

The Alaskan Mile

A winter circumnavigation of the McKinley and Foraker massifs

by DARYL MILLER

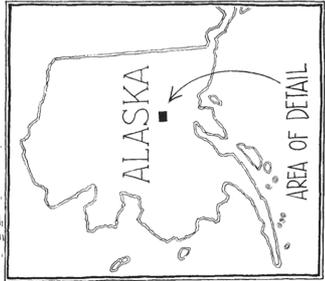
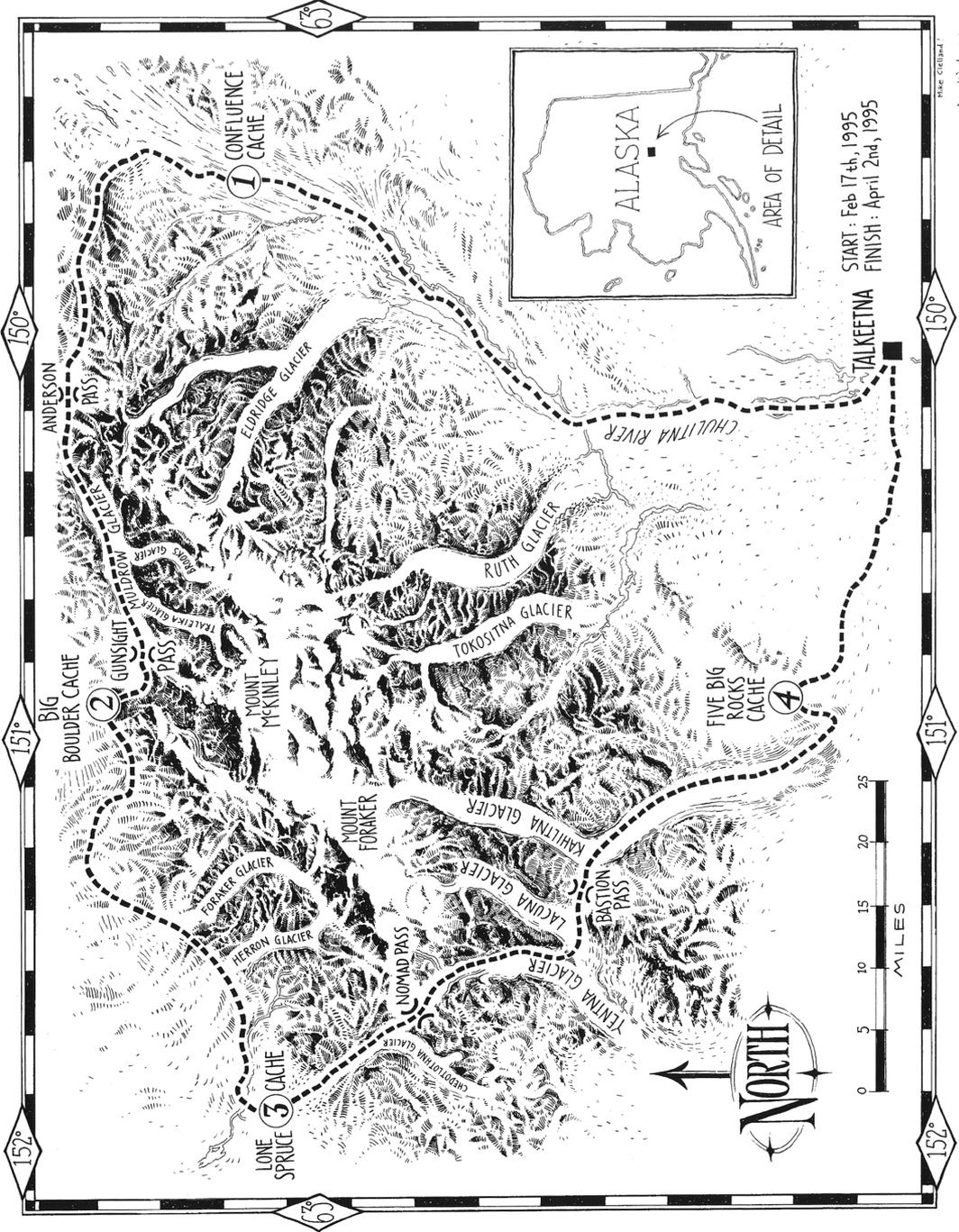
In 1794, the first observations of the Mount McKinley and Mount Foraker massifs were recorded by George Vancouver. Since then, only a single team has experienced the entire 360° perspective of both these unique geological phenomena. On June 23, 1903, an expedition of five men and 14 horses led by Dr. Frederick Cook disembarked from Tyonek, an Indian village on Cook Inlet, with the sole objective of climbing Mount McKinley. The party retraced a route pioneered by Lt. Joseph Herron's U.S. Army Expedition in 1899 and the Alfred Brooks U.S.G.S. Expedition in 1902. Dr. Cook's ambitious adventure — the second major attempt to climb the mountain — succeeded in reaching 10,900 feet on the Northwest Buttress. In the face of exhausted supplies and the approaching Alaskan winter, he was forced to retreat. Their expedition recrossed the Alaska Range to the east, descending along the Bull River. They abandoned what remained of their horses, built crude log rafts and descended the Chulitna River, barely escaping with their lives. On September 26, 1903, having spent 94 days on the trail, traveling by horse, motorboat, raft, and foot, they arrived back at Cook Inlet. They had achieved the first circumnavigation of the entire Mount McKinley and Mount Foraker massifs.

