

McKinley-Hunter Traverse

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LIKE the great Swedish explorer, Sven Hedin, who once convinced his Tibetan captors that it was against his religion to walk in his own footprints, we four McKinley climbers wanted to traverse the Alaska Range afoot from Wonder Lake to Talkeetna and visit all the summits of McKinley, Foraker and Hunter on the way.

With this ambitious goal in mind, Tom Choate, Cliff Ells, Dave Johnston and I gathered in McKinley Park on July 6 and began our walk that afternoon. We all had at one time or another lived in Alaska and all but Cliff had attended Colorado State University. After our easy ascent of the historic Muldrow route, we visited the north summit of Mount McKinley from Denali Pass on July 18 and the following day joined the Harvard Wickersham party in climbing the South Peak. Dave and Vin carried packs up and spent a comfortable night on top in the highest camp ever pitched in North America, right beside the roof peaks of the Japanese tent left there in May, 1960. From this vantage point we witnessed the total eclipse of the sun on the 20th. Tom came up from Denali Pass that afternoon for his second day in a row accompanied by Cliff.

After an easy snowshoe descent of the West Buttress, with packs up to 85 pounds now that we were not relaying, we were held down briefly by our first storm. At 6250 feet on the Kahiltna Glacier we received our second air supply and were able to increase our rations from the 1 pound per man-day on which we had climbed McKinley. Cliff Hudson of Talkeetna, our pilot, landed to deliver the food and to take Cliff Ells out since he had to return to work.

The last of the Foraker party had just left; we heard they had been successful, so now Mount Hunter was a more desirable goal, since it had been climbed only once before, in 1954 by Beckey, Harrer and Meybohm. (See *A.A.J.*, 1955, 9:2, pp. 39-50.) After carrying our packs across the early morning crust of the Kahiltna Glacier on July 28, we found an intricate route around the south side of the icefall of the glacial bay which occupies the great cirque on the west side of the Hunter massif. Never had we seen such an awesome cirque, with 3000-foot granite walls capped by the ice cliffs of Hunter's central plateau. At first it seemed we

had entered an impossible *cul-de-sac*, but then the route we had picked from the map appeared near the end of the northern flanking ridge, a 1300-foot snow couloir leading to a 9350-foot col on the only ridge practical for ascending Mount Hunter. However, since the heat of the day was bringing avalanches down with frightening regularity, we rock-climbed on fine granite up the east side of the couloir until the cooler temperatures of late afternoon permitted us to crampon up the snow of the last half. The col made a fine campsite.

Morning found us rock-climbing again up the interesting pitches along the ridge past rappel slings left on the descent of our predecessors nine years before. Then we came to the narrow, heavily corniced snow ridge where we balanced between a steep avalanche slope dropping into the cirque on our right and the fracture line of the great cornices to our left. The dangers had been well anticipated by Washburn (*A.A.J.*, 1953) and Beckey (*A.A.J.*, 1955). We had read neither prior to our expedition, but it did not matter much, for a mountaineer must make his own appraisals. Just beyond Point 10,820, while leading the worst of the narrow ridge, I trod upon a cornice which broke with a boom and swiftly tumbled down the fluted ice face 3000 feet to the glacier below. I followed it for 50 feet before the braided goldline and Tom's efficient arrest brought me to a thankful halt. By alternating tension and up-rope I regained the crest of this 80° wall without resorting to prusiks. Next the ridge widened out a bit but became steeper with hard blue ice, requiring us to chop steps and belay continually from ice pitons. A level area finally appeared at 11,350 feet, where we stopped and made camp since sunlight due north indicated midnight.

On July 30 we were able to collapse the tent and leave our packs as we planned to climb all three peaks of Mount Hunter before we returned. Just above camp we left the ridge and traveled on the gentle snow slope north of it, but were forced back again at the top where it required step-chopping and belays to get us through the narrow pass in the ice cliff at the edge of the plateau. Topping out at 13,000 feet we decided to go for the virgin peaks first and plodded across the level snows, where no man had been before, to arrive atop the Middle Peak (13,470 feet) in a cloud. When it passed we had a spectacular view of the great western granite face of Mount Huntington, (12,240 feet) across the head of the Tokositna Glacier. Passing along the eastern edge of the Middle Peak, we continued to the South Peak, climbing to the junction of its east ridge with the summit block, then diagonally up the snowy northern face to be the first climbers ever to view the Alaska Range from this 13,970-foot high vantage point.

