

The Grand Teton by the North Face

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IN the history of the Grand Teton, the climbing season of 1931 will probably take rank as the most notable. Early in the summer, two wholly new routes to the summit and one partly new, were added to the two previously available.¹ There remained the great north face, so forbidding in aspect that most climbers had, upon casual examination, dismissed it as hopeless.

Being unwilling to accept such an offhand verdict, however, Robert L. M. Underhill and the writer last summer resolved to put the mountain's defenses in this quarter to actual test. Accordingly, on July 20th we left Amphitheater Lake camp at 5.30 A.M., crossed to Teton Glacier, and, dodging open crevasses by keeping well to the right, cut steps up to the *randkluft*. Turning sharply left we followed the margin of the ice and encircled the head of the glacier. We rejected the couloir leading up into the Notch, since boulders were coming down through it on to the glacier, and continued to the base of the north precipice. Here we turned right, threading a course through the yawning crevasses and shattered snow-walls of the *bergschrand* to the rocks beyond, reached at 8.20 (altitude about 11,000 feet).

Being equipped only with common work shoes (the failure of my pack outfit to arrive at Amphitheater Lake the day before had left me without climbing equipment, except for my axe) I had docilely followed in Underhill's spacious footsteps while ascending the glacier, but now I was able to take my turn at lead. We started up the steeply inclined ledges which reach up to the north shoulder of the Grand Teton, keeping safely out from beneath the 3,000-foot precipice the first half of the way and close in to it the second half, where overhangs protected us from the intermittent bombardment of rocks. At 9.55 we reached the angle where the north shoulder meets the "north corner" (the latter is formed by the union of the north and northwest faces).

¹ See "The 1931 Mountaineering Season in Grand Teton National Park," p. 535.

We found ourselves at an altitude of about 12,100 feet, and within arm's reach of the fearsome north face, rising nearly 2,000 feet from the shoulder on which we were perched. It was entirely in shadow and a cold wind swept across it from the west. Two lines of attack were evident: By a horizontal ledge extending out across the northwest precipice in the direction of the upper saddle, and by a steeply inclined ledge leading upward toward the right around the north corner. Far up the wall we could see a chimney which the latter ledge might enable us to reach; hence we decided in favor of it—a wise choice as it proved, since the other ledge was later seen to pinch out on the northwest face.

After ten minutes spent on the shoulder Underhill led off up our ledge. It proved most insecure both because of its narrowness and because of the rotten condition of the rock, but it served to conduct us to the base of a north-facing wall 150 feet high. This we managed to scale with difficulty. There followed a 75-foot traverse left to an easy gully which brought us out on a shoulder. Clearly we had reached the *first* step of the north wall, as one sees it in profile from the east.

We continued diagonally right up steep rock faces for seventy-five feet to the foot of a deep narrow crack rising left. Higher this crack developed into a vertical chimney, the inner angle of which at the bottom and higher up was filled with snow and ice. Leaving pack and axe behind—for only so could he squeeze into the crack—Underhill climbed slowly up the chimney to the first stance, sixty feet above. From here he called down to me that the going was pretty “strenuous.” Having sent up the packs and axes to Underhill, who dug them into the snow behind him, I came up the crack, climbing even more slowly, and finding good reason to accuse my partner of gross understatement.

But the difficulties of this chimney were immediately forgotten in the face of the real crisis which now confronted us, for that portion of the chimney immediately above us consisted of a vertical rise of at least fifteen feet, beyond which it was blocked by a chockstone so huge that it extended well out over our heads.

Would a *courte-échelle* go? Five feet out on the sheer right-hand (west) wall of the chimney we both found toe-room and I, being by fifty pounds the lighter, climbed to Underhill's shoulders, then to his head. From the latter position (quite unique in my

experience) I could just reach the lower part of the chockstone. Keenly conscious of the fact that success or failure was now at issue I searched desperately for some slight hold by means of which I could get started up this pitch and so attain the chockstone, but nowhere within reach, on or around the chockstone, could I obtain so much as a fingerhold. How long I continued the futile search I do not know, in concentration of effort losing all sense of time; but utterly exhausted and with arms and fingers quite numb I was finally compelled to lower myself into Underhill's arms and admit myself beaten.

