

Franklin Spencer Spalding and the Ascent of The Grand Teton in 1898

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THE climb of The Grand Teton in 1898 was an outstanding event in American mountaineering, regardless of whether or not it is considered to be the first ascent. It is certainly the first definitely authenticated ascent and it provided a sound route to the summit which has been followed by a large proportion of succeeding climbers. A great deal has been written about the claim of Nathaniel P. Langford that he and James Stevenson reached the summit in 1872 and the insistence of William O. Owen that such was not the case. I do not propose at this time to discuss this controversy, although I believe that the subject merits a review in this *Journal*. Quite as important, in my opinion, is the presentation of a fair and full account of the 1898 ascent in a form available to those who are interested in mountaineering history. Most of the publicity that followed the initial reports of this notable climb has emanated from Mr. Owen, whose enthusiasm for the mountain long antedated the event and has continued to the present day.¹ Mr. Owen, however, seems to have been rather more concerned with disproving Langford's claim than with giving a full account of the final stages of the climb which led to its successful outcome. That the account which follows brings into prominence the fine figure of Frank Spalding is no disparagement of Mr. Owen's part in the climb, but is, rather, I believe, an enrichment of the annals of mountaineering.

The history of The Grand Teton is now so generally known that only a very brief review is required of the events that preceded the climb under consideration. Whether or not Langford and Stevenson in 1872 stood on the actual summit, there is at least no doubt that they reached the famous "Enclosure" a few hundred feet below the summit. This remarkable feature has aroused the speculations of many subsequent visitors most of whom have undoubtedly had the same thoughts as Langford's, namely, that it was the work of Indians, that it was built for protection against the

¹ Owen's accounts are to be found in *Alpine Journal*, August, 1899, No. 145, pp. 536-543; *Outing Magazine*, 1901, pp. 302-307; *New York Herald*, September 18, 1898; and in other publications.

wind, and that it was constructed a long time ago.² At least two other parties visited the Enclosure in the 1870s, but did not succeed in reaching the summit. In 1891, Owen and his wife, with Mr. and Mrs. M. B. Dawson, made a determined attempt upon the mountain, but turned back when still 700 or more feet from the top. Owen made several other attempts in the next few years, in which, though unsuccessful, he gained considerable knowledge of the mountain.

In 1896 "The Rocky Mountain Club" was organized in Denver, Colo. One of its charter members was the Rev. Franklin Spencer Spalding. Born in Erie, Pa., March 13, 1865, he had come to Colorado in 1874 when his father became Missionary Bishop of Colorado, Wyoming and New Mexico. Frank Spalding, long of limb and a lover of the out-of-doors, grew up in familiarity with the Rockies of Colorado. During his undergraduate days at Princeton, from which he was graduated in 1887, he was active in athletics as well as in journalism and debating. He elected to follow his father in the Episcopal ministry and attended the General Theological Seminary in New York, after which he taught for a few years in Colorado. It was at this time that he joined with other enthusiastic climbers in forming the Rocky Mountain Club. Although called in 1897 to his father's old parish in Erie, Pa., he still looked to the West and eight years later he was elected Missionary Bishop of Utah with headquarters in Salt Lake City. Bishop Spalding, however, was not a man of the cities and of rich parishes. His chosen field was among workingmen and people of all conditions of life, especially those in isolated communities. His biography discloses his sympathetic understanding of men and the breadth of his Christianity.³ At the very height of his career, and in the prime of life, on September 24, 1914, he was struck down by a recklessly driven automobile in Salt Lake City and was instantly killed.

Such was the man, who, in 1898, came West from his parish in Erie, for a summer vacation in the mountains. He was thirty-five at the time and still an athlete. He had climbed a number of the high peaks of Colorado, including Longs, Grays, Evans and the "Collegiate Peaks." Earlier that year, George H. Knifton, presi-

² "The Ascent of Mount Hayden," by N. P. Langford, in *Scribner's Magazine*, June 1873, p. 145.

³ "Franklin Spencer Spalding: Man and Bishop," by John Howard Melish. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917.

dent of The Rocky Mountain Club, had written to W. O. Owen, who held the position of State Auditor of Wyoming, at Cheyenne, inviting him to head a party under the auspices of the Club to make another attempt to reach the summit of The Grand Teton. Owen had been elected a member of the Club, and Spalding, who still retained his membership, became its other representative. The party assembled at Jackson Hole early in August and comprised, besides Spalding and Owen, Thomas Cooper, of Cheyenne, John Shive, of Elk, Wyo., and Frank L. Peterson and Hugh McDermont, of Jackson, Wyo.

