

## Climbs in Mexico, 1932

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THE train ride from Vera Cruz up to Mexico City, though hot and dusty in parts, offers much solace to the mountaineer, for there are splendid views from the car window of the snow-crowned Orizaba, seen all day long, and towards evening of the huge forms of Ixtaccihuatl and Popocatepetl, towering impressively above the high Mexican plateau. Orizaba (18,225 feet), the third highest mountain in North America, exceeded only by McKinley and Logan, is seen in clear weather from the deck of the steamer before reaching Vera Cruz. Rising almost to its full height from the coastal plan on the east, it drops 10,000 feet to the elevated plateau on the west. It is dramatically visible from the train on three sides for nearly two hundred miles of the ride, the line approaching between Esperanza and San Andres to less than fifteen miles from the summit. As we looked back at its dazzling white névé covered northwest face from San Marcos at the base of the bandit-infested Malinche, it was most beautiful in its symmetry and brilliance, scarcely dimmed by the dust blown up from the parched fields.

Mexico City lies on a flat plain 7,500 feet above sea-level, surrounded by volcanoes and volcanic remnants. There must be two or three dozen cones within fifty miles of the city ranging in height above the plateau from 100 feet to many thousands of feet and culminating in the giants, Ixtaccihuatl (17,100 feet) and Popocatepetl (17,850 feet), the latter the fifth highest summit in North America, only St. Elias coming between it and Orizaba. During March, when we were in Mexico, the weather is nearly always fine, though some cumulus clouds pile up against the higher peaks, but there is seldom rain at this season which is probably the best for mountain ascents. The rainy season comes in June and lasts through September, and it is during this period that most of the snowfall for the year occurs in the mountains. The Mexicans, who are more and more learning to enjoy their mountains, have organized under the leadership of Mr. Otis McAllister, an American, the Club Exploraciones de Mexico. This active

organization sends parties out for excursions of varying length and often has large groups of thirty or more at a time on the higher peaks. Curiously enough the ascent of "the Popo" is considered by them to be complete when the lower edge of the crater is reached, at least we were told that very few bother to go to the highest point.

After a few days to become acclimated, our party, consisting of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas D. Cabot, Mr. and Mrs. Walter A. Wood, Jr., Mrs. Hall and I, drove over to Nevado de Toluca, an ancient volcano, about eighty miles by road west of Mexico City. The road, one of the highest in Mexico, after crossing the wooded range just west of the city and passing through the town of Toluca, climbs gradually up the wooded slopes of the mountain, finally emerging above tree-line and after entering the broken-down south side of the old crater ends at the borders of a lake now filling it, at an altitude of 13,500 feet. The 1,700 feet to the summit took about two hours up rather steep scree slopes, a path of sorts being appreciated, in the thin air, for over half the distance. A few feet of rock scrambling at the top brought us out on the highest point of the long semi-circular ridge. The view was extensive where clouds did not interfere. After a leisurely hour for luncheon and photographs the descent was made easily and quickly down the loose slopes, back to the car, and we were in Mexico City again for dinner by half past seven, the whole trip having taken about eleven hours.

Three days later, on March 17, Wood, Cabot and I were joined by Mr. McAllister on a five days' trip to the readily accessible "Ixti" and "Popo." Provisions and cooking equipment were purchased the afternoon before and crampons secured from Mr. McAllister. After a two hours' drive to Amecameca, a town at the foot of the mountains, we were met by one Pablo Valerde who undertakes to outfit parties with horses and men for such trips. The horses did not at first appear very promising, nor the saddles, but the men, Indians, soon had our baggage packed and we left at noon, Valerde and ourselves mounted. Riding through the town which is in the usual Mexican state of dilapidation, and crossing some fields, we soon found the trail, sunk or worn down in places several feet below the surface of the ground and horribly dusty. Many of these trails bear evidence of long use, the nature of which was evident from the occasional donkies

or horses that passed us. They were generally well laden with firewood or other burdens and driven by Indians, invariably on foot. The trail mounted steadily and after three hours came into the pine zone at about 11,000 feet. Here we noticed many of the trees girdled. The Indians hack off the bark to use the dry pitch-filled chips for starting their camp fires. Soon the tree dies, and they may then cut it for firewood and transport it as we had seen down to the villages.

