

Second Ascent of Mount Bryce

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MT. BRYCE, 11,507 ft., overlooks the Columbia Icefield from the S., but had been climbed only once. From Rice Brook on the British Columbia side, it promised to be a fine snow and ice climb; from there also, climbers need not approach it by miles of monotonous snow tramping over the icefield, a penance many of the neighboring peaks demand. For these reasons, Miss Kate Gardiner and the writer chose it as the objective of a climbing trip north this summer. We had looked forward to going since 1933, but in the end the arrangements were only made at the last minute by telegraph to Lake Louise in response to a cable to Philadelphia from New Zealand.

The Lake Louise-Jasper Highway is now open to autos as far as the 36-mile post, so the party assembled there July 22nd for a four weeks' trip. With us were the two Swiss guides, Edward Feuz and Christian Häsler. Jim Simpson and his men had charge of the outfitting and horses. We formed quite a caravan as we continued on the new road in various stages of construction down the Mistaya and up the Saskatchewan River. In four days we reached Thompson Pass, whence Sir James Outram with Christian Kaufmann had made the first ascent of Bryce in 1902. Their long and arduous route had discouraged other climbers. Only once had it been attempted again; in 1929 by Col. Amery and Edward Feuz from Rice Brook, but failing to reach the summit.

From Watchman Peak, S. E. buttress of Thompson Pass, we picked our route up Mt. Bryce. From here, there is as fine a view as any in the region. With the glasses we found Mt. Trident on the Big Bend of the Columbia River. We had been on its summit eight days before. It was now only 35 miles away, but we had traveled over 200 miles, about 60 of them by packtrain to make that distance. The icefields lay before us, and Mt. Bryce, with its E. ridge a double curling cornice. It was plastered with snow, the bergschrund showing up beautifully but covered entirely at the left side. The corniced ridge on the right was out of the question, but across the face ran several ledges of snow, one of

which might lead to the left ridge and thence to the summit. The view of one section was obscured by a rock buttress. That might not go, but we felt the chances were good. Edward's old route with Amery was straight up the snow towards the long sloping right ridge. They had turned back because of weather. Now in one spot above that route an ominous break in the snow indicated it sometimes avalanched there. Chris pronounced our proposed route "duck soup." It didn't look like "duck soup," but we were all content. Seven or eight goats paraded past us on our way back to camp.

The next day we moved a small camp 2.5 hours down Rice Brook. Jim Simpson had spent two days clearing out most of the old Boundary Survey trail and there was cutting to do now only for a short distance. One-quarter mile above the junction with South Rice Brook we camped, with a tumultuous stream running by our cook fire, so that we had to raise our voices over it to be heard. Flowers lined the rocky shore along the creek, a clear stream trickled out of the woods above and a wild little canyon choked with deadfalls was just upstream. It wasn't much of a campground but we were to be there just three days, and Mt. Bryce towered above us. "Bryce or bust," says Jim, and we agree. But we little knew it would be two weeks later before we left that camp. The horses were sent back to the pass.

Promptly in the morning we left for a bivouac on Mt. Bryce. Striking a diagonal route up through the timber we found the bushwhacking easier than we had expected. Jack Harris, the wrangler, had come with us and he blazed the trail for his own return. Anyone who goes in there now, will find blazes, but only one way. Before noon we were up at timberline. The trees were very large and instead of decreasing in size as one goes higher, seem to just stop. The men found a snug spot by a big spruce and put up a grand lean-to. In the afternoon they scouted the route up the moraine and glacier while Miss Gardiner and I took naps. By 5.30 it was quietly raining. We should have gone home, but it was such a surprise to us that we could not believe it would not stop and we waited. We did come home the next morning as soon as it was light, soaked to the skin after a not too comfortable night.

One is hemmed in by mountains on three sides of Rice Brook, but down the valley there is a patch of open sky. I wish I knew

how many storms we watched apparently starting there, and how many times blue sky hopefully appeared only to be engulfed by another storm. Teepees are delightful tents and one can sit and think or read or just sit, throwing on the wood from the ample pile at the door as the fire burns down. The rain patters on the canvas but seldom comes in at the top. We came to know it very well there on Rice Brook, and the stony flat became very familiar ground. Straying further from camp, one soon became soaked by the bushes even if not caught in the actual storm. After five days of it, we started out in clouds and wet bushes to try Mt. Queant, 10,200 ft. and unclimbed.

There is a moose-trail up part of S. Rice Brook, starting just beyond an old campsite on the stream bank. Above the little canyon, we came across the old survey blazes and Conrad Kain's trap line, one of his old traps still hanging on the tree. Marten tooth-marks were visible around the edges of the cut. We followed the trail, much overgrown, as far as a big alder slide. Then a dry stream bed led upward to the cliffs. After much scrambling, we got onto the glacier, Mt. Spring Rice above us hidden by clouds, a small unnamed peak below us looking twice its real height. Some step-cutting was necessary to make the col between Spring Rice and Queant and then to our pleasant surprise, a knife-edged snow ridge led up to the top of Queant. The mountain did not look like much from the glacier below, as it is a shoulder, or rather outpost of Spring Rice, but here it was saying with a flare, "I'm a real peak after all." The sun shone down on the Saskatchewan flats but Alexandra and all the high peaks were in the clouds. The easy final slope of Alexandra was visible for a few minutes. The most spectacular peak was Mt. Cockscomb with its snow-crest shining but inaccessible across S. Rice Brook valley. We descended by only a slightly different route. To our joy when we reached the Survey trail at the alder-slide, we found fresh blazes, the windfalls removed and considerable cutting done. Jim had cut out the trail and we followed it directly to a log felled across the stream just above our camp. We had taken seven hours for the ascent, five for the return.

