New Facts About Early Wyoming Ascents

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AN ADVENTURE into exciting new information spurred research for the *Guide to the Wyoming Mountains and Wilderness Areas.* (Reviewed in this issue.—*Editor.*)

It soon became apparent that Fremont and Bonneville had not been credited with climbing the proper peaks. Their own historical accounts, according to my knowledge of the country, would not fit where later writers had put them. Fremont had not climbed Fremont Peak; Captain Bonneville had not climbed Mount Bonneville.

For something new on the story of the Grand Teton, we began looking through old handwritten papers, fading photos, and dusty drawings. We found several surprising items. One amazing document—and astonishingly in Owen's own collection—was evidence that the Grand Teton had been climbed five years before Spalding led Owen and his party to the top in 1898. It has changed the history of the Grand Teton.

For over a hundred years Fremont's climb has been a problem. Historians wandered through bookstacks, or pored through bifocals into yellowing volumes for an answer. They had no time to roam the length and breadth of the Wind River Range to explore its 500 odd peaks and passes. Climbers and outdoorsmen, penetrating the heart of the range, could not fit Fremont's account into the climb the experts selected. They had no time to roam the bookstacks or dispute the experts and so condemned Fremont's description as inept.

Actually, Fremont's story was quite accurate. It is one of the classics of American literature.

Fremont called his mountain *"the Snow Peak, as it exhibited more snow to the eye than any of the neighboring summits."* From Fremont's camp at Island Lake and from the Titcomb Valley, the peak named Fremont Peak presents only rock walls. The one with the most snow to my eyes is Mount Woodrow Wilson. Was there any significance in this?

Fremont made numerous astronomical calculations of position during his trip of 1842. His skill and competence was as great as any man of his day. He was a professional. He was brilliant in mathematics. He taught

for two years aboard the sloop-of-war *Natchez,* where he made daily culculations of the ship's position. Before his climbing adventure he had spent six years doing topographic mapping for railroad, land, and other surveys. We wondered if he had calculated the position of his peak!

His determination of longitude, of course, would be of no value. Dependent on synchronization of timepieces thousands of miles apart, no one could determine it accurately until the advent of the telegraph. Chronometers were always running down. Someone forgot to wind them, as they did Fremont's. The latitude, based upon solar observation, was more accurate. However, Fremont's 1845 report, congressionally printed, did not have it. But we found it in Bigelow's *The Memoirs and Life of Fremont,* published in 1856. Fremont gave the peak as 43°10′ north latitude. We turned to the topographic map of 1906, triangulated by T. M. Bannon, and followed the Continental Divide until it intersected this latitude. It pinpointed only one peak. The peak *was* Woodrow Wilson.

We checked Fremont's descriptions and story, the old drawings and accounts. It was no longer a scrambled jigsaw puzzle. The pieces all fitted together to form an exciting picture. It is given in the new *Guide,* along with Fremont's own account, and pictures by Charles Preuss, the artist who made the climb with him.

Mount Bonneville is the prominent peak one sees looking easterly down the main street of Pinedale, Wyoming. The early surveyors named it for Captain Bonneville, honoring him for the first ascent of a major peak in the range. They did not know which one he climbed. Bonneville claimed he ascended a peak which appeared to be the highest. Later surveys showed Gannett (13,785 feet) higher than any in the range. Did Bonneville climb it?

Bonneville knew more about the Wind River Range than most mountain enthusiasts today. He had traveled the complete length on both flanks, circled the southern half through South Pass at least five times, made one complete circuit going north through Union Pass and had camped for long periods in both the Green River valley on the west and the Popo Agie valleys on the east. But was he right about having climbed the highest peak?

Bonneville kept careful charts and detailed journals. After his return from the west, Washington Irving found him in Washington, in a barrack room filled with Indian trophies, struggling with a mass of manuscript on a table stacked high with maps and papers. Irving relieved Bonneville of the chore, paid him a thousand dollars, and polished up the account with professional skill.

Turning to Washington Irving's *Captain Bonneville,* chapter 25, we find Bonneville on the summit describing the view: ". . . almost at the Captain's feet, the Green River, or Colorado of the West, set forth on its wandering pilgrimage to the Gulf of California; at first a mere mountain torrent, dashing *northward* over crag and precipice in a succession of cascades, and tumbling into the plain, where expanding into an ample river, it circled away to the *south,* and after alternately shining out and disappearing in the mazes of the vast landscape, was finally lost in the horizon of mountains."

Gannett is the only peak in the Wind River Range to which the beginnings of the Green River can thus be tied.

The Green River starts at the foot of, and west of, Gannett Peak, tumbling over waterfalls and cascades on the Wells Creek fork, almost impassable to climbers. It swings *north* as Bonneville says, forming the Big Bend of the Green River, and then turns *south* again. No one had previous knowledge of this trick geography of the Green River. Bonneville was the first to describe it. He had climbed Gannett Peak!

