

The Ascent of Mt. St. Agnes

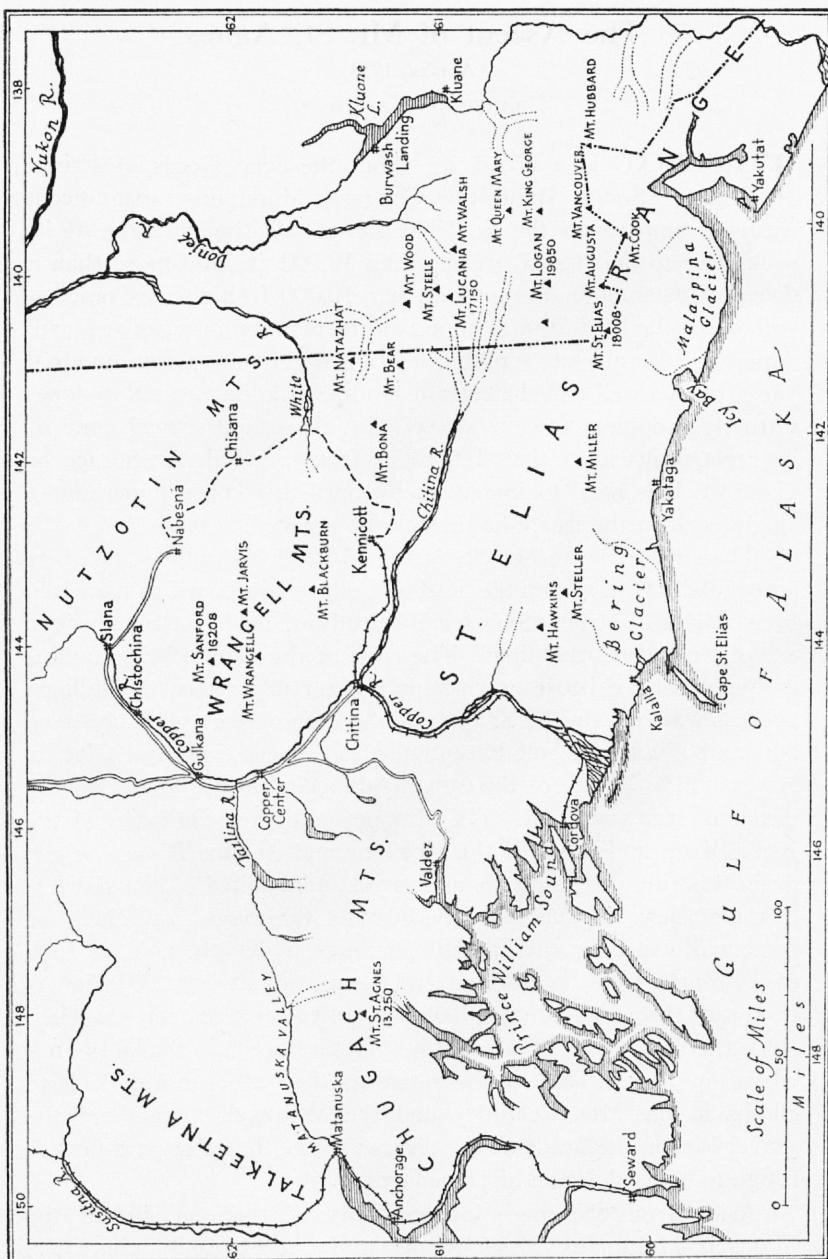
(Alaska, 1938)

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TOWERING in a broad arc about the deep fjords of Prince William Sound stand the Chugach Mountains, magnificent western ramparts of the St. Elias Range. Although three of its peaks rise to heights of greater than 12,000 ft., and more than a dozen of its summits are greater than 10,000 ft. high, this range is still one of the least known among all the mountain ranges of North America. Its glaciers tumbling to tide water only a few hundred yards from a well-travelled steamship line; the eastern snow-slopes virtually dropping into the streets of Valdez, and scarcely one of its great peaks more than 100 miles from Seward, Anchorage or Cordova, it is hard to imagine why until this last summer not a single peak in the range had ever been reached.