In the intervening century three expeditions in the spring/summer have negotiated the 90-mile circumference of the base of Mount McKinley; one expedition achieved a similar trip around Mount Foraker. Cook's accomplishment, however — a circumnavigation of some of the largest projections of mountains on earth — had yet to be repeated.

Since camp this morning Mark and I have traveled five hours in the icy darkness. It's mid-February; the winter days are short and very cold. We move with heavy packs, pulling snow pigs (sleds) filled with assorted gear. I acquired a special dislike for my pig immediately when it highlighted my lack of physical training for this trip. Mark's way of training for trips, which seems to work for him, is doing it off the couch. My method has provoked some body suffering, and with 270 miles to go the prognosis is not good.

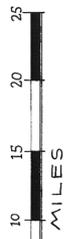
Mark looks at his tiny clip-on thermometer and informs me it is 15° below zero. The chilling wind has finally subsided, allowing me to feel my nose run for the first time in a week.

We've entered our first major canyon complex. As we ski past the massive red granite walls, we penetrate a world of shadows. The narrow canyon



START : Feb 17th, 1995
FINISH : April 2nd, 1995

TALKEETNA



blocks the sun, eclipsing the sky in an eerie darkness. The snow in the canyon is deeper and demands slow and laborious trail-breaking. I hear a loud cracking and feel the heaving of the river's unstable shelf ice. As I approach the narrowing river channel I notice open leads that appear deeper than the rest. The ripples are smooth and dark. I can hear the water accelerating violently beneath my skis.

I glide across the snow-covered ice and glance back to see Mark several hundred yards behind. Halfway over the main river channel a snowy trap door opens beneath me and I plunge into the dark and frigid river. The current sucks my legs beneath the ice. I hook my arms on the wafer-thin circle of ice and try standing with my skis, but the swift, chest-deep water sweeps me off balance again and again.

As I struggle to keep from being pulled under, I notice my snow pig teetering on the crumbly snow edge, threatening to fall in. I yell at Mark, but with only my head and arms above the ice I'm not sure he can even see me. My rapid breathing goes out of control as the icy water penetrates my clothing.

I hear Mark yell, but I can't understand anything he says. When he gets about 25 feet from me he quickly stops and pulls his rescue throw-bag from his sled. He hurls it in my direction, but the rope falls 10 feet short. He quickly pulls it back and throws it again. This time the rope hits me; I quickly grab it, and Mark pulls me from the freezing water.

A giant bonfire is my first thought, but this is not the best choice of locales. We would need to use precious fuel to ignite it, wasting more of our now-limited daylight. I change into dry polypro and gulp down a thermos of hot tea while Mark shakes the ice off my frozen wind suit. My waterlogged clothes froze solid a few minutes out of the water. My concern now is freezing to death. Mark takes pictures, saying we need to document the event.

After dumping the water out of my bunny boots and eating some frozen beef jerky, I am ready to roll. In this situation traveling is warmth — we decide to get the hell out of the canyon.

We start up the steep climb from the river. Ten minutes later we are overheating in deep snow, dragging our snow pigs up the vertical side hills.

After locating our cache on Honolulu Creek we head up the West Fork of the Chulitna River, crossing precarious ice bridges that span open braids of water. Though it is time consuming, we decide to belay the delicate traverses. It's safer, if only psychologically.