If the history of Gannett Peak must thus be rewritten, what about the first ascent of Mount Bonneville? W. O. Owen wrote Kenneth A. Henderson that he had climbed Mount Bonneville in the course of a Land Office Survey in 1890. But the absence of any record or of his name chiseled in granite as on other peaks he climbed, and his insistence that anyone climbing a mountain the first time would do so, indicates that *he* probably climbed some other peak. In 1936 a survey party reported their ascent of Mount Bonneville and gave detailed instructions for reaching the summit, now in USGS Bulletin 212—which our study embarrassingly showed to be an excellent route description for Raid Peak. In the *Saturday Evening Post,* March 22, 1947, Harry Willits and Weir Stewart reported their first ascent on August 30, 1946 of Mount Bonneville's main summit, on which they found no record of a previous ascent. The north summit (there are three) had been climbed in 1927.

We expected to find little new on the first ascent of the Grand Teton—were surprised when we did*. Claimed by Langford in 1872, prescripted by Owen in 1898, it became the basis of the most acrimonious argument over a mountaineering accomplishment ever recorded in public print. Friends of these otherwise fine gentlemen could not persuade them to drop it.

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*The *Guide* presents a portfolio of pictures concerning first ascent claims.

W. O. Owen started the verbal battle before he had ever been on the summit. He wrote to Henry Gannett, head of the U. S. Geological Survey, disputing both the Langford-Stevenson ascent and the USGS determination of altitude. The Hayden Surveys had calculated it at 13,858 feet; Owen made it 14,150. Today's last word is 13,767.

After Franklin S. Spalding led Owen, John Shive, and Frank Peterson to the summit in 1898, it stirred Owen to such angry dissent of Langford's earlier climb that it became an obsession the remainder of his life. The following paragraphs, copied from Owen's own handwriting on a manuscript he sent to the editor of *Forest and Stream,* December 5, 1898, are typical:

"If Langford's last article doesn't indicate the wail of a defeated man and one who has been caught lying, then all past experience goes for naught.

"Within 125 feet of the summit of the Peak this truthful man, who, judging from his last effusion, has a monopoly on manhood, moral honesty, integrity &c. &c., insists that 'Flowers also of beauteous hue, and delicate fragrance, peeped through the snow wherever a rocky jut had penetrated the icy surface.'

"This is quoted verbatim from Langford's article in Scribner's magazine.

"It is simply a lie—nothing more or less, and I leave it to subsequent climbers to verify what I say. I wish to call especial attention of your readers to this particular statement, for some later climber will be able to tell who was right.

"There isn't the semblance of a flower in the last 500 feet of the climb, and Langford's statement that he found them within 125 feet of the summit is conclusive evidence that he has never seen the summit of the Grand Teton.

"If this newspaper mountaineer is in earnest let him accept the following proposition:

"We will select three representative, disinterested men, and send them to the Teton peak to make the ascent and examine every foot of slope over which Langford says he climbed.

"If they find a single flower, or plant which ever bears the flower, anywhere on that slope I will pay the expenses of the party. If (they) do not find anything of the kind then Mr. Langford must pay them.

"This will settle the question beyond argument . . ."

While we were researching the Yellowstone National Park library at Mammoth Hot Springs, Merrill D. Beal brought out of a locked vault 12 drawings by Wm. H. Jackson of the Langford-Stevenson climb. Jackson had talked to the members of the party after their return from the climb,

had made the drawings for Langford, and after his death his nephew had turned them over to the Park. They were unknown to historical writers.

One of these drawings (included in the *Guide*) shows Langford and Stevenson standing in the middle of the mysterious structure on West Spur of the Grand Teton. It is labelled "Top of Mount Hayden," which was the name the party gave to the Grand Teton.

There is an amazing sequel to the Owen-Langford controversy, brought to light while we were searching the voluminous files of W. O. Owen in the Coe Memorial Library, University of Wyoming, in September 1959. (The *Guide* was already being printed.)

The Grand Teton was climbed on September 10, 1893, by Captain Charles H. Kieffer and two soldiers from the Yellowstone Garrison—five years before the Spalding-Owen climb. On April 3, 1899, Captain Kieffer wrote to Owen giving him an account of the climb. Owen filed the letter away and never publicly revealed it—all the years he was amassing correspondence to tear down the Langford claim. A photograph of Kieffer's letter and sketch of his route is reproduced in the *Guide.*

Unchallenged—even by Owen—Kieffer's account must be given the same credence usually given to all climbers who reasonably report an ascent.

The letter in Owen's collection has changed the history of the Grand Teton—it has added three more names, Kieffer and his two companions, to the glory of one of our most spectacular American mountains.