

# Record of the First Approach to Mt. McKinley

JOHN C. REED, JR.

*U.S. Geological Survey,<sup>1</sup> Washington 25, D. C.*

IN 1902 Dr. Alfred H. Brooks, of the U.S. Geological Survey, made a journey that has since come to be considered one of the classics of Alaskan exploration. His party of 7 men and 20 horses left tidewater at the head of Cook Inlet on June 2, 1902. They crossed the Alaska Range through a pass at the head of the Yentna River, which Brooks named Rainy Pass, turned northeastward and skirted the base of the range as far as the Nenana River, then called the Cantwell, descended the Nenana to the Tanana River, and reached the Yukon at the village of Rampart on September 15th.

On this journey of 800 miles over rugged and unexplored terrain, the party carried out topographic and geologic surveys, portions of which are only now being refined and improved.

During the course of their exploration, the Brooks party made the first close approach to the base of Mt. McKinley, and D. L. Reaburn, topographer of the party, made the first reliable measurement of the height of the peak. His figure of 20,300 feet for the altitude of the south peak of McKinley has been accepted for 52 years.

On August 3rd, the Brooks party made their closest camp to the base of McKinley, near the head of what is now called Slippery Creek, about 13 miles northwest of the summit of the mountain. In one of his accounts of his journey, Dr. Brooks writes:<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Publication authorized by the Director, U.S. Geological Survey.

<sup>2</sup> Brooks, A. H., "An Exploration to Mt. McKinley, America's Highest Mountain": *Jour. Geography*, v. 2, no. 9, p. 441-469, Nov. 1903.

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Two days later we made our nearest camp to Mt. McKinley, in a broad, shallow valley incised in the piedmont plateau and drained by a stream which found its source in the ice-clad slopes of the high mountain. We had reached the base of the peak, and a part of our mission was accomplished, with a margin of six weeks left for its completion. This bade us make haste, for we must still traverse some four hundred miles of unexplored region before we could hope to reach even the outposts of civilization. Notwithstanding all of this, we decided to allow ourselves one day's delay so that we might actually set foot on the slopes of the mountain. The ascent of Mt. McKinley had never been part of our plan, for our mission was exploration and surveying, not mountaineering; but it now seemed very hard to us that we had neither time nor equipment to attempt the mastery of this highest peak of the continent.

