

The North Face of Mount Robson

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HEN PAT CALLIS and I arrived at the Robson Coffee Shop on the morning of August 6, we were fortunate to have a beautifully clear view of the mountain, apparently the first for days, but we were disheartened when the proprietor of the shop told us that one of the local guides had authoritatively said that Mount Robson would not be climbed this summer. The guide had been influenced by his own unsuccessful attempt earlier and by the bad snow conditions he had found.

After a late start, we arrived at Berg Lake Châlet just after dark, in the rain. It was too much to expect a whole day of good weather. The next day's hike started along the sand bars north of Berg Lake and up the Robson Glacier to the Rearguard-Helmet Col. Black clouds enveloped the area and soon we were in a downpour, which stopped as we approached the col. With its grass, flowers, miniature ponds and absence of snow the col seemed a little Shangri-La, but eventually we had to leave and venture out onto Berg Glacier. We finally quit for the day at 9000 feet because of sloppy late-afternoon snow and an appealing flat spot to erect our tent. The next day was leisurely, as all we had to do was to carry our high camp through more sloppy snow to 10,500 feet, eat and get to bed early for the attempt in the morning. Our camp lay towards the left side of the face, on the lower lip of a very wide bergschrund, which we thought would make us safe from avalanches.

The next morning, August 9, we awoke early and got away at two o'clock. The weather was uncertain, but we knew it would be folly to wait for an ideal day and we could always retreat. The bergschrund beneath which we had camped extended all the way across the face uninterrupted except for a place a hundred yards away, where it was filled with avalanche debris. We crossed the avalanche cone in the dark and proceeded right, knowing there was another bergschrund a few hundred feet above. On the traverse we came to a steep icy patch where Pat set up an ice-axe belay while I kicked and chopped steps around it. After traversing beyond the end of the upper schrund, we kicked good steps in the snow without crampons, angling about 20° to the right of straight up, until we were halfway up the face and just to the right of the largest rock band. We climbed without belays except for the spot on the traverse. We were treated to an eerie display of distant northern lights and lightning flashes.

By the time we reached the rock band, it had become light, and we could see how steep and exposed the face is. It gave us quite a sensation

to be able to look so nearly straight down on our camp from high up on the face. Unfortunately from here on we found ourselves on loose, insecure powder snow over glare ice. Until we reached the Emperor Ridge, the snow never would hold our weight. Whenever we stepped onto it, it would give way until our foot rested on the ice beneath. Because of these insecure conditions we put on crampons. To set up a belay we had to scoop out several cubic feet of loose snow in order to stand on the solid ice and to anchor ourselves with ice pitons. We belayed this way for twelve 150-foot rope-lengths before reaching the Emperor Ridge and climbed straight up with only slight deviations when we thought we could find better snow conditions. I had an ice hatchet besides my ice axe and very much appreciated having both implements. With one in either hand, I could climb transferring most of my weight to one of the tools and thus avoid allowing my feet to sink into the loose snow. Pat made similar use of a long rappel picket. On one of the last moves on the face he actually imbedded the picket vertically with his hammer, climbed up on it and then used it for a foothold. On the upper part of the face we climbed on all fours as much as the angle of the face would permit. The anticipated rock bands presented no problems thanks to many of them being covered with the heavy snow. Only on one short band did the leader have to chop a few steps.

With relief we finally climbed onto Emperor Ridge a few hundred yards from the summit. We had felt much apprehension and anxiety on the face, mainly because we were never sure what lay ahead. The ridge traverse was easy and enjoyable. The route simply went over and around several ice blocks and pinnacles. The view down the ridge was tremendous, and where we had to traverse on the north side of an ice block on an extension of the north face, I was horrified to find I had already lost my tolerance to the exposure. The ridge soon broadened out and at noon we stood on the summit. A cloud cap prevented our seeing more than glimpses of spectacular views through openings now and then. After a bite of lunch, we quickly descended the southeast ridge towards the Kain Face. When we did find the face, we were so concerned with its avalanche hazard that we kicked off all the cornices above and started numerous magnificent slides. These let us descend the face on the hard, avalanche-packed snow. Our final problem was to cross the Robson-Helmet Col, but the crevasse pattern was favorable and we got back to our camp well before dark.

Summary of Statistics

AREA: Canadian Rockies.

ASCENT: First ascent of North Face of Mount Robson, 12,972 feet, August 9, 1963, (Patrick Callis, Dan Davis).