As we approach the West Fork Glacier I rip the foam core out of my new skis, rendering them useless. I have no choice but to use snowshoes. Though a good back-up system, I quickly notice I have some serious learning to do about snowshoe technique. Keeping up with Mark is not an easy task.

We climb up and over Anderson Pass following fresh wolf tracks and



then head west up the massive Muldrow Glacier, traversing its immense crevasses. On day 20 we pick up our second cache at the head of Muddy River and move west across the vast north side of the Alaska Range, where we observe hundreds of caribou grazing on the rolling slopes above Iron Creek. They watch us move slowly through the shadow of the northwest buttress of McKinley. Wolves howl day and night, their paw prints mixed with caribou tracks as they hunt the wind-swept expanses. I see a pack of seven on the Foraker River, several hundred yards away. They trot at a seemingly effortless pace and quickly disappear over the horizon.

Below the Foraker and Herron Glaciers I watch red fox hunting and find fresh sets of wolverine tracks. For the next several days we move through the thick timber expanses and river valleys en route to the Swift Fork of the Kuskokwim River.

Since moving on the north side of the range, Mark has been having unpleasant conversations with his snow pig. He seems very touchy when I question him about the nature of the talks. Shouting is consistently one-sided. In several conversations he grabs his pig firmly, sometimes standing it up as if to make better eye contact. The discussions seem more heated during episodes of side-hilling and encounters with thick alder brush.

Mark spends his tent time telling long stories and writing detailed and descriptive accounts of each day in his diary. I write a few accounts from time to time, but my fingers always stiffen painfully from the cold before I can finish. I find it difficult to sleep even with a hot water bottle stuffed in my sleeping bag. I lie in one position at night trying hard not to roll on my frozen socks and gloves. We take turns sleeping with several frozen bagels to keep them chewable enough in the morning to avoid the loss of our molars.

During the nights we leave the tent doors open to decrease the condensation from our breathing. The moist air freezes the zippers shut on our sleeping bags, creating modified straight jackets and eliminating chances of late night potty calls. I give up all hope of sleeping comfortably and stay warm only while moving during the day.

One of the few things I look forward to in the morning is a cup of hot java and our dream critiques, in which we trade the previous night's fantasies. I learn that Mark is sleeping comfortably most of the time. He envisions bold multi-women encounters, South Pacific island hopping and death by chocolate cakes. My dreams are more about freezing to death, mixed with thoughts of cheese on my bagels. (Mark is allergic to milk, so we brought no dairy products.)

It is near dark and -60° when we reach Little Siberia. The Swift Fork cache, the third of our trip, has been placed under a lone flagged spruce tree in the middle of a 100-square mile treeless plateau. To our dismay we look



across the frozen tundra at several lone spruce trees far in the distance. The desolate and rolling hills are windswept; many of the barren ice lakes appear identical. I feel sure the spruce tree a mere quarter of mile away is our cache, but Mark's guess of the farthest tree some three miles away turns out to be painfully correct.

By the light of a full moon rising over Mount Foraker, we finally reach our needed fuel and food stash. We put up our camp in the bone-chilling darkness. We can feel the extreme cold pierce our clothing; Mark's thermometer reads 40 below, but the red is in the bottom of the bubble and we know it is even colder. We struggle with our tent, which is frozen solid from a Somber Creek overflow encountered earlier in the day. With our tent finally up, we drink hot soups and collapse in frozen lumpy sleeping bags.

Late the next morning we awake to a welcome whiteout. We decide not to move. It is our first real break in 29 days. One of the more brilliant things we have done is pack a pint of rum, vacuum sealed pre-cooked moose and caribou steaks, and a fresh supply of Drum tobacco in each of our four caches. Mark and I are feeling confident; we are snug, rested, and have new treats to feast on.

I fire up the stove to thaw the solidified rum. We are cooking inside to heat up our yellow ice shrine. As I pump more pressure into the already-burning XGK stove, fuel begins spraying everywhere, including on me. I quickly cover the spray with my hands while turning off the stove.

One of the unique features of the XGK stove is that it will burn at least another full minute after you turn it off. Just as I blurt out to Mark, "I think we have a big problem here," I am engulfed in a blaze that includes my head, gloved hands and everything around me. I look with horror at my chest, which is on fire, and smell cremated hair and melting nylon.

"Get out, get out of the tent!" Mark yells. He is on fire also and desperately tries to get out of his sleeping bag. In trying to get everything on fire out of the tent, he throws all the flaming gear at me.