By five o'clock we were not far below tree-line which is here about 13,000 feet. After some difference of opinion with Valerde as to a suitable camp spot we chose a site near a small stream where it cascaded over a lava-flow outcrop under which there was a cave, and the horses were unpacked. Following a meal, in whose preparation we all seemed to have a share, the men built up a large fire around which they arrayed themselves for the night and we spread out our sleeping-bags on the ground under the stars.

At two in the morning we woke to find a rather threatening sky, but upon Valerde's assurance that rain was unlikely we had breakfast by the light of the fire and started off on horseback after instructing Valerde to move the outfit a few miles south to the caves of Ayoloco. Ixtaccihuatl was hidden by clouds when we dismounted, at 14,300 feet, all rather chilled, in the whirling mist, the temperature being 28° Fahrenheit. Walking briskly we soon came to the beginnings of a stone hut which the Club Exploraciones members are building near the snout of the glacier which flows down on the west side of the mountain between the "Head" and the main summit. A brief halt to adjust crampons and we were soon on the ice. Unroped, because the few crevasses are all open at this season, we moved up the easy slopes, nowhere steeper than twenty-five or thirty degrees, each at his own pace. One of the Indians accompanied us as porter and "guide," the latter function being of little importance on this mountain. His strength was our envy, as he almost ran up the ice, but his technique of running and stopping, repeated over and again, did not appeal to us.

By eight o'clock we reached the saddle on the main crest of the mountain and rested in the sun at the base of the "Head." The question of climbing the "Head" had been discussed previously but the uncertainty of the weather decided us to make

directly for the summit by the easy north ridge, here pure *névé* and rather heavily corniced on the west side. The weather became more threatening as we advanced and our "guide" growing apprehensive of the wind and clouds advised a retreat. There seemed no reason for this and when he became very insistent, we told him to go back to camp. This he did after predicting dire consequences if we tried to go on. The only difficulty encountered was with breathing in the light air and by eleven o'clock we stood on the summit, a flat snow cap. Heavy wind-blown mist cut off all view, so we soon started across the flat summit to find the route of descent. Here occurred the unexpected. After a few minutes' walk we came to an abrupt drop. We knew from photographs that the summit is partly edged with ice cliffs, but could not be sure of the exact way past them. The wind came rather unsteadily at this time, and was shifting as we soon learned, which somewhat confused our sense of direction. After two or three more futile attempts to find the desired route, and in view of the altitude and cold wind affecting some of the party, we tried to retrace our steps to the north ridge. This attempt also proving abortive, the course was again set, this time by compass, for the south *arête*. To steer a compass course for a certain point, it is necessary to know where you start from, but this we couldn't accurately determine after more than an hour of roaming. The whole summit cap isn't more than half a mile in diameter. The compass advocates won out, largely by luck, I think, when we shortly came upon a way past the ice-cliffs and started down, still prevented by the mists from seeing more than the length of the rope which was being used to keep the party from becoming separated. It was rather hit or miss for the next hour. Coming to a vertical rock wall below, we swung more to the right and came down what eventually turned out to be the west face of the mountain. At about this time, when we were 2,000 feet below the summit, the clouds parted and we could re-orient ourselves for the remainder of the descent. A large moraine hundreds of feet above the present surface of the glacier, which descends on the southwest side of the mountain, soon brought us down to grass line at 14,500 feet where our Indian had already arrived with two horses. Two riding and the others walking, we were soon at the caves of Ayoloco where the night is generally spent before the ascent. Supper went well and we soon

sought out a location for our sleeping bags in the open, preferring to allow our men and whoever else would, the undisputed use of the caves.

The next day was spent in luxurious ease. It was perfect, with no clouds on the mountains. Several parties of young Mexicans came up during the day for the climb on the morrow. They seemed to carry little equipment and almost no food. We gave a loaf of bread to one rather promising looking young man, but that soon turned out to have been a mistake, when several others came over, evidently expecting further handouts. The brilliant moonlit nights here, just below tree-line at 12,500 feet, were a joy. Wood had kindly lent me his extra sleeping bag, otherwise I should have been a little cool in my ordinary light bag with night temperatures in the lower twenties.

