

## ALPINE ACCIDENTS

### REPORT OF THE SAFETY COMMITTEE OF THE AMERICAN ALPINE CLUB

1951

Considered in relation to the tens of thousands of climbs made by members and non-members of mountaineering organizations throughout North America, the number of mountaineering accidents each year is relatively small. The tragic fact remains, however, that alpine accidents continue to be persistent and numerous enough to justify anxiety among *all* climbing organizations. This committee was formed four years ago in the hope that an annual analysis of representative accidents would indicate significant trends and that this analysis could aid in the development of more direct and effective means of minimizing such accidents.

While only a fraction of the non-fatal accidents and seldom any of the near accidents are brought to the attention of the committee, it is believed that nearly all the fatal accidents are reported. Thus our conclusions have been based mostly on the annual number and type of known *fatal* accidents. The tabulation below is of significant accidents reported in the United States and Canada since the summer climbing season of 1947.

Year	Total number of fatalities reported to the American Alpine Club Safety Committee	Number of fatalities reported which may be termed direct consequences of "mountaineering"	Number of fatalities involving mountain hikers, unwary scramblers, etc.	Number of non-fatal accidents reported to the Safety Committee & deemed representative enough to analyse	Out of Total Listed Alpine Accidents	
					(A) Involving experienced or moderately experienced mountaineers	(B) Involving novices or uninitiated persons
1947	11	10	1	4	3	7
1948	15	7	8	13	7	21
1949	9	4	5	8	2	15
1950	8	7	1	22	3	27

Although data thus far are still insufficient to allow a definite statement of trends, we can at least report that the total number of fatalities in 1950 is the lowest in the past four years and only one more than half the number reported in 1948 -- the worst post-war year in this regard. There has been, however, a noticeable and probably quite significant *decrease* in accidents occurring to more experienced climbers. Unfortunately, this has been accompanied by an even more marked increase in the number of accidents involving novices and those completely uninitiated in the alpine way. Ronald W. Clark has pointed out that during the last few years a similar situation has developed in the British Isles ("Mountain Tragedy," *Spectator*, 20 April 1951). Apparently the intense post-war fervor, which possibly created abnormal carelessness on the part of some experienced and indoctrinated alpinists, has abated. In the meantime, "mountaineering," with all its romantic and dramatic connotations, has attracted many inexperienced persons. This increased interest, unfortunately, has had its tragic results. As Mr. Clark aptly says, it might be well to leave the term "mountaineering" in quotes. "For it is a fact, not always brought out in reports, that such accidents are rarely caused by mountaineers climbing difficult places; the ill-clad, ill-shod walker, on the hill path, the youth with little or no experience of the transformation which weather can bring to even 3,000 foot heights..., is invariably the cause of trouble. Yet among the thousands of such thoughtless wanderers, most of them preserved, it seems, by nothing more than good luck, there exists a whole thick stratum of young men and women who are, conscious or otherwise, "graduating" into the sport. For them it is widely felt there could well be far more adequate training facilities than exist today."

In the past several years some of the more mature and loyal members of the mountaineering fraternity have focused their attention particularly on this problem. However, it should not be the responsibility of these few alone. All members of organized mountaineering and outdoor clubs must share in this work. The following table of some of the leading regional alpine clubs and memberships shows the large

number of persons who can be immediately enlisted in this effort in different sections of the United States, Canada and Mexico.

<i>Clubs</i>	<i>Membership, 1951 (All Categories)</i>
Alpine Club of Canada	725
British Columbia Mountaineering Club	100
Club de Exploraciones de Mexico	870
American Alpine Club	400
Appalachian Mountain Club	5,207
Green Mountain Club	1,200
Chicago Mountaineering Club	100
Iowa Mountaineers	1,346
Colorado Mountain Club	855
California Alpine Club	500
Sierra Club (California)	6,802
The Mazamas (Oregon)	876
The Mountaineers, Inc. (Washington State)	2,037
Washington Alpine Club	236
College Mountaineering Clubs at: Dartmouth, Harvard, Norwich, Oregon State, Princeton, Rensselaer, Stanford, University of Washington and Yale.	500
27 member clubs in the Federation of Western Outdoor Clubs*	3,000
Estimated membership in unlisted mountaineering and trail clubs in U.S.A. and Canada	4,000
Other mountaineering clubs in Mexico	11,000
Approximate Total	40,000

\*This does not include the California Alpine Club, the Mazamas, the Mountaineers, the Sierra Club and the Washington Alpine Club which are listed above.