I dive under the vestibule and roll in the snow. Loose flaming gear of all sorts flies out of the tent. I try to grab things, dousing them in the snow. Mark finally comes flying out looking like a terrorist, his tangled rastafari hair engulfed in flames.

He rolls in the snow. Soon he sits up. "Hey Daryl," he asks. "Are you o.k.?"

"Yeah, sure," I answer, as smoke rolls off my parka. "How about you?"

"Yeah, I'm o.k.," he answers. "That's the best damn tent fire I have ever been in!"

After a generous rum toddy we survey the damage: one fuel-soaked bagel, new vent holes in my clothes, and a new punk hairdo with no eyebrows or lashes. The fireball has also burned several holes in my now extra flat and frozen Therm-a-Rest. Mark insists that I will be better off, as the

hard surface will support my back better and prevent any overheating or sweating in my sleeping bag.

Early the next morning we leave camp with smoke-charred parkas and heat-blasted hairdos, heading for the Chedotlothna Glacier and a steep ridge we call "Nomad Pass." (After seeing our slide show later, Brad Washburn assured me, "Daryl, that is not a pass, it's the place where you guys crossed the Alaska Range!") After an unforgettable 4,000-foot climb, we rappel down to the Yentna Glacier and crampon its length in hurricane-force winds until we reach the Trench, a severely broken, crevasse-laced trough running through the Lacuna Glacier.

We spend our coldest-feeling night in the bottom of the Lacuna trench, shivering the night away, eating our last ration of mashed potatoes and smoking our last Drum. It has taken us two full days of misery and tedium to cross a mere two miles. Crossing the Alaska Range has taken 12 days on a 10-day food ration. We still have at least another 20 miles between us and our final cache at Spruce Creek. But we're not certain, because we lost all of our maps several days back.

We cross the Ramparts Range the following day and then begin descending the Kahiltna Glacier in a thick fog, moving slowly through the crevassed sections, feeling the effects of not eating. We hallucinate regularly throughout the day, making travel highly experimental. Mark feels camps will at least be faster to put up and take down, as cooking and eating have been the largest part of our three-hour camp chores.

On day 42, after traveling 16 miles, we lie in the tent, too weak to move. We have plodded sluggishly for the last several days, the lack of food kicking my butt. We eat snow in the morning and most of the day but it doesn't make up for needed energy. Mark was right about the hallucinations: I constantly envision burning my snow pig, which has been hanging up on low tree limbs and bushes on a regular basis. We can move only a mile or so before lying down in the snow, sleeping and resting on our packs.

Our final push has taken us up Cache Creek, only a few miles from our final cache on Spruce Creek. We lie in the tent, dreaming about feasting, when we hear snow machines in the distance. The Journey is over.

We crawl out of the tent and wobble over to the couple standing by their snow machines. After a glance at us the man remarks, "You boys look a little hungry."

I certainly feel starved and Mark looks anorexic. They insist we take some food and a pack of smokes. I eat a Baby Ruth candy bar; small pieces of it fall on the ground. As I attempt to chew and communicate with the couple I notice Mark on his hands and knees carefully picking each crumb out of the snow and eating it. I stuff several slices of bread in my mouth; I am having trouble speaking plainly, so I just nod a lot. After a few minutes they

load up and head out; we thank them, open the tuna fish and Wonder bread, and make short work of an appreciated meal.

We leave after napping a few hours, getting to our cache in the early afternoon. We gorge ourselves into another agonizing snooze. Things begin to look like civilization; we see many snow machines on the trail and stop for a great night at the Forks Road House for wonderful food and showers.

On day 43 we are met by our support crew and good friend from Talkeetna, Julianne McGuinness, who joins us for our final two days' march. After 350 miles, we recross the now-open Susitna River and finish our trip, arriving back in town on Day 45. The winter solitude, relentless cold and remote mountains have given us a new appreciation for the early explorers, who faced similar unknowns in the initial years of exploration around the wilderness of McKinley. In a testament to human potential we return to Talkeetna the way we left: on foot and as friends!

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Denali National Park and Preserve, Alaska.

CIRCUMNAVIGATION: Mount McKinley and Mount Foraker massifs, 350 miles, 45 days, February 17 - April 2 (Daryl Miller and Mark Stasik). All caches were placed and removed with respect for the rules and regulations of Denali National Park and Preserve.