

*Source:* David Isles.

*Analysis* (Isles): "I never felt that my feet were uncomfortable, perhaps because we were too busy or I was too tired. The wetting of socks (traceable to failure to wear gaiters) and the night in a wet sleeping bag finished the foot. Though I had extra socks with me, I made no attempt to change them in the bivouac, the effort involved, at that point, being too much for me."

(Additional factors may be the fatigue due to the drive out and the poor physical condition—ed.)

*Colorado, La Plata Peak*—On March 19, Karl Pffinner (25), George Hurley (25), and Ron Bierstedt (25), climbed La Plata Peak (14,340 feet) by way of the Ellingwood Ridge. They turned back at about 13,000 feet because of the hour, and followed the ridge leading NNW; near the end of the ridge they dropped off towards La Plata Basin, on the west. They were going straight down a small, steep, open area just below timber line when an avalanche struck them. All three were carried away. Hurley was swept only 20-30 feet and was stopped by a clump of small trees; he was almost buried in snow. Bierstedt was carried about 150 feet to near the tip of the slide; he was unhurt and could free himself easily as only his legs were buried. He went to help Hurley and dug him out in about 45 minutes. The two searched for Pffinner but were unable to find him. The avalanche fell at about 5:30 p.m. At 6:30 p.m. Bierstedt left the accident scene to go down for help, while Hurley stayed and continued to search for Pffinner as long as it was light. Bierstedt reached Mt. Elbert Lodge at 7:45 p.m. and gave the alarm.

Three rescue organizations responded: Lake County Rescue, Rocky Mountain Rescue Group and the National Ski Patrol. Some difficulty was encountered in communications; phone lines were busy, the Forest Service did not help as promptly as it might have helped due to jurisdictional limitations, and there was delay in locating proper avalanche rescue equipment. Nevertheless, the first rescue party arrived at the accident scene at about 2:45 a.m. on March 20, and was soon joined by others.

A large snow slab still overhung the slide area and looked dangerous. Partly for this reason, no searching was attempted until dawn, about 6:00 a.m. Soon after the search began, Earl Gannog, of the National Ski Patrol, saw a small piece of snowshoe projecting from the snow and almost hidden by an overhanging piece of snow slab. The body was found and evacuated to the highway by 8:25 a.m.

Pffinner was the only one of the three who was wearing snowshoes at the time of the slide.

*Source:* Harold F. Walton.

*Analysis:* Avalanche danger existed at time of accident. The route taken by the party on March 19 followed ridges where avalanche danger was minimal for the most part. Nevertheless, avalanche danger in the area was extreme. There had been several weeks of abnormally low temperatures and heavy snowfall.

*Colorado, Long's Peak*—On April 19, Prince D. Willmon (23) (Leader),

David L. Jones (18), Jane R. Bendixen (18) and James Greig, left Long's Peak campground early to climb the east face of Long's Peak. They reached the base of Alexander's Chimney about 10:00 a.m. Here Greig turned back, feeling unwell. When the climbers had not returned to the campground by midnight, Greig notified the Rocky Mountain National Park authorities and the Rocky Mountain Rescue Group in Boulder. There was cause for concern because a bad storm had struck the peak at three o'clock.

The Park administration sent two rangers, Robert Frauson and John Clark to investigate. They reached Chasm Lake before 7:00 a.m. on April 20, and reported by radio that they saw no sign of anyone on the East Face, except for tracks which showed that the party had completed the roped part of the climb and had moved up the "Staircase" toward the summit. Additional help was then called, and seven members of the Rocky Mountain Rescue Group left Boulder soon after eight. Four of them joined Frauson and Clark to check the north face of Long's Peak (the normal descent route) and the Keyhole; two went to the col between Long's and Meeker Peaks to look at the south-west side of the peak. They saw tracks indicating that the party had gone down that way toward Wild Basin.

At 8:00 p.m. word came that Jane Bendixen had walked into the village of Allen's Park, south-east of the peak. She was very weak from frostbite and shock, but gave what information she could. The party had spent the night high on the peak. That morning she had rappelled and, in part, been belayed down steep rocks, had fallen and been unconscious for a while, but had reached the snow and walked out through the timber. As far as she knew the men were still high on the mountain.

More searchers were called, and at 4:30 a.m. on April 21, two strong parties left, one from Wild Basin to retrace Miss Bendixