

# Two Expeditions in the Northern Purcells

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IN LATE August 1953 four friends and I completed a high-level traverse through a large unexplored section of the northern part of the Purcell Range of British Columbia.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately the weather was exceedingly bad and we were in no position to wait for it. At the time, we longed to return to these valleys and peaks, and enjoy them in more leisurely fashion. Despite considerable planning, none of my companions ultimately found himself able to fulfill this wish, while, rather unexpectedly, I found myself free to go.<sup>2</sup>

## *I. The Wedge Peak Group*

On July 6, 1954, a party of three gathered in Spillimacheen, B. C. My companions were Dick Morden, of London, England, with four sessions in the Alps behind him, not to mention numerous "dicey bits" on British rocks; and Bill Briggs, an old Dartmouth friend and 1952 companion in the Purcell Range. Our first objective was a high, wedge-shaped peak ("Unnamed—over 10,000") just west of the Purcell watershed, requiring an approach over high passes from Vermont Creek. Since it would be possible to camp in the forest, all "luxuries" such as air mattresses, tents, and stoves were dispensed with, thus reducing our packs to a respectable 40 lbs.

The approach to the cabins on Vermont Creek was made on

<sup>1</sup> *A. A. J.* ix, 47.

<sup>2</sup> See map, page 62, *A. A. J.* 1954, which covers this area.

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July 7th and 8th by the usual lumber roads and trails. The weather was reasonable and the only incidents of particular interest occurred when we hitch-hiked across the flooded Columbia on a bulldozer, made the log crossing over the raging Bobbie Burns Creek, and when we were forced to cut our way through a quarter mile of forest which had been flattened by an avalanche the previous winter. Continuous rain on July 9th gave us a good excuse to spend the day enjoying the cozy warmth of the Vermont Creek cabin.

There was little improvement in the weather the following day, but we decided to be on our way up the valley and over the divide. The last winter's extremely heavy snowfall, which at lower elevations had caused slides to fight through, now blessed us by thoroughly covering the bush, swamps, and streams. From the low divide between Vermont Creek and the North Fork of Crystalline Creek, at the snout of the glacier, we descended the latter creek to a point where we could turn westward into the Valley of the Lakes.<sup>3</sup> After shivering through a lunch in the last trees, we assailed the steep snow pass at the southwest corner of the valley, as a sleet storm assailed us. Beyond the pass a series of rock folds were crossed to a gentle watershed pass (Middle Fork of Crystalline Creek to an unnamed tributary of Duncan River) above a lake on the east side. Here Bill came upon what were *unquestionably* tracks of the "Abominable Snowman"; hence "Snowman Pass" and "Snowman Lake." West of the watershed we swung around to the south, crossed over a wooded shoulder, and descended through the snowy woods until a suitable spot was found for constructing a lean-to. Three hours later we were huddled under a mantle of dripping boughs trying to dry ourselves over a fire.

The situation seemed even more discouraging next morning as rain continued to fall intermittently while we lay crowded tightly in our little home. However, occasional patches of blue gave encouragement. In the afternoon Dick and I set out to explore and soon found that we were camped near a broad terrace 500 feet above the main valley. It was but an easy twenty-minute hike along the valley side to the tongue of the Wedge

<sup>3</sup> An important variation on the 1953 route.

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Peak Glacier. An examination of the glacial boulders confirmed my earlier guess that the ridge of peaks on the west side of the valley is composed of granite.

When we were back in camp in the early evening, the clouds momentarily tore away, revealing a towering granite peak to the southwest, its top frosted white like a cake, suggesting the name "Sugarplum Spire." The coldness of the evening gave us hope for better weather.

At 10:30<sup>4</sup> the next morning we set out under gray skies to have a go at Wedge Peak (9870 ft.<sup>5</sup>). The entire two-mile length of the glacier, with deep soft snow at the top, was ascended to the col (by 1:15) at the base of the corniced east snow ridge. A roaring southwest wind lowered our spirits until we were bundled up and well on our way up the gradually steepening arête. Bill carefully kicked a way up between the large cornice on the right and the snowy precipices on the left, which became more impressive as the ridge approached a 45-degree slope. The ridge itself was capped at the top by a cornice, necessitating a traverse across a steep slope to the left and a short climb onto the top from the south (at 2:45). As we approached the highest point of scalloped cornice, we discovered rather suddenly that the rewards of these few moments far surpassed the days of drudgery and dampness which had preceded. For Dick it was a first first ascent. To the west, over the unexplored reaches of the Battle Range, great patches of blue sky were moving toward us on the wings of a dry, exhilarating wind.