We decided then to back pack a camp into the head of S. Rice Brook to climb Alexandra, which, in spite of its 11,214 ft., we felt could be climbed in poor weather. Going in took three hours but later when there was no cutting to be done, it took but half

this time. It is a lovely valley. We camped just below a fine canyon through which the stream flowed from a high waterfall on the left; above the falls a wide flat alpine valley opens before one. To the right, thick grassy meadows were brilliant with flowers, mostly arnicas and paintbrush. But one enjoyed these beauties only if willing to bushwhack through thick undergrowth, every leaf of which harbored a glistening drop of water, soaking one through.

We climbed Mt. Alexandra. One could barely see Edward, who was leading, through the snow flakes which whirled about us. At the top, we could see where the snow cornice stopped in the mist beyond and we let Chris fall through the snow on each side to make sure we could not get around it or onto rocks. Then "Here we are, let's go down" was all anyone said. I knew the Lyells, Oppy, Farbus and a thousand other peaks were all before us and a tremendous sense of disappointment surged through me. It poured all the way back to a cheerless fly-camp. We packed out of S. Rice Brook the next day.

If it hadn't cleared, I don't know what we would have done. As it was, it rained at supper ten minutes before we left camp for the Bryce bivouac, but we went anyway, choosing for our route the dry creek-bed which the trail crossed a half mile above our camp. It was a good route, saved our getting wet in the underbrush and in one hour and forty-five minutes we were at the bivouac. It was as we had left it, except a mouse had nibbled some of our chocolate. It was a cold night, so cold the men started breakfast about midnight. We left at 2.10 and stumbled after Edward's small flickering candle. We crossed the little creek, went up the moraine and got onto the glacier. The day was clear but it was still very dark. We waited for daylight but it was too cold, so we felt our way on over the ice. When dawn came we were high up on the mountain. Our route lay straight up the S. glacier, twice traversing onto the rocks to the right. Edward's route with Amery was up a long ridge of rotten rock to the W., coming out on the glacier high up near the col. The col, divided by a large gendarme in the center, is a spectacular gateway to the upper névé. We paused there but not for long as the wind blew and it was very cold. It was not quite 7.00. The E. face of Bryce, which we had seen so well from Watchman Peak, towered 1000 ft. above us. The snow was steep but it was in perfect condition, windswept and firm. Chris cut steps straight up to the berg-

schrund, where it was well covered. The slope got steeper as we progressed. When the schrund was passed, we began the traverse along the steep narrow shelf we had spotted from Watchman. Chris cut big steps near the wall of the mountain and we found handholds there as we moved carefully along. The snow was too hard to jab in one's ice-axe but often it could dangle in the crack between the ice and the wall. Soon the couloir came into full view from behind the buttress. It looked steep and forbidding; the few rocks, projecting out of the pure white, were glazed with ice. Chris started chipping off the ice, and preparing a steep but regular staircase to the ridge above. I huddled against the wall, the rope belayed around the axe jammed into the crack between the ice and the wall. Below, our narrow, steep and snowy ledge dropped off to nothingness. Edward and Miss Gardiner were behind, well anchored, and across the valley the peaks surrounding S. Rice Brook stood out clear and beckoning. Chris was now up and out of sight and we followed slowly and carefully. Now we were on the upper S. ridge of Bryce and a glistening highway led to the summit. A movie record was made of the ascent of the last slope. Then Miss Gardiner and I together walked out on the very summit.

Well anchored, we moved out on the cornice as far as we dared. The ridge between Bryce and the central peak to the E. is magnificent. The snow curls over first on one side, then on the other and often is corniced on both sides together. Even as we looked, however, a swift moving cloud had wiped out the S. Rice Brook group and threatened to envelope us. I grabbed the movie and panoramed slowly towards the icefield and Mt. Columbia, the cloud closing like a curtain shutting off the picture. The wind blew and it was bitter cold. We descended to a little outcropping of rock where we reconstructed the cairn and left our names. We found no record but it was too cold to search thoroughly.

The half hour spent on top was all too short for what we wanted to do and see, but too long for freezing hands and feet. We hastily descended, fearing also the snow conditions might be less favorable on the descent. It was only 9 A.M. when we left the summit. At the col, we nibbled chocolate and frozen bannock sandwiches, then proceeded across the glacier below, to the rocky ridge now on our right, which Edward and Amery had used on their ascent. The snow was good at the col, but further down it became soft and sticky, and we started going through to the ice

beneath, so it was pleasant to reach the rocky ridge. Very rotten, in places quite narrow, whole sections of it looked as if they might be pushed over easily. We reached the bivouac exactly twelve hours after we had left it. Packing up the few things left there, we went on to camp. Jim had a grand meal ready for us and we pitched in, but even as we ate, a gentle and familiar patter was heard on the canvas above us. How differently rain sounds after the climb is over!

The next day, we moved camp to the Castleguard Meadows. The whole outfit was together again for the first time since we had left Thompson Pass. We passed right through our old campground there without stopping, and a sorry looking place it was. Our twenty-three horses, grazing there for two weeks, had eaten every blade of grass.

We climbed Mt. Castleguard and it poured all the way home. We had hoped for Mt. Columbia, but the weather was impossible and it seemed foolish to stay on the great divide any longer. So we travelled back towards Lake Louise and put in our last two days climbing from camp on the Mistaya River. The third highest Murchison Tower, 10,100 ft., was a first ascent. We had a beautiful day but as we looked to the N. from the summit, the clouds still hung over all the high peaks of the divide. We had a fine view of Mt. Murchison itself and of the second highest tower, 10,659 ft. The latter is unclimbed and looked difficult. Our last climb was Mt. Chephren, more familiarly known to most of us as just "The Pyramid." We made the summit in another snow storm, an appropriate ending to the rainiest summer in the Canadian Rockies for many a year.