

Early American Ascents in the Andes, 1854-1950

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HERE SEEMS TO exist no complete survey of American mountain ascents abroad. This short contribution purports to chronicle early American ascents that took place in the Andes, from 1854, year of the first of such ascents, to before 1952, since it is felt that it was the American Alpine Club and Sierra Club expedition of that year to the Cordillera Blanca of Peru that drew renewed attention to the high peaks of South America.

When reviewing these early ascents, readers are asked to observe a proper sense of time and proportion. A peak that thirty years ago required a long and frustrating approach may at present be reached in a few hours of four-wheel driving; a 9000-foot peak in Southern Chile has far more glaciation than a 19,000-foot mountain in the Peruvian desert; what was considered a difficult ascent some seven decades ago may be regarded today as an easy half-day excursion for a hiker. And so on.

In the following survey, names of climbers, peaks climbed (with height and location) and exact date of ascent are given whenever possible. A short comment is added when it may supply useful or interesting information.

Church, 1854. Earliest American Andean ascent so far recorded was accomplished by Walter Stuart Church, who sent a contribution describing *soroche* (mountain sickness) to the *American Journal of Science*. On June 18, 1854, with two Peruvians, he climbed to the summit of Volcán Candarave, which seems to correspond to Volcán Yucumani (5494 meters, 18,025 feet), in the Cordillera Occidental of Peru. This was also the first known ascent of that peak.¹

Orton & Farrand, 1867. James Orton and Camille Farrand made in February 1867 an ascent of Pichincha, Quito's patron volcano (4791 meters, 15,718 feet). Until almost the end of the last century this relatively low peak had permanent snow.²

Farrand, 1873. The same Farrand travelled along the northern Andes to capture scenes for lantern transparencies. On June 18, 1873, he made alone the second ascent of Tungurahua, an imposing 5005-meter (16,419-foot) volcano of the Cordillera Oriental of Ecuador. German vulcanologists had climbed the peak only two months before.³

Bailey et al, 1891. Several astronomers ascended the famous volcano El Misti many times. Misti (5821 meters, 19,098 feet) belongs to the Cordillera

Occidental of Peru and rises near Arequipa. The astronomers, mostly Harvard people, had to inspect periodically a meteorograph placed near the summit. Brothers H. and S. Bailey participated, together with L. Duncker, W. Pickering, D. Stewart, W. Upton, G. Waterbury and G. Wymer, and were often accompanied by Peruvian porters. Waterbury "made altogether fifty ascents," while the others made occasional ones. Solon Bailey also adds that "several others have made the ascent once or twice." It is not known when visits to the station stopped. Date for ascents in 1891 and 1893 and 1895 are specifically given.⁴

Peck, 1908. An avowed feminist, Annie Peck set out to climb Huascarán, Peru's highest mountain (Cordillera Blanca). She was accompanied by two Swiss guides, R. Taugwalder and G. zum Taugwald. She probably accomplished the first ascent of Huascarán Norte (6654 meters, 21,830 feet) on Sept. 2, 1908, and also of a small peak c. 16,000 feet high, in the Cordillera Raura. Her Huascarán ascent has been disputed and it has often been said that she never got higher than the "Garganta" at 19,700 feet, separating the two peaks of Huascarán. However, it is evident from her photographs that she must have reached at least a height of 21,000 feet. A study *in situ* of her summit photos is necessary before a final judgment can be passed. Until then, she should receive the benefit of the doubt.⁵

Peck, 1911. In a book, archaeologist Bandelier had declared that Coropuna, in the Cordillera Occidental of Peru, could well be the culminating point in the American continent. Both Hiram Bingham (see below) and Annie Peck set out to climb it. She had a motley company of one Swiss-American and several Peruvian hillmen. She and her entire party climbed the two ice domes that are visible from the town of Viraco, probably about 20,500 feet high, on July 16, 1911. Upon realizing that the highest peaks of Coropuna were not nearly as high as Bandelier had thought, she ordered the retreat. In 1966, Canadian Dick Culbert climbed one of these peaks and claimed it as a first ascent.⁶

Bingham & Tucker, 1911. Not willing to have a race to the top of Coropuna with his feminine and feminist opponent Annie Peck, Bingham marched rather slowly, carrying out surveys along the way. He did climb the highest peak of Coropuna, which his surveyors declared to be 6617 meters high (today lowered by Peruvian army surveyors to 6427 meters, 21,085 feet). Bingham, H. Tucker and two stout Peruvians camped on the summit itself on Oct. 15, 1911.⁷