At this point let Spalding tell the story. He doubtless would have preferred that it be told in the form in which he wrote it shortly afterwards in an article which was sent to *Cosmopolitan Magazine*. The article, though accepted, was, however, never published and the manuscript has been lost beyond hope of recovery. Nevertheless, there exists another account, which for our purposes is probably even better, for it was written or dictated within a few days after the climb and was given to the newspapers as he passed through Denver on the way to the family summer home in the Colorado mountains.⁴ It appeared in the *Denver Evening Post*, August 16, 1898, and reads in part, as follows:

The camp was right beneath the Grand Teton and it was a sight that I shall never forget, when early on the morning of the 11th we saw it wreathed with clouds and somber as if rebuking us for daring to scale it.

We started at 5 o'clock. The first difficulty encountered was that we would select an easy route which would end abruptly in a precipice. We went up something like 900 ft., and being confronted with a wall of rock went down again. Finally we made the valley again and determined to follow it up. We reached our first glacier and found it was three-fourths of a mile across, solid ice covered with rocks and checkered with deep crevasses.

We began to realize what was before us, but we had no fear in our final success. Our outfit consisted of 450 ft. of rope, two ice axes, two iron-pointed prods, a half dozen steel drills

⁴ Melish says the interview was given to the *Cheyenne Republican*, and quotes part of it in the biography. Bishop William Ford Nichols, of San Francisco, furnished the account to the *Churchman*, December 17, 1921, in substantially the same form as it is presented here. He speaks of it as an extract from Spalding's diary, but also says it was obtained from a clipping supplied by Mr. Knifton. Bishop Spalding's sisters do not know of any diary. Mr. Kemper Fullerton quotes the same newspaper account in *The Princeton Alumni Weekly*, May 11, 1928.

and twenty iron pegs. We made the top, however, without having to use the drills or pegs.

The glacier led to a snowfield, 100 yds. in width. The snow was so soft that we had no difficulty in walking over it. Then we came to another rise of rock, 300 to 400 ft. in length and at a steep angle. The rock terminated in another snow-bank at an angle of 30°. In single file we began to climb this, each stepping in the other's footsteps.

When we reached the "saddle" between the middle Teton and the Grand Teton we laid down and rested for a few minutes. Refreshed, we went up to the saddle between the west spur and the main peak, a point as far as anybody had ever gone. Mr. Owen found the can he left there in 1891, marking the highest point man had ascended.

Ice was all around us. Our first attempt to continue our journey was up through an ice niche, but we discovered that there was no place to hold to. We were consequently forced to follow a little gallery 3 ft. wide up to the north side. Here is where the great similarity of the Grand Teton to the Matterhorn comes in. I have climbed both and I know whereof I am speaking.⁵

Naturally, the north side of any large and supposedly inaccessible peak is supposed to be the hardest climb. But the Matterhorn is climbed most easily by the north side. So was the Grand Teton. We decided to stick to the north, and cautiously made our way along our gallery until the man in front suddenly drew back with the remark that it ended in a precipice that shot sheer down for 3000 ft.

Below the gallery and jutting out from the wall of rock were two large slabs, probably 6 ft. in length, which had been sprung out from the main wall by the action of the ice and rain. Behind these, after lowering ourselves to them, we crawled along a distance of 20 ft., which brought us to a little ledge under an overhanging rock. The ledge was so narrow that we were forced to crawl on our stomachs.

Even the consciousness that a fall would land us 3000 ft. below gave us a decidedly creepy sensation. We had to dig our fingers in the rough granite in places to pull ourselves along. We encouraged each other by keeping up a natural conversation, but it was with an immense feeling of relief that we crossed the ledge and came to a sort of niche with a small overhanging rock. Over this we threw a rope—an action that required a cool and steady hand and a nice eye. We pulled ourselves up and out over this 3000 ft. of space and continued

⁵ According to Miss Sarah G. Spalding, this is an interpolation by the reporter. Spalding had not climbed the Matterhorn, nor did he ever claim to have done so.

on up the niche to about 50 ft. It was so narrow that we could use our feet, elbows and knees.