We retreated to our snow-corner in the chimney, and here, after a council of war, decided that now if ever the use of pitons was justified. Returning to the right wall, Underhill drove in a first piton at the limit of his reach, and, from my shoulders, drove a second one perhaps three feet higher. A ring was snapped to each, and by means of these rings we roped ourselves to the pitons. It was now Underhill's turn to launch an offensive. He mounted to my shoulders and, using the upper ring, attempted to climb to the chockstone. But though of far greater strength than I and having a longer reach, he, too, found the absence of holds an insuperable difficulty and after a strenuous try was forced back to my shoulders for a rest. A second effort likewise ended in failure and was again followed by a shoulder-rest, but on the third he solved the problem. (In calm retrospect, after the lapse of several months, Underhill still admits that this was the hardest pitch he ever climbed.) It seemed to me that, having reached up to a good hold with his right hand and having found an awkward jam-hold high up under the chockstone with his left, he pulled himself up, then swung his right leg up sidewise to the level of his hips in an attempt to catch his foot against some irregularity on the rock face well out to the right. After several attempts finally succeeding in this, he next raised his left foot onto the upper piton, made a quick shift around to the side of the chockstone, and sprawled over upon it. The actual accomplishment was not so simple as this account would indicate, but I leave it to Underhill himself to analyze further the technique of his achievement. Had he failed, probably neither of us could have summoned strength for another attempt, and there would have been no alternative save a retreat down the difficult course we had come up, a most uninviting prospect. It was a magnificent

piece of work, the finest it has ever been my privilege to witness, and for us it meant the conquest of the north face.

After sending up the packs and axes, I myself came up—none too gracefully or swiftly, finding it necessary from the upper piton on to resort in part to a fixed rope, for my arms and hands were still somewhat paralyzed. The scene of our struggle had, I observed, become quite gory. It was a vast relief to join Underhill where he was comfortably ensconced behind the chockstone.

We were again entirely enclosed in the chimney, which above us switched left. After sixty feet more of somewhat less strenuous climbing we found ourselves beneath a second chockstone, in size and position very similar to the one which had so nearly proved our undoing. Underhill yielding the lead at this point, I straddled the chimney and, by climbing perhaps fifteen feet up the right-hand wall, was able to avoid the chockstone. We found that we had now gained the terrace which forms the *second* big step of the north face-profile.

The open climbing and the smooth, polished rock-surfaces which we encountered from here on gave a wholly different character to the remainder of the ascent. I thought longingly of the sneakers which, alas, were somewhere in Wyoming along with the rest of my equipment, but found reason to be thankful for the adhesion afforded by my rubber heels and the composition sole on my right shoe.

Continuing, we traversed left (east) a few yards to a shallow inclined trough. Ascending this we reached an unclimbable buttress but were able to swing out to the left on steep slabs, and so around it. An easy chimney rising to the right came into view, and by this we climbed to a platform on the north corner. To our delight there now came into sight far to the right the West Spur of the Grand Teton. The realization that we were actually on a level with it afforded tremendous encouragement.

It is barely possible that at this point we could have traversed right and intersected the Owen route, but we avoided this and sought a course up the remaining portion of the north face. This proved feasible since we had now attained the base of the broken and rounded summit. The smooth faces and steep chimneys of the first 400 feet proved difficult—much more so than the corresponding portion of the old route, but relatively easy as compared with what we had come up—but beyond lay only an easy

scramble of 200 feet. In this portion we unroped for the first time since starting up the glacier, nine hours before. Fifty feet below the top we came upon the old Dewey pennant which, its usefulness long past, had been ingloriously cast down from the summit by some former climber.

At 3.15 we reached the cairn. Finding a couple of flat boulders we stretched out and, relaxing after the long strain, tried to comprehend that it was all over. From the register we learned that a party of five had left the summit an hour before. Later its members told us that, having innocently supposed the north face to be safe from human molestation, they had amused themselves by rolling boulders down it! We descended by the old route to Amphitheater Lake. Here I left Underhill in his solitary little camp and continued to Jenny Lake where, the next day, he rejoined me.

A comparison of the routes on the Grand Teton, now six in number, is difficult to make, inasmuch as no one individual has yet made the acquaintance of all. Underhill is better qualified than anyone else to offer an opinion, however, inasmuch as he has climbed the peak by four routes and to an important degree is responsible for the discovery of three of these. He places the four he has done in descending order of difficulty as follows: North wall, east ridge, southeast ridge, ordinary route. His favorite route remains the east ridge, which he thinks consistently interesting, yet free from the excessive difficulty and the "objective dangers" of the north wall. As for the other routes, the new west chimney used by the German climbers undoubtedly adds considerably to the difficulty of the original route; and all who have used Exum's southwest ridge agree that it is considerably more difficult than the original route. From the available accounts it would appear to be rather less difficult than Underhill's southeast ridge.