Nearly half of this enthusiastic membership has enrolled since World War II. It is obvious that with such a phenomenal increase in active membership and interest some problems must be expected. Mr. Geoffrey Winthrop Young has well described how, at the turn of the century, the more experienced men at a British climbing center "would arrange suitable parties for the day's expeditions, insure that each was experienced enough for the job in hand, and retain a paternal interest and vigilance until all were safely home. It is rare to find any comparable spirit today watching over the thousands of youths -- and others -- who set out for a mountain walk or a rock-climb much as they would set out for an afternoon at the cinema."

Following is a description and analysis of accidents which occurred in 1950. A review of them cannot but impress the reader with the number of fatal or serious alpine accidents resulting primarily from *inexperience*, *unjustified overconfidence* and *unpreparedness*, as illustrated only too well by the unbelievably large number of simple slips on the moderate to steep *snow slopes*, upon which so many hikers and climbers of all ages have been injured during this past single season. Since many of these accidents could have been prevented by just a small amount of indoctrination and, in some cases, by such easily applied rules as "roping up and belaying," it does seem that there is no reason for most of them. The committee's recommended solution to the problem has been pointed out already in this and preceding reports: more active missionary work by individuals in local clubs, and a more energetic campaign to publicize the realities of climbing rather than the drama which appears to be involved.

The two fine young men who so tragically and unnecessarily lost their lives on the east face of Mt. Whitney last July serve as prime examples of the type of person whom regional clubs *must* seek out and indoctrinate; that is, the novice climber who has ambition or otherwise strongly motivated enterprise, yet who lacks the necessary judgment and the contact with an individual or organization which will lead him to climb safely. In the eyes of our committee at the present time, this is the *most pressing problem* to be brought to the attention of the local and regional clubs. We would like to mention here the exemplary attitude of the lead climbers in the Chicago Mountaineering Club as evidenced by the following excerpt from a letter written by the Chairman of their Mountain Safety Committee:

We are at least doing something concrete about reaching and working with potential climbers in the high school and college age groups. Eleven of our more experienced members recently spent a week-end at Devil's Lake, to give them about ten hours of basic instruction in rope handling, proper belaying, fundamentals of rock-climbing technique, etc. We have also had four members of the mountain climbing 'interest group' at the La Grange High School with us on two outings this spring. In a couple of weeks, we will have up to fifteen members of another young men's group out for special instruction and indoctrination on one of our Sunday outings to a local quarry, and in the autumn will again have special outings at Devil's Lake for Explorer Scouts and other interested young persons.

It is gratifying also to receive other evidence that the impact of the National Mountaineering Safety Campaign is taking effect. A report from Ernest K. Field, Acting Chief Ranger of Rocky Mountain National Park, mentions an all-time record of ascents of Long's Peak during August 1950. In that one month 1071 persons made the climb, with 111 climbers of experienced caliber reaching the summit via the relatively difficult east face. Field reports: "Not a single accident occurred on the peak during the whole summer." The National Park Rangers believe that the mountain safety posters, provided in the area by the Colorado Mountain Club, have been partially responsible for this "no accidents" record. While such reports are heartening, a close, friendly and diplomatic control must continue to be exercised on the part of authorities in charge of any mountain recreational area.

To the already experienced climber, the accident last summer at the Warm Springs cliffs in California should provide a sombre and realistic note. While in this case, fortunately, the experienced climber involved made a complete recovery after hospitalization, such cases should be publicized as stark reminders that even a thoroughly trained mountaineer on a scheduled climb with an experienced and well-organized group can and does sometimes become involved in a serious fall. It is the experienced climber, of course, who will be expected to maintain caution and a proper attitude for himself and -- more than that -- an acute awareness of the safety of others in his party as well.

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