The approaches to Mt. St. Agnes (13,250 ft.) and Mt. Wither-spoon (12,100 ft.) from the head of College Fjord, which has often been visited by expeditions for the study of its beautiful glaciers, are particularly forbidding. The rock of the Chugach Mountains is dominantly schistose or volcanic and terribly rotten. The huge glaciers which drain the S. flank of the range are exceedingly steep and rough, with the sole exception of the great Columbia Glacier. Access to the N. side of the range is difficult because of inadequate means of transportation. The Matanuska Valley, the valley of the Knik River, and those of the Nelchina and Tazlina Rivers, which drain this side of the range, are as yet uninhabited. The shortest of the glaciers, leading from the heart of the range to the head of these various valleys, is nearly 30 miles in length, and, in each case, to approach the glacier's end, a walk of at least 30 miles is necessary through country which has not been extensively travelled since the days of the Gold Rush. Horses are not available anywhere on the N. side of the range as they are for approach to climbs in the Mt. McKinley and the Wrangell areas, and the gravel-bars in the heads of the rivers are for the most part far too rough to be used for an airplane landing.

Aside from the mere inaccessibility of the one side of the Chugach Mountains which seems to be most easily climbable, the greatest deterrent to the exploration of the Chugach Range has



been the unbelievably terrible weather which sweeps the slopes of these mountains almost every day of the entire year. Alaskan weather, at best, is notoriously bad; in the mountains fringing Prince William Sound it is awful beyond the most remote limit of the imagination.

During the winter and spring of 1938, a small expedition was planned at the Harvard Institute of Geography to attempt the ascent of Mt. St. Agnes, the highest peak in the Chugachs, and to make a series of aerial photographic flights, which would fill in the great blank on this part of the Alaskan map.

Early in June, 1937, on a flight between Seward and Valdez, I had an excellent opportunity to study the Seward face of Mt. St. Agnes, which seemed particularly steep and rugged. Although there appeared to be two routes on this side of the mountain which might prove possible for climbing under excellent snow conditions, we decided, however, it would be worth while to make a further reconnaissance flight on the N. side of the range before blundering on to one of these very steep and exposed S. ridges. Russell Dow and Pilot Bob Reeve of Valdez succeeded in making a flight along the N. edge of the range early in February, 1938, as soon as the sun had risen high enough to make photography on this side of the mountains possible. These pictures were sent to Cambridge by air-mail where they were developed, and we discovered an ideal route to the summit of St. Agnes by way of a great ridge which dropped N. from the peak to the head of Matanuska Glacier. This glacier, only the snout of which appears on the U. S. G. S. map, melts into the Matanuska River, near the mouth of which the Federal Relief Colony has been established some 40 miles down the valley near the shores of Cook Inlet.

Without the possibility of obtaining any pack-horses on this side of the range, the long rough approach up the Mantanuska Valley was not a cheering prospect, in view of the weather which we must almost certainly face. On the new aerial pictures showing the Mantanuska Glacier, there appeared to be a beautifully smooth, high plateau about 8 miles below its head. Reeve was certain, after examining the head of the glacier on this February flight, that he would be able to land both our party and supplies somewhere on this plateau. In order to do this, he agreed to use his ski-equipped plane, taking off from the Valdez mud-flats as we had done on the Mt. Lucania trip the year before.

The advance guard of our small party, consisting of Peter Gabriel, Norman Bright and Norman Dyhrenfurth arrived with all of our supplies in Valdez on April 30th. I planned to reach Alaska in the middle of May and we hoped that by that time Reeve and the other three men would have been able to move our entire outfit to a base camp on the glacier and start the reconnaissance of the lower part of the mountain. The Chugach weather, however, now got to work. The flight from Valdez to the glacier, including time taken to unload the plane, was only a matter of about two hours. When I arrived in Valdez on the afternoon of May 16th, I learned that the first clear two-hour period had been early that morning. My three companions were still in Valdez and only one of our four loads had been flown to the glacier. Ten more days of bitter storms followed, and at last, very early on the morning of May 27th, Reeve, Gabriel and I made a flight to the glacier and a temporary camp was set up beside our landing place. The weather on this trip was far from good and Reeve was forced to fly almost 50 miles out of his way in order to get back to Valdez, as the passages over which we had flown but two hours before were completely clogged with clouds on his return.