Bill constructed a cairn, Dick and I took vertical angles and photographs, and in less than 30 minutes we were on our way back to the col. After lunch there (4:10), we climbed up onto

<sup>4</sup> Mountain Daylight Time although we were officially in the Pacific Time Zone.

<sup>5</sup> Altitudes given are estimates based on a series of vertical angles taken during the 1954 season.

**Top**—WEDGE PEAK AND SUGARPLUM SPIRE FROM NORTHEAST  
on route back to Vermont Creek.

*Photo, R. Morden*

**Bottom**—SUMMIT OF SUGARPLUM SPIRE FROM SECOND PEAK  
Photograph from color slide.

*Photo, P. Robinson*

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the south end of the Barrier Ridge, which lies on the Purcell watershed east of Wedge Peak Glacier and forms a high barrier overlooking the head of the Middle Fork of Crystalline Creek. By this time the sky had cleared and we scrambled along in the warm sunshine to Barrier Peak (9330 ft.), the highest point, by 5:30. Continuing northward, Bill wandered ahead, finding the route, while Dick and I followed, making frequent halts for photographs, enjoying the perfect finish of a perfect day. Finally we climbed from the ridge down a series of ledges and gullies to the Wedge Peak Glacier. A last lingering halt was made on a wooded shoulder just south of camp to admire the evening light on Wedge Peak and the south wall of the Carbonate Group to the north across the valley. As a site for a timberline hut in the range, this place is unsurpassed.

Our objective for the next day was Sugarplum Spire (9640 ft.). Leaving camp at 10:15 A.M., we ascended a steep glacier to the col (reached at 12:45) north of our objective. The first vertical buttress was avoided by circling around its west face and into a gully leading back to the crest of the northwest ridge. Several hundred feet of scrambling brought us to the steep upper part of the first main step in the ridge. Dick, with the one ice-axe we had elected to bring, cut steps up a 100-foot snow slope and I took the lead on the rocks above. A move around and up a left-hand corner brought us to some ledges at the base of a broad cliff of lichen-covered rock with no obvious routes. The rock proved more difficult than it looked and we found no holds where we most expected them. I moved off to the left over a short chockstone pitch to a good belay. The last pitch went up a series of cracks and slabs which proved fairly difficult, and I have since regretted that I didn't place at least one piton.

From the top of the first step we had our first look at the ridge

**Top**—EAST PEAK OF MT. THORINGTON FROM CONRAD ICEFIELD  
Ridge of ascent on left. Face foreshortened.

*Photo, R. Morden*

**Bottom**—WEDGE PEAK AND WEDGE PEAK GLACIER  
Barrier Ridge to left.

Photograph from color slide.

*Photo, P. Robinson*

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ahead and lost much confidence in our ultimate success. A short descent over snowy ledges brought us to the base of a jagged, knife-edged buttress leading to the second peak. The ascent of this, mostly on the west face, proved strenuous and entertaining. At one point I dragged myself onto the crest of the ridge and discovered that the opposite side was a vast overhang and I was looking almost straight into the bergschrund far below.

At the top of the second peak we came face to face with the final peak, the "Sugarplum," a snow-draped block with a few rock ribs standing out from it. Below the second peak a more immediate obstacle presented itself in the form of a deep vertical notch just too wide to leap. Reaching around under an overhang to the right, I discovered a jammed chockstone on which it was possible to swing at arm's length and drop into a side gully whence the opposite side of the gap was climbed. With his short stature, Dick, coming down last, had an awkward time.

A second short drop and a long scramble on boulders and ledges brought us to the foot of a wide black rib. I led up exposed snow and rock to the left, then made an awkward move right to a belay position on the rib itself. Bill furnished the final belay, as I led up a 100-foot blocky chimney leading to the edge of the snow-cap where the others joined me.