It was while we were going up this niche that the only accident, if you could call it such, occurred. John Shive was the last man coming up. A rock weighing 200 to 300 lbs. became dislodged and fell with a scraping sound in the direction of his head. It bounced to one side, as Shive unconsciously swerved. It struck the brim of his hat and knocked it to one side.

All of the rock was slippery and we could not go too carefully. When we reached the top we went on another gallery for a distance of nearly 200 ft. to the west: then up to another ice niche in which we were forced to cut five steps. It was 60 ft. high and led on to a ridge. We followed a snow ridge for 200 ft. and then over the sharp, jagged eruptive rocks, so noticeable above the timberline, clambered with a shout to the top. We made it at 4 o'clock exactly. We had been climbing for eleven hours.

Frank Spalding was a very modest man, and in this account there is little indication of the leadership on his part that made the ascent possible. Fortunately, there have been preserved in the archives of Yellowstone National Park copies of several letters written by Spalding to Langford a few months after the climb, during the height of the controversy instituted by Owen over the first ascent. Moreover, John Shive, who took no inconsiderable part in the climb, is now living in Blackfoot, Ida., where I had the privilege of talking with him last summer. His recollections coincide substantially with the following account quoted from Spalding's letters to Langford, dated Erie, Pa., December 5th, 1898:

The sort of gallery ran north beyond the face of the cliff and ended in a pile of rocks and a precipice. The north face of the mountain itself, you remember, is nearly perpendicular. However, just where the gallery leaves it a couple of slabs of granite were split off, and being still fastened at the lower end, projected off the face of the cliff a couple of feet. I crawled along there possibly 10 ft. and came to a narrow ledge under the overhanging rock. This ledge was so narrow that I had to take off my camera which I had strapped on my back, and push it ahead of me. A crawl, or rather squirm, of 30 ft. brought me to a shelf of rock, and the cliff above was broken enough to risk climbing. I had carried an end of rope across with me, Owen paying it out, and I succeeded in throwing a loop over a projecting rock and pulled myself up. Here was a chimney up which I climbed about 40 ft. or more. It was a steep bit, but there was no ice, and being long armed and legged, I made it all right carrying the rope up. I was now

above the overhanging rock, and I walked along the top of it south again, and saw the boys on the enclosure. The peak itself was between me and Jackson's Hole. Here I came to another chimney made by the softer filling of a dyke having disintegrated, and I climbed up that about 60 ft. There was some ice in it, but I managed it without much difficulty. It seemed to me that the top was just ahead, but I did not wish to go ahead of my party, and so I climbed down the last chimney, and hallooed to Owen to come on. The boys on the enclosure saw that I had the way to the top and they came on. The last chimney was hard for the short-legged fellows, and so I carried a rope up for them, and some steps were chopped in the ice.

From this letter it appears that Spalding was not only the leader of the party on the only difficult part of the climb, but that he practically made a "solo" ascent, returning when he was within a few feet of the summit in order to bring up the rest of his party.⁶

The ascent described was made on August 11th, 1898, and four of the party reached the summit—Spalding, Owen, Shive, and Peterson. Cooper had dropped out before reaching the upper saddle, and McDerment remained at the Enclosure. Spalding speaks briefly of the descent: "The descent was harder than the ascent, because it was more risky. We had to rope off four places as a precautionary measure, although, really, there was but one place where it was absolutely necessary." Owen states that camp was reached at eleven o'clock that night. Two days latter, Spalding and Shive repeated the ascent and erected a monument on the summit. On August 15th, the following telegram was sent by Owen from Market Lake, Ida.: "George H. Knifton, Denver: Success is ours. At 4 P.M., August 11th, we planted the club's colors at the summit of the mighty Teton. We feel pardonable pride in the success of our undertaking, and that the accomplishment of the feat has added by no means the least resplendent gem to our club's coronet of achievements in mountaineering."⁷

The ascent was indeed a splendid achievement, and reflected great credit upon William O. Owen for his pluck and perseverance, and upon Franklin Spencer Spalding for his mountaineering ability and his modest sportsmanship. May they both be long remembered as great American mountaineers!

⁶ This is further substantiated by Kemper Fullerton, *op. cit.*

⁷ Denver *Evening Post*, August 17, 1898.