Fog and rain again enveloped Valdez for several days, and although our weather on the N. side of the mountains was moderately good, there was no hope whatever of bringing in the last two loads from the coast. Gabriel and I were comfortably established on the glacier with ample food for several weeks, and in constant communication with Valdez and Anchorage by means of our small portable radio telephone. Situated as we were on exactly the opposite side of this range from Valdez, it was impossible to tell what sort of weather to expect in either place, no matter how clear it might be in the other. The radio proved a marvelous boon to the efficient freighting in of the last two loads, as well as in getting the party safely out to civilization at the close of the trip.

Two lovely mornings on May 31st and June 1st brought the remainder of our party in from Valdez and united us all safely on the glacier. Gabriel and I had reconnoitered 4 miles about the base camp the day after our arrival and had marked the trail clearly with willow-wands as far as we felt it safe for two people to travel alone. On June 2nd we started sledging supplies ahead up the valley to a camp at 5950 ft., 2 miles above our base. The reason for the exceedingly short distances between all our camps on St.

Agnes was the weather. It snowed heavily almost every night, and during the day when it was not actually snowing or blowing a hurricane, the lower glacier was usually blanketed in dense fog. In order to keep the trail broken out, we made our camps close together and relayed twice each day instead of once.

Camp 2 was established on the night of June 4th, and on the 5th and 6th, we had the most terrific storm of the entire trip. Two of our heavy bamboo tent-poles were smashed to pieces and the new trail, both above and below camp, was completely buried. Thick fog settled down over the glacier for the next three days, but we managed during short clear streaks to mark a good trail to the top of the low icefall, slightly more than 2 miles above camp. Heavy rain on the 9th and 10th reduced the fresh fall of snow to a sea of slush, and when we finally managed to drag the last of our three light loads into Camp 3, we were utterly disgusted with the weather. During the 14 days that Gabriel and I had been on the glacier, we had only once been able to glimpse the summit ridge of St. Agnes, and then only for a few moments.

The morning of June 11th dawned cloudless after a night of dense fog and light snow. We made an early start and sledged a load to a point about a mile from the base of the northerly ridge of St. Agnes, and then bogged down on the glacier in a mass of slush. We made another trip late that night after a crust had formed, finding our way to the cache only by means of the willow-wands. More fog and still more snow hampered the next three relays, which finally established us at a fourth camp on a fine level patch of snow, 7500 ft. high, at the very base of St. Agnes. Although essentially a rock ridge, this northerly buttress of St. Agnes is so exposed to the force of the easterly storms that its entire length is capped with a beautiful arête of snow. By following the crest of this buttress to a height of about 10,000 ft., we hoped to attain the main summit ridge of St. Agnes at a pass about 11,000 ft. high. This route had the disadvantage of forcing us to climb over the tops of two distinct peaks, each one followed by a descent of more than 500 ft. before reaching the actual summit cone of the mountain.

Unfortunately the easier and more direct routes of approach which lay at the very head of the Matanuska Glacier were far too badly swept by avalanches for consideration. We had at first hoped to relay our final camp up the N. ridge to 10,000 ft. without

any intermediate depot. In fact, if it had not been for the uncertainty of the weather and the length of this climb, involving two descents, we should certainly have tackled the summit directly from Camp 4 without any further advance at all.

A short clear-off on the night of June 13th gave us a chance for reconnaissance up the ridge to 10,000 ft., where we located a level though very exposed campsite. The clouds and blowing snow above this point hid all the upper part of the mountain in such a wild swirl that we were forced to return without having a chance to study the final approach to the 11,000 ft. pass. We beat our way back to camp down the narrow ridge in a gathering gale, and during the next three days we were scarcely able to leave the tents on account of a hurricane of wind and drifting snow.

