condition for short glissades. Then followed a wearisome grind over dreadful ridges of sharp stones and large boulders, ruinous on boots and very tiresome to the feet. A longish rest and some further refreshment were enjoyed on a grassy flat about 1,400 ft. above the camp, and the latter was reached again shortly before 7 P.M.

The following day was one of inactivity for the climbers. After some showers during the night, Sunday, the 19th, opened with a brilliant sky. The writer was still lazy; but Feuz and Wright started out at 9.30 to obtain a look over a pass to the southeast directly under a castellated peak which towered above the camp, probably not quite 10,000 ft., and a very striking object from Sylvan Pass. Heavy showers fell in the afternoon, and the men returned thoroughly soaked, having advanced beyond the summit of the Pass to a point on the east side of the peak, which Feuz calculated to have been almost 9,000 ft.

The weather having now begun to look distinctly unfavourable, we considered it wiser to return to the Palliser River than stay here any longer, lest we should be frustrated in our desire to climb Mt. Robertson in the British Military Group, which had been unsuccessfully attempted six years before. Accordingly, on the morning of the 20th, after a night of rain, we made an early start under a leaden sky, which brightened during the forenoon. Our progress to Sylvan Pass was rapid. The former camping ground was reached in two hours, and the Palliser River in less than six. The next day was bright and warm, one of the finest of the whole trip. The afternoon of the 21st saw us camped near Turbine Canyon, after having crossed the colorful North Kananaskis Pass, 7,680 ft. The evening was delightful, but before we retired ominous flashes of lightning lit up the heavy clouds on the eastern sky.

During the night a change of wind brought about a complete reversal of weather conditions; it snowed down to 8,000 ft., and,

with the clouds equally low, anything important was excluded for the day. On the 23rd the writer peeped out at 6 o'clock and called to Feuz, who had been up an hour earlier, when the sky looked quite hopeless. At 7.45 we got away, bound for the Haig Glacier, the tongue of which stretched down to about 350 ft. above our camp, 7,250 ft.

It was pleasant and safe going across the ice, which was in capital condition, and at 9 A.M. we were 1,200 ft. above our starting point. Higher up, the glacier was covered with fresh snow, and as the ground was unknown, we tied up. The walking was excellent, no crevasses worth mentioning being encountered. The end of the snowfield under Mt. Robertson was reached at 11.15, and half an hour later the col between this peak and Sir Douglas, the ascent of some 300 ft. of scree, which moved down almost as rapidly as one moved up it, being decidedly irksome. At this point we were at an elevation of approximately 9,400 ft., and considering that Mt. Robertson was only 1,000 ft. higher and that the weather, although uncertain, did not appear too threatening, we decided to take a shot at the peak. It was fairly obvious that we should have to follow the ridge and that there would be some difficult places.

The first part of the ridge, which runs up from the southwest, consists of detached towers and huge knobs of rock, seamed by small chimneys with scree lying between. In forty minutes we had accomplished more than half the distance in height, and had left our ice-axes behind. The more critical part of the climbing now began, and Feuz looked ahead with obvious satisfaction. At about 10,000 ft. the ridge runs more directly north and south, becomes more jagged and so narrow as to be almost knifelike. In quite a few places the amateur straddled it and occasionally the guide did not spurn to do the same. Again and again the full length of the 80 ft. rope separated the climbers, who had to manœuvre for relatively comfortable, though by no means safe, positions. At 1 o'clock the small cairn placed on the ridge by the A. C. C. party of 1922, among whom was the lamented M. D. Geddes, was passed. The party of five had reached this point, not more than 150 ft. in height below the summit, at 3.40 P.M., and considering its number, and what lay ahead, had wisely turned back. We advanced some 50 ft. higher on the ridge, much indented and blocked by gendarmes of all sorts of shape, and of very brittle composition. One has to

climb over these, there being no way of turning them. A belaying of the rope is practically impossible. Feuz was facing one of these protuberances, and the writer was straddling the ridge, when we decided to stop. Neither of us enjoyed such an exposed situation on such rotten rock. We took a look over the right side of the ridge in the hope of seeing some possibility of an escape, and almost at once Feuz exclaimed that he thought there was a safer way up, if only we could descend about 100 ft. to a ledge. We retraced our steps beyond the A. C. C. cairn and then came down over some steep slabs of rock, thereby gaining the espied ledge. It proved to be what we hoped. It entailed a longish traverse on a sufficiently wide rim running around the summit cliffs. On this we paid out the rope four times to the full length, and finally by the ascent of some 20 ft. of precipitous and rather rotten rock landed on the very pointed summit a few minutes before 2 o'clock. Only twenty minutes were spent here, for hail and snow, which began to fall, warned us not to loiter, and moreover there was no protection from a cool wind.

The retraverse of the ledge was accomplished safely, and the ridge regained, on which more "horsing" was indulged in. Half-way down we varied the route by using an easy couloir of scree and gravel on the right and then traversing from its foot over loose rocks back to the ridge at a point a little above where the ice-axes had been left. From here the descent was quite simple. The col was reached at 4.30, and after a short rest, with some food, we got down in less than five minutes to the snow. There was nothing to delay us on the glacier, and at 7.15 P.M. we were again in camp.

The weather, which had seemed for several days to be brewing a big storm, now looked so threatening that we decided to move down next day to Kananaskis Lakes and enjoy a rest and some fishing at this lower altitude, where, if it did snow, the result would be less unpleasant. As a matter of fact the weather did break badly on the evening of the 24th, and for the best part of two days it rained and snowed down to 5,600 ft., so that scarcely anything could be seen of the mountains in the neighborhood of the Lakes. On the way there the writer suffered a sprained ankle and other injuries through his horse falling down on the trail, which put any further climbing for the season out of the question.