Together we moved toward the summit on soft snow. Because of my greater weight, as a final humiliation I was forced to crawl upward on hands and knees to keep from sinking in to my hips. The highest point was on a curving edge of snow which we crossed to the highest rocks beyond. It had been the most difficult first ascent any of us had made. We had been on the ridge for four and a half hours, and although it was now 5:30 P.M., there was hardly a cloud in the sky. Visibility was perfect and we believe we even saw Mt. Sir Sandford to the left of Sir Donald. Nearby Wedge Peak looked more impressive than ever, as did the south ridge of our peak, which will surely be an interesting climb.

Although the tension of the ascent had abated somewhat, we soon had to concern ourselves with the descent, for the route we had come up was unsuitable if we hoped to get off by dark. Climbing down the same route on the final peak, we continued

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diagonally northward down the snow and ledges of the west face. Bill took over the route finding, while I came down as last man with the one ice-axe. Constantly belaying, we reached the snowfield at the base in two hours, then circled in a few minutes back to our other axes and the col (8:20). Camp was reached just after sunset at 9:45.

On July 14th we returned to Vermont Creek cabin, using a new pass direct to the Valley of the Lakes, thence north over "Cold Shiver Col" and down the glacier into Vermont Creek. The next day we reached Spillimacheen River in 6 hours and 15 minutes, and were fortunate in catching a ride out to Parson so that the evening could be spent soaking in Radium Hot Springs.

### *II. Return to the Conrad Icefield*

In Spillimacheen we were met by Virg Day, brother of Rob Day who had been on the 1953 trip. Unfortunately, Bill had aggravated some old hip trouble and deemed it inadvisable to join in our back-packing plans. Several days later, after a long struggle which included the construction of two "bridges," our friend Ralph Wass of Spillimacheen became the first man in 1954 to get a vehicle (farm tractor and wagon) as far as the Bugaboo cabin. For the next few days, during which the weather was decidedly poor, we moved supplies up to Boulder Camp, where we met a party led by Bob Hind, and established a cache on Bugaboo - Snowpatch Col.

The bad weather broke on July 23rd and the next morning Dick, Virg, and I set out over Bugaboo - Snowpatch Col to make an assault on the unclimbed Howser Middle Tower (10,750 ft.). At the notorious bergschrund we were lucky to find a narrow spot to the left, and at 11:00 Dick started over the bulging soft snow of the upper lip, belayed by both Virg and me. Twenty minutes later Dick had established a belay on the 52° slope above, and I went up to begin the long job of step kicking.

The soft snow surface was deeply furrowed by slides, but underneath was a more compact layer into which crampons bit readily. Off to the right where the sun struck the slope more directly, frequent snow slides hissed downward into the berg-

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schrund. Two rope lengths of diagonal traversing to the right and three more lengths straight up toward the col brought us to the lowest rocks at 2:00 P.M. Dick led up a chimney, protecting himself with slings, and Virg moved up beyond and into a steep gully. I then led up through the treacherous gully and a short rock pitch to a firm belay position near the top of the central buttress just below the col. Dick joined me and investigated the final 30-foot slab leading to the col. With a covering of four inches of rotten snow and ice, it was soon abandoned. Protected by slings, Dick moved to the left across a series of bulbous masses of rotten snow, but found no route up the last ten-foot wall to the col. We could see that the nearby buttress of the peak itself was heavily coated with snow and rime ice, making chances of an ascent very small. At 4:30 we decided to turn back, for wet clothes and cramped positions had become a serious matter. After a careful descent, backing down most of the snow steps, we recrossed the 'schrund at 7:00 and got back to camp at 8:45.

After a day of rest, we moved camp on July 26th over Bugaboo - Snowpatch Col, across Vowell (formerly Warren) Glacier, and across the glacier basin at the head of East Creek to our 1953 Camp VII, a cave affectionately known as "Shaft No. 7," overlooking the headwaters of Malloy Creek. The next day we made the third ascent of Mt. Conrad (10,670 ft.) in four hours. On the spacious summit we couldn't find the record of our 1953 ascent, but the view of the Conrad Icefield<sup>6</sup> and surrounding areas, which then had been concealed by clouds, now became a revelation. Before returning to camp, we descended westward across the West N ev e to a minor peak (Giegerich Overlook, ca. 9900 ft.) on the wall above the head of Giegerich Creek.