It was late in the day as we retraced our steps over the plateau. We knew a storm was coming, but none of us wanted to descend without climbing the main peak. We chose a new route up the south face and the southwest ridge of the North Peak, spending most of the night belaying Tom as he cut his way through a cornice barring our way. It was still fairly dark as we arrived on top at 14,570 feet and we did not linger. We traversed on across to descend the steep northwest slope to the southwest-leading valley that took us back to the point where we had gained the plateau. As we came down, greatly satisfied with our climb, the sun rose somewhere beyond the dark south face of Denali and bathed Denali's wife (Mount Foraker) in brilliant light, but beneath us a tide of dark clouds was plowing up the Kahiltna from the coast. Soon after we reached camp it began to snow and blow.

August 1 was too stormy for us to move at all (only 3 days out of 35 were in this category) but on the second we started down amid decreasing winds and blowing snow, belaying carefully from ice screws on the steep ice. It was warm and the fresh snow sloughed from the line of our tracks in many places. This time, when we came to the site of our first night's camp on the ridge, we kept on going on the main ridge to the pass on the west side of which is a granite tower labeled 9050 on the map. Here we took the interesting rather than the easy route on a shelf along the south side of the tower where the culminating pitch was a delicate traverse on good granite with the exposure of a great face dropping away beneath us. How we wished for a practice rock made out of this material near Anchorage! Before dark we had found an easy way down the northern valley at the end of the ridge. In order to find our cache on the Kahiltna in the dark we spread out as far as the rope would permit when we thought we were close and were glad to hit it on the first try.

We wanted to climb Mount Foraker as well in order to visit all the peaks in the Alaska Range over 14,000 feet in elevation, but since Tom had to meet his wife in McKinley Park on the 10th, we had only time to walk out.

The walk out the Kahiltna is a long one, only done by three parties previously, and all were earlier in the year than we. It was August 4 when we started, and most of the day was spent in a large icefall area. I walked into a snow-covered pond of slush, getting wet to my waist, and Dave fell 15 feet into a big crevasse, filled to that level with water. By the time he could prusik out he was rather cold! The following day, in snow and white-out, we made our way by compass course, and on the next we finally passed the firn line onto bare ice where we could see the crevasses. We also passed the great bend and saw our first green slopes. What a fine

color! The greenery was such a lure that we soon quit the glacier to camp off its edge. We ate the first flowers we came to — dwarf fireweed on the moraine. On August 7 we followed the eastern edge of the Kahiltna, wading streams, until we reached Granite Creek which seemed too big to wade. We camped on a sandbar, hoping it would subside during the night. It did not look too bad in the morning and we managed to get across it and Dutch Creek just above where the two join. It rained as we crossed the Dutch Hills and the wet grass and brush soaked us thoroughly but there were few mosquitoes. Next day brought us through the Peters Hills on old mining roads to Petersville (population 1). After a night with the old miner, Rocky Cummings, we walked on to Talkeetna, arriving there on August 10 with sore feet and weary shoulders, but proud of our route. Had we crossed some mountains off our list? No, only added a score of new ones we must some day climb.

Summary of Statistics

AREA: Alaska Range.

ASCENTS: Mount McKinley, North Peak, 19,470 feet, July 18, 1963 (whole party); South Peak, 20,230 feet, July 19-20, 1963 (Hoeman, Johnston), July 19 and 20, 1963 (Choate), July 20, 1963 (Ells).

Mount Hunter, Middle Peak, 13,470 feet, and South Peak, 13,970 feet, July 30, 1963 — both first ascents; North Peak, 14,570 feet, July 31, 1963 — second ascent (Choate, Hoeman, Johnston).

PERSONNEL: John Vincent Hoeman, leader; Thomas Scribner Choate, Clifford Dean Ells, David Perry Johnston.