In one short lull late on the night of the 14th, we managed to sneak one load to a sheltering rock outcrop on the ridge at about 8600 ft., but above that the wind was blowing so hard we could not work it up any higher. On the night of the 15th, we had a short break. The wind and snow suddenly died down at sunset after a constant blizzard all day. By working all night, we managed to break trail through oceans of powdered snow on the crest of the ridge, and by dawn had made two relays to the 8600-ft. shelf. We abandoned two sleeping-bags at the base of the ridge and only took with us the absolutely necessities for ten days' existence on the mountain. We slept for a short time early in the morning of the 17th and then worked all through that day, pushing three relays through to our final camp at 10,000 ft. The freak good weather ended abruptly just before noon, and camp was finally set up just before supper in a frigid wind and driving snow. The last trip from the lower cache had been made entirely along willow-wands in dense fog and snow. That night we wondered why we had ever tried to climb Mt. St. Agnes!

The wind again rose to hurricane force. We had erected camp under such wretched conditions, had not been able to dig it in deep enough and just leveled out a space large enough for the tent and built a small wall to windward. It blew so hard about midnight that we had to pull down the tent poles for fear the whole camp would be demolished, and spent the remainder of the night half smothered underneath the flapping cloth, sitting up in bed every hour or so to throw off the drifting snow and keep it from

burying us. The hurricane continued until the middle of the next afternoon, when we turned to in shifts, dug out camp and built a new and higher wall.

A lull late in the afternoon put Bright and myself on the trail, while Gabriel and Dyhrenfurth fortified camp for the coming night. In two hours of fog-groping through a maze of cracks, guided mainly by one of our aerial photographs, we found an excellent way to reach our 11,000-ft. col and willow-wanded trail through to the bottom of a smooth slope immediately below it. The new wall stood us in good stead that night, but we had little sleep. The wind and driving snow roared by ceaselessly at 80 or 90 miles an hour, having started up just before Bright and I got in from our afternoon's reconnaissance. At 6 o'clock on the morning of the 19th, the wind suddenly died and the clouds lifted, although the weather was still far from promising. We decided to make a quick start and work our way as far up the mountain as we possibly could. Our food supplies were limited; we had to count on flying out to Valdez no later than the end of the month, if we were still to have smooth snow for the airplane to take off.

The trip on foot down the Matanuska Valley would have been a long and difficult walk, and both Gabriel and I had to be in Valdez no later than July 1st—he to meet the Harvard ski party, and I to meet Terris and Katrina Moore for the Sanford climb. We had planned to spend two whole months on St. Agnes, but storms had forced us to waste all of May waiting in Valdez; bad weather had again caused us day after day of delay in reaching this final camp. We were certain that St. Agnes could be climbed. The problem now arose as to whether even two months were sufficient allowance in order to have a single clear day.

Shouldering two days of iron rations, our survey camera, the light movie camera and some extra film, we set out at 9 o'clock on the morning of June 19th in hopes of at least finding out exactly what was in store for us on the upper ridge of the mountain. The new snow was abominable. We had to use snowshoes wherever it was possible to wear them. At 11 o'clock we made our pass and thence followed the ridge in warm sunlight to the bottom of Pk. 12,250 ft., which we had always hoped we might traverse on its right (W.) flank. This, however, proved absolutely impossible, as a 5000-ft. cliff of rock and ice tumbled abruptly from its

very summit to the very head of the Knik Glacier, which stretched below us towards Anchorage. Peering towards the S. across this cliff and past Pk. 12,250 ft. we had the first glimpse of the actual summit of St. Agnes since we had landed at its base more than three weeks before. Still 3 miles ahead, it looked as if it were but a stone's throw away. With the added incentive of the summit in sight, we decided to press on over the top of the 12,250-ft. peak and mark a trail as far as we possibly could. The opposite side of this smaller peak is exceedingly steep and quite icy. By dropping down 800 ft., we attained a notch on the other side of which 2 miles of plateau-like snow fields brought us to an altitude of 12,500 ft., near the summit of our second intermediate mountain. We managed to avoid going over the actual top of Pk. 12,750 ft., a mile N. of St. Agnes, by slipping past it on a shoulder about 12,600 ft. high and thence wallowing down 400 ft. through waist-deep powder snow into the final pass, 12,200 ft.