The long trip westward for the ascent of Mt. Thorington was made on July 28th. Descending 1000 feet into the Malloy Valley and climbing 1500 feet up the west side, we crossed three miles of the main Conrad Glacier and the Northwest N ev e, and climbed the narrow southeast ar ete of the East Peak which, by virtue of a resistant granitic dike, proved to be highest. Virg,

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<sup>6</sup> The Conrad Icefield, 15 square miles, is the largest connected body of ice in the Purcell Range. It has altogether nine outflow glaciers, of which the Conrad Glacier is the longest, measuring five miles.

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on his first ascent, led the way to the corniced summit, and a massive cairn was built on the highest rocks. Camp was reached again at 10:15 P.M. after 13½ hours.

The day after the Thorington ascent, we breakfasted at 1:00 P.M. and later in the afternoon wandered up nearby Osprey Peak (9580 ft.), northeast of camp. Near the east col, on the way, we got a close look at some spectacular needles and a natural arch. From the broad summit we enjoyed one of the finest views of the Conrad Icefield.

July 30th, camp was moved southward over the pass to the first clump of trees on the east bank of the East Branch of East Creek. In the center of this grove, which we called Pleasure Island, a fountain of crystal clear water, the "Fountain of Youth," gushed up continuously from a hole between the rocks.

The 31st was occupied in a 13½-hour expedition to a high peak (10,070 ft.) to the southwest of Mt. Conrad, which we named in honor of A. H. MacCarthy. The greatest difficulties of the day were the morning and evening stream crossings in the vicinity of camp. Climbing around a high shoulder to the upper basin of the West Branch of East Creek, we crossed a col leading to the MacCarthy Glacier, which was ascended for more than a mile to the south ridge of our objective. From the summit one could see the entire west face of the Howser Spires. Another fine peak (9990 ft.), one mile to our south, we tentatively named for W. E. Stone, who had also climbed in the Purcells. Over a shoulder of the great Four Squatters Range, a section of Kootenay Lake could be seen far away to the south in the Purcell Trench.

Altering the route slightly on the way back, we climbed down the West Branch of East Creek to the junction with the East Branch. Deeply incised into the intrusive rock, the valley is choked with gigantic boulders and West Kootenay bush. The side walls in many places consisted of enormous slabs covered by cascades. Dominating the scene, 5,000 feet above, is Howser Spire, while on the southwest side of the valley a range of jagged granodiorite peaks rise 3,000 to 3,500 feet.

### OSPREY PEAK NEEDLES AND HOWSER SPIRE

*Photo, R. Morden*

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August 1st we spent enjoying "Pleasure Island" and on the 2nd returned to Boulder Camp by a direct pass just to the north of Howser Spire and leading past a lake to the west side of Vowell Glacier. That evening the long period of almost perfect weather came to an end in a violent thunderstorm. A last few days were spent enjoying the Bugaboos with various friends from the East. Bill had improved considerably and arrived carrying skis. Dick and I made a minor first ascent between Eastpost and Brenta Spires, a prow-shaped peak we called "Whippingpost Spire." The final day we climbed Bugaboo Spire and descended to the cabin in the valley.

So ended one of our finest mountain trips. Perhaps more parties at Boulder Camp in the future will avail themselves of the chance to see more of this country beyond the Bugaboos.

### *Summary of Statistics (Part I)*

ASCENTS: Wedge Peak, 9870 ft., first ascent, July 22, 1954;  
Barrier Peak, 9330 ft., first ascent, July 12; Sugarplum  
Spire, 9640 ft., first ascent, July 13.

EXPLORATION: Wedge Peak Group, Purcell Range, British  
Columbia.

PERSONNEL: William Briggs, Richard Morden, Peter Robinson.

### *(Part II)*

ASCENTS: Mt. Conrad, 10,670 ft., third ascent, July 27; Mt.  
Thorington (East Peak), 10,000 ft., first ascent, July 28;  
Osprey Peak, 9580 ft., first ascent, July 29; Mt. MacCarthy,  
10,070 ft., first ascent, July 31.

EXPLORATION: Conrad Group of the Purcell Range, British  
Columbia, including the Conrad Icefield and branches of  
East Creek.

PERSONNEL: Virgil Day, Richard Morden, Peter Robinson.