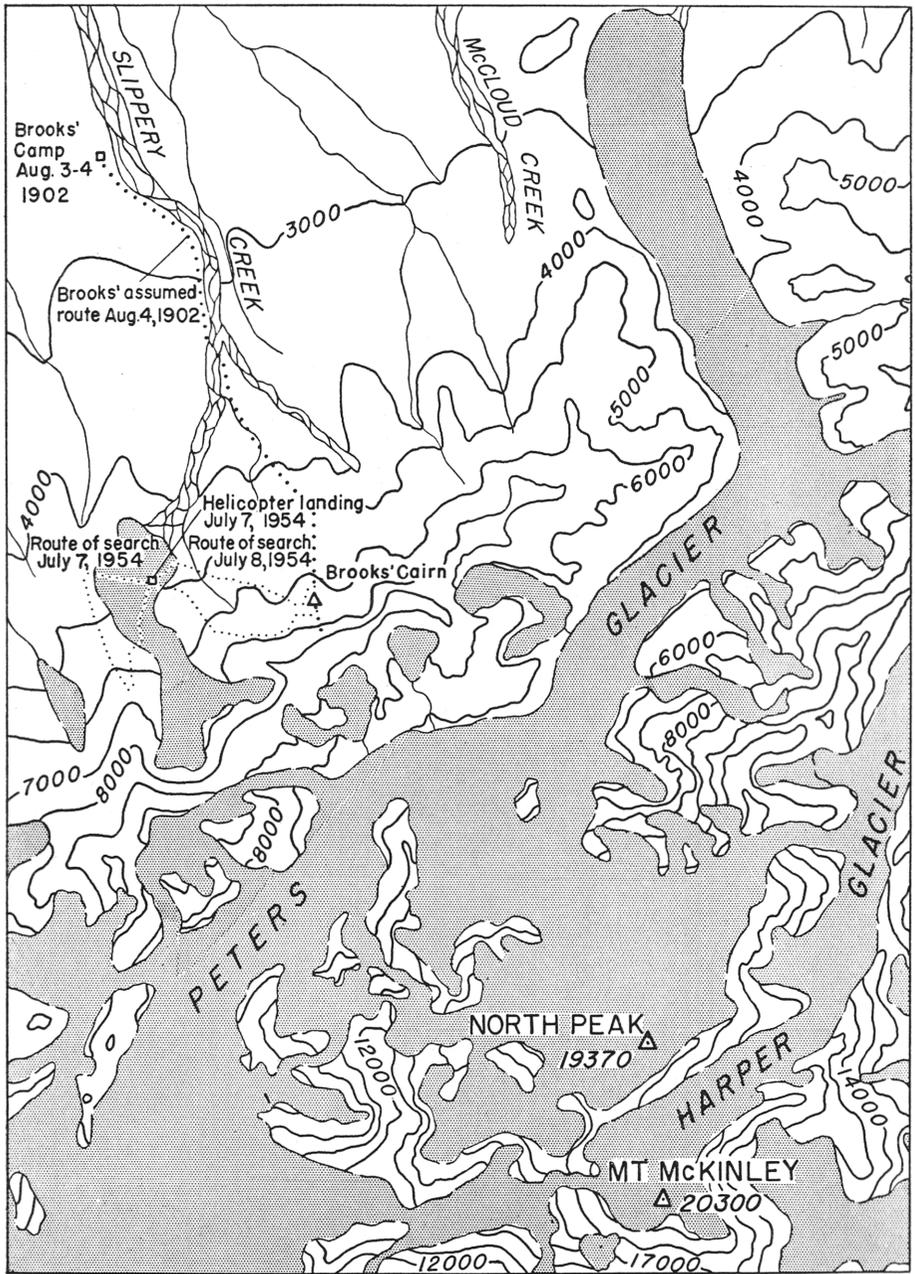
The next morning dawned clear and bright. Climbing the bluff above our camp, I overlooked the upper part of the valley, spread before me like a broad amphitheatre, its sides formed by the slopes of the mountain and its spurs. Here and there glistened in the sun the white surfaces of glaciers which found their way down from the peaks above. The great mountain rose 17,000 feet above our camp, apparently almost sheer from the flat valley floor. Its dome-shaped summit and upper slopes were white with snow, relieved here and there by black areas which marked cliffs too steep for the snow to lie upon.

A two hours' walk across the valley, through several deep glacial streams, brought me to the very base of the mountain. As I approached, the top was soon lost to view; the slopes were steep and I had to scramble as best I could. Soon all vegetation was left behind me, and my way zigzagged across smooth, bare rocks and talus slopes of broken fragments. My objective point was a shoulder of the mountain about 10,000 feet high, but at three in the afternoon I found my route blocked by a smooth expanse of ice. With the aid

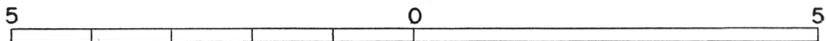


of my geologic pick I managed to cut steps in the slippery surface, and thus climbed a hundred feet higher; then the angle of slope became steeper, and as the ridge on which the glacier lay fell off at the sides in sheer cliffs, a slip would have been fatal. Convinced at length that it would be utterly foolhardy, alone as I was, to attempt to reach the shoulder for which I was headed at 7,500 feet I turned and cautiously retraced my steps, finding the descent to bare ground more perilous than the ascent.

I had now consumed all the time that could be spared to explore this mountain which had been reached at the expense of so much preparation and hard toil; but at least I must leave a record to mark our highest point. On a prominent cliff near the base of the glacier, which had turned me back,



Scale in Miles



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I built a cairn in which I buried a cartridge-shell from my pistol, containing a brief account of the journey together with a roster of the party.

By this time I was forcibly reminded of the fact that I had forgotten to eat my lunch. As I sat resting from my labors, I surveyed a striking scene. Around me were bare rock, ice and snow; not a sign of life,—the silence broken now and then by the roar of an avalanche loosened by the midday sun, tumbling like a waterfall over some cliff to find a resting-place thousands of feet below. I gazed along the precipitous slopes of the mountain and tried to realize again its great altitude, with a thrill of satisfaction at being the first man to approach the summit, which was only nine miles from where I smoked my pipe. No white man had ever before reached the base, and I was far beyond, where the moccasined foot of the roving Indian had never trod. The Alaskan native seldom goes beyond the limit of smooth walking and has a superstitious horror of even approaching glacial ice.