Ullman, 1928. The well known novelist James Ramsey Ullman and E. de la Motte, a Briton, accomplished on March 5, 1928 the fifth ascent of Aconcagua. Argentinian sources have so far not reported Ullman's exploit properly, since it is still believed there that his name was James Ramsey.⁸

Austin, Moore & Thorne, 1929. The first ascent of active volcano Sangay (5230 meters, 17,159 feet) on August 4 and the fourth of Chimborazo (6267 meters, 20,562 feet) on August 28 were the meritorious results of an expedition of the California Institute of Technology to Ecuador. Waddell Austin, Terris Moore and Lewis Thorne participated.⁹

Dill et al, 1935. An international expedition to northern Chile was organized to study the varieties of the physiology of life at high altitudes. It comprised Americans David Bruce Dill, H.T. Edwards, W.H. Forbes, F.G. Hall, Ross McFarland, Ancel Keys and John H. Talbott, as well as a Chilean, a Danish and a British scientist. Several other Chileans volunteered also to do work for the expedition. The party had chosen Aucanquilcha (6180 meters, 20,280 feet), a peak with a large working mine at 17,400 feet. It had been climbed before many times by local miners, but the scientists inhabited the highest camp (over 20,000 feet) from June 29 to July 14, 1935 and reached the summit itself several times.¹⁰

Dodge, 1936. T. A. Dodge, of Los Angeles, and his porter D. Dionisio made in 1936 the first ascent of Tuyujuto's lower or northern peak (5699 meters, 18,698 feet). Tuyujuto, also called Pariacacca (after an Inca titan) is located in the Nevados de Cochás, of central Peru.¹¹

Wiessner, before March 1937. Fritz Wiessner, German emigré to the United States, who distinguished himself on K2, made the probable first ascent of Nevado de Sumapaz (4244 meters, 13,923 feet), highest in the Sumapaz massif, of the Cordillera Oriental of Colombia. It was since 1917 that the peak lost its snow cap, but the name of *nevado* has remained.¹²

Carter et al, 1938. H. Adams Carter, present editor of the *American Alpine Journal*, travelled to South America with the American ski team comprising E. Bering, C. McLane and R. Shaw, and all four, plus a Chilean companion, ascended on skis Llaima (3128 meters, 10,262 feet) and Volcán Chillán (2770 meters, 9088 feet). Both mountains are located in southern Chile.¹⁴

Dodge, 1938. Continuing his meritorious climbs in the Cochás peaks of central Peru, Dodge achieved the first ascent of Pachancoto (5394 meters, 17,696 feet), again with D. Dionisio, and of Tuyujuto's highest peak (5756 meters, 18,886 feet), alone for the last 500 feet, both in September 1938.¹³

Bakewell & Wood, 1939. Led by Thomas Cabot, a group of very experienced American mountaineers found access to the south side of Colombia's highest mountains, the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. Pico Colón (5773 meters, 18,940 feet), only two meters lower than its sister peak, Pico Bolívar, was ascended for the first time, by Anderson Bakewell, Walter A. Wood and a Swiss companion (March 10). The Cabot expedition also mapped the range.¹⁵

Cowles et al, 1941. No doubt as a result of the Cabot survey, another American party, comprising Elizabeth Cowles, Elizabeth Knowles and Paul Petzoldt, reinforced again by a Swiss, visited the Santa Marta district of Colombia. Ascents accomplished were the probable first of El Guardián (5285 meters, 17,338 feet), and the certain first of Pico Ojeda (5490 meters, 18,012 feet) and La Reina (5535 meters, 18,158 feet), (early March 1941).¹⁶

Bishop & Coyle, 1942. After reconnoitering mighty Huagoruncho, Robert H. Bishop and Russell Coyle made the second ascent of Nevado Jancahuay (5160 meters, 16,929 feet) in the Cordillera Oriental of Peru. A local hillman had ascended the same summit some time before.¹⁷

Powers, 1943. La Paloma ("The Dove," 4930 meters, 16,175 feet) is a beautiful ice peak that forms part of the backdrop of Santiago, the capital of Chile. Skier Hugh Powers and three Swiss-Chileans ascended it via the south-west side, on skis to 4000 meters and the rest on crampons (October 31, 1943).¹⁸

Eagle & Maxie, 1943. Except for a short note recorded by Eichler, nothing else is known of the small expedition of December 1943 to Ecuador by Jimmy Engle and John Maxie. Both Americans made the third ascent of Cayambe (5789 meters, 18,993 feet), the 15th of Cotopaxi (5897 meters, 19,348 feet) and failed just below the top of Chimborazo.¹⁹