Sunday, March 20th, dawned clear and still, snow-covered Popocatepetl being visible over a nearby intervening ridge. Off by eight o'clock, we were soon skirting the southerly slopes of "Ixti" on our horses, while Valerde watched for bulls which he didn't relish meeting. We enjoyed the splendid view down into the valley toward Amecameca and Mexico City 5,000 feet below, and up to the two great mountains, as much above. By noon we had come to the broad pass at 12,000 feet between Ixtacihuatl and Popocatepetl which Cortes crossed from the east in 1519 on his remarkable march of conquest to Mexico City. After stopping at the only spring in miles for luncheon (for water is scarce at that time of year), we continued to Tlamacas, and camped near the site of a former sulphur refinery in the woods on the north side of "Popo" at about 12,600 feet. As the sun set on "Ixti," twelve miles to the north of us, we prepared to start that night for the ascent of "Popo."

Up at 11 P.M. in the brilliant light of a full moon, we ate lightly and left camp at exactly midnight. The way lay at first through the woods, across a deep barranca or gully sixty feet deep eroded in the soft ash by melted snow waters from the mountain, and then on to the great gray ash slopes. A west wind was forming cloud banks around the west side of the mountain, but these conveniently dissipated before reaching us. The cool of the night greatly lessened the monotony of the trudge up those long even slopes. An occasional barometer reading showed that we really were getting up. At about 16,000 feet the slope suddenly

became very hard where melting water from the snow had frozen over and among the ash. Crampons were used from this point and became very helpful as we arrived at the weird *nieve penitente* formation. The snow instead of presenting a fairly hard smooth surface, as it had on the corresponding side of "Ixti," was here melted, or probably rather evaporated, into sharp pinnacles and gullies from a few inches to several feet in relief. As the first light of dawn showed to the east, the cold perceptibly increased and with it came a biting wind. The party was now going as each man pleased and we became somewhat strung out as the altitude of nearly 17,000 feet began to have its effect. Mexico City to the northwest and Puebla to the east were clearly visible, each a myriad of lights. The landscape below and the few clouds which continually blew in lower down from the west were still bathed in the brilliant silver light of the moon, as the east became solid gold, silhouetting the mighty Orizaba, eighty miles away on the horizon, and the nearer Malinche. Finally at five-thirty just as we reached the crater edge the sun rose directly over the summit of Orizaba. Waiting for the others to come up, we looked at the thermometer which registered fifteen degrees. The barometer showed an altitude of 17,100 feet. This was as far as Mr. McAllister had ever been on the mountain. To be sure, one had a splendid view, and the crater was very awe-inspiring with its vertical sides, in places over a thousand feet deep. Steam issued from several vents with an audible roar, and the vile rotten-egg smell of sulphur at times filled the air.

When all had rested, it was unanimously decided to go on to the top. This we did in about an hour and a half by skirting the north edge of the crater. As the sun rose, the wind dropped. It became much warmer, noticeably increasing the effects of altitude on one or two members of the party. The last few hundred feet went very slowly. The highest point on the west rim of the crater is apparently about 17,850 feet above sea-level. The Mexican Government, we later learned, has no accurate determination of this figure. The view was very extensive in all directions. Eighty miles to the west stood the bulky Nevado de Toluca and more to the southwest, very much farther away in the blue distance, was a range which McAllister thought might be the Sierra Madre del Sur near the Pacific Coast.

After more than an hour of enjoyable rest we looked at Mexico City and decided to try to get back there in time for dinner. The descent to camp took about two hours. There a slight interruption might have occurred when we found some rather doubtful looking characters, about fifteen in number, all armed with rifles of ancient vintage, in complete possession. McAllister talked with them and when he had disappointed them with the report that we had no money with us and Wood, mumbling audibly that he should be picked on, had given them cigarettes, they quietly moved off into the woods, much to our relief.

Packing up we set out for Amecameca about noon, which place we reached in four hours, over what must be, I am sure, one of the world's dustiest trails. Here a private automobile was luckily secured, the bus being hopelessly crowded without us and baggage, and we reached our hotel, dirty but well pleased with the trip, in good time for dinner.

This brought our climbing to an end, too soon, as I had hoped to do Orizaba before leaving Mexico. Had I joined a party of the Club Exploraciones two days later I should have had that climb also. It is said to be somewhat more arduous than either "Ixti" or "Popo." The train is taken to San Andres, thence a tram to Chalchicomula and a walk or ride of four or five hours to the camping place for the night, all of which can be done the first day. The climb of about eight hours up and four down is done the second day and return to Mexico City on the third day. There had been talk when we first reached Mexico City of a party to try a new route from the north but this was abandoned owing to reported bandit activities in that direction. Such a complication is always possible in Mexico, but seldom results seriously for tourists who have taken the precaution to leave their valuables behind.