During the summer of 1954, the author was in the Mt. McKinley area conducting geologic studies and checking geologic interpretations that had been made from aerial photographs in the office the previous winter. Grant H. Pearson, the superintendent of Mt. McKinley National Park had just finished writing a history of the Park and had come across the above quotation. He was extremely interested in attempting to locate Dr. Brooks' cairn and recover the record that had been left. As I had planned to visit the Slippery Creek area by helicopter, we decided to join forces and combine a quick geologic reconnaissance with a search for the cairn. We realized that locating a single cartridge shell on the slopes of Mt. McKinley was the old problem of the needle in the haystack raised to the nth degree. However, we had several clues to go on. The location of Dr. Brooks' camp on August 4th is shown on the map which accompanies his official report.<sup>3</sup> Several photographs bearing this date appear in his various papers; presumably they were taken somewhere along his route, probably at the point where the cairn was built. His description of the route he followed, although not very complete, further served to narrow the field. Last, and most important, we assumed that the route he would have chosen would correspond closely with the route that anyone experienced in the mountains would have selected under similar circumstances. After careful stereoscopic study of the aerial photographs we selected two places near the head of Slippery Creek which seemed the most likely areas to

<sup>3</sup> Brooks, A. H., "The Mount McKinley Region, Alaska": U.S. Geol. Survey Prof. Paper 70, 1911.

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search. The first of these was at the foot of a steep, glacier-covered ridge just west of the glacier which lies at the head of the westernmost fork of Slippery Creek—for lack of any other name we referred to this as the “Slippery Glacier.” The second was on a prominent bare ridge about 3 miles east of the “Slippery Glacier.”

On July 7th, we were landed at an altitude of about 5,400 feet on the “Slippery Glacier” by a Geological Survey helicopter which was operating from Wonder Lake. Setting up our camp near the middle of the glacier, we immediately set out to search the ridge to the west. At the time, we considered this the most likely location as it seemed to offer the most direct route to the only 10,000-foot shoulder of mountain shown on Brooks’ map, and the route was indeed blocked by a smooth expanse of ice that would have been an insuperable obstacle without the aid of ice-axe and crampons. After searching unsuccessfully for several hours we returned to camp in time for our evening radio schedule with the Survey camp at Wonder Lake.

The next day, July 8th, we turned our attention to the eastern ridge. Traversing the slopes east of the glacier at about the 7,000-foot level, we spent several hours searching minor ridges and spurs and at about 2:00 p.m. reached the second area we had picked on the photos. Although this second ridge was not ice covered, it had obviously been overridden in the very recent past by ice of a small glacier lying just to the east. After a search of about half an hour, we located the cairn at the north end of a prominent erratic boulder which lies at an elevation of about 6,500 feet on the skyline of the ridge as seen from the west. The boulder is a rectangular block of granite about 15 feet long and 5 feet wide. The cairn consisted of four or five rocks piled over a small hollow in the large boulder which contained a 30-30 cartridge,<sup>4</sup> sealed with clay, and wrapped in a cloth tobacco sack (Maryland Club Mixture). Since the cairn had been erected by Brooks in 1902, at least an inch of moss had grown between the rocks. No attempt was made to remove the note, for the paper was badly water soaked.

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<sup>4</sup>In his account, written some time later, Brooks mentioned a pistol cartridge, evidently a minor mistake.

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After replacing the Brooks note with one of our own, which we placed in a waterproof film can, we rebuilt the cairn and returned to camp to report our success over the radio to Wonder Lake.

The cartridge was sent by the National Park Service to the National Archives in Washington, where experts removed the note. It proved to be a standard Geological Survey specimen label with Dr. Brooks' name written in pencil on the back. The cartridge, note, tobacco bag, and a specimen of the moss have been returned to McKinley Park where they will remain in the park museum as a memento of the first man to approach the slopes of Mt. McKinley.