We reached this pass at 3 P.M. without a single rest, even to eat, since leaving camp at 9 o'clock in the morning. The weather, though still calm, was very unsettled. The blue sky had disappeared shortly after we had descended the S. side of Pk. 12,250 ft. Heavy clouds were now rolling in towards us from the coast. A light southerly wind was picking up and patches of fog were rapidly forming all along the valley of the Knik Glacier to our right. As we sat shoulder deep in the loose snow with the summit rising 1000 ft. above us, now but a scant three-quarters of a mile away, we realized that this was our last chance. Another big southeaster would be sure to blockade us in camp until the end of our food. We had to strike now or give up the mountain. The clouds were rapidly closing in about the summit cone, so we carefully headed our trail across our broad pass toward the spot where the final pyramid seemed most easily climbable. Then the clouds completely hid the peak from view and we continued ahead holding a straight course by lining each new willow-wand up with the preceding ones, which we knew were heading us exactly where we wanted to go. This literally surveyed us through the fog to the bottom of a clear route up the summit cone. Once out of the pass, with its fathomless powder snow, the footing changed to hard ice. We put on our crampons once more and made fine headway. The wind and snow increased gently and the fog was impenetrable.

At 4.40 p.m., however, we hit the unmistakable final ridge. The last ten minutes we followed the crest of the ridge into a chilly southerly breeze, laden with hoarfrost and occasional snowflakes. At 4.50 p.m. the ridge abruptly ended; steep slopes dropped sharply about us on all sides through the fog, and we stood at last on the summit of St. Agnes.

The ascent of Mt. St. Agnes was a curious mixture of failure and success. Happy as we were at making a goal which we had virtually given up, we realized that one of the prime objectives of the trip—the photographic survey of the Chugach Range from the summit—could not possibly be accomplished. Nevertheless, we felt ourselves extremely lucky even to have made the climb, as we were certain beyond all doubt that this was the first day in more than six weeks that we could possibly have succeeded.

Our stay on top was short, partly on account of the cold, partly because of the late hour and the long struggle with its two uphill grades that still lay between us and camp. Our old trail entirely gone and nothing but twigs sticking through the drifting snow left to guide us, we finally reached camp at 9.50 that night, after a long, exhausting day—a combination of joy and bitter disappointment.

The storm hit that night with redoubled fury. The wind and snow were so bad on the following morning that we decided not to tackle the descent of the ridge until the usual evening lull. This arrived on schedule late in the afternoon, but it ended much sooner than usual and we descended the last half of the ridge in a veritable tornado of wind and blowing snow, arriving at Camp 4 late in the evening. The next night saw us safely back in Camp 2. Our old landing-field near Camp 1 had been completely wiped out by heavy rains. We were forced to spend the whole of the next day snowshoeing a safe solid runway 2000 ft. long and 80 ft. wide near Camp 2. The radio again rallied to our aid. The night of June 22nd was icy cold and magnificently clear, the only truly clear night on the entire expedition. We picked up Valdez on our first call at 6 o'clock in the evening. Reeve, fully warned by wireless of the shape and position of the new field, dropped from the skies early the next morning and spirited us safely out to Valdez in two quick flights.

Technically speaking the ascent of Mt. St. Agnes was not difficult. Two short stretches on the ridge below our final camp,

as well as the descent on the S. side of Pk. 12,250 ft., were exceedingly steep and icy but presented no first-order difficulties. Similar in most respects to a good many other Alaskan mountains, the main problem on St. Agnes was that of reaching its base. The climb proper was accomplished from Valdez to Valdez in twenty-seven days, a time which would have been more than doubled had we not succeeded in making both our approach and retreat by air.

Repeated use of airplanes for stocking our base on the Yukon Expedition in 1935 and on Mt. Lucania a year ago furnished convincing proof that these flights cannot be carried out efficiently and safely without the use of reliable radio equipment at both ends. Our success on St. Agnes despite the desperate efforts of a hard-working climbing party was due in great part to the flawless operation of our radio and the expert piloting of Reeve, both of which contributed to make an isolated and strongly fortified mountain one which could easily be attacked.