Emmons, 1945. After failing a first time in 1944, Arthur B. Emmons, an Argentinian and a Briton returned the next year to succeed on the west face of Cerro Tolosa (5370 meters, 17,618 feet), a new route (February 27, 1945).²⁰

Pohlemus, 1946. Theodore Pohlemus, plus two Bolivians and two Britons, accomplished the third ascent of Nevado Sajama (6520 meters, 21,391 feet), highest mountain in Bolivia. A violent wind storm dragged Pohlemus off and he was never seen again.²¹

Carter, 1946. Returning to Southern Chile, H. Adams Carter soloed Villarrica (2840 meters, 9318 feet) and ascended Llaima again, with a Chilean friend. Both were ski ascents.²²

Crowter & Edwards, 1948. Apparently employees of a petroleum company based on Maracaibo, W. Crowter and E. Edwards made the probable 22nd ascent of Pico Bolívar, highest mountain in Venezuela (5002 meters, 16,410 feet). A Venezuelan friend also participated (January).²³

Hackett, 1949. After ascending Mount McKinley, Lieutenant William D. Hackett travelled to Argentina hoping to be the first American to ascend Aconcagua. He ignored the fact that James Ramsey Ullman had already made an ascent in 1928. Nevertheless, Hackett and an Argentinian colleague, Lieutenant Jorge Mottet did climb Aconcagua on February 19, 1949.²⁴

Adams & Adams, 1949. Probably coming from Venezuela into Colombia, brothers B. and W. Adams ascended El Guardián in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (5285 meters, 17,338 feet) on March 25.²⁵

Jirak, 1949. With two expert Ecuadorian climbers Ivan Jirak, a constant traveller to the Andes, made the probable seventh ascent of Chimborazo, in Ecuador (July 17).²⁶

Siri, 1950. Dr. William Siri, a participant in several American expeditions abroad, ascended in March of 1950 the central Peruvian rock peak of Yanasinga (5285 meters, 17,338 feet) with a Peruvian companion. They found pieces of iron pegged into the summit rock by unknown visitors, probably local miners.²⁷

Harrah & Maxwell, 1950. Probably the most important American mountain ascent in South America was the first of Yerupajá (6617 meters, 21,711 feet), accomplished by Dave Harrah and Jim Maxwell, members of a very strong team of university students. Using the south ridge, a route wholly repeated only once, they reached the magnificent summit on July 31, 1950.²⁸

The preceding list refers to actual ascents only, attempts having been omitted.

Three other mountain ascents previously ascribed to American mountaineers have been deleted from the above list. These are:

—*Hall, 1831*. It has now been proved beyond doubt that Colonel Francis Hall, who climbed Pichincha in 1831, was a Briton.

—*Wheelwright, 1854 (?)* The German geographer K. Rohmeder mentioned railroad builder William Wheelwright as the mysterious engineer who may have climbed the great peak of Incahuasi (6610 meters, 21,867 feet) in northern Chile-Argentina around 1854. No proof of this or of any modern ascent, previous to 1912 has ever been located. The wood branch or twig found by Walther Penck that year on the summit almost certainly belonged to Indians (the name of the peak itself means "abode of the king").

—*Lutz, 1920 (?)* Robert Lutz, an American who resided in Santiago, belonged to the Club Cordillera, first mountain climbing institution in Chile. He and two other members reached a summit of San José (5880 meters, 19,292 feet), located east of Santiago, in 1920. This was announced at that time as the first ascent of that huge volcano, but Lutz and his companions had not deceived themselves; they left in a cairn a note stating that they had reached a lower point and that they would try to climb the true summit another time. They never returned, but very little is known about that American and his fellow members of the Club Cordillera.

Possible ascents by geologist Benjamin LeRoy Miller and engineer William E. Rudolph, both in Northern Chile in the 1920s and 30s, if any were accomplished, remain to be investigated. Miller *may* have ascended Cerro Olca (5310 meters, 17,422 feet) and Rudolph reached a point below the summit crater of Cerro Putana (5890 meters, 19,324 feet). Dates for these and other possible ascents are unknown.

NOTES

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21. Short note in *Alpine Journal* v. 56, pp. 80-1.
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23. Carlos Chalbaud Zerpa, personal communication to the author.
24. W. Hackett. "Una ascensión norteamericano-argentina al Aconcagua." *Revista Andina* 65 (1949), pp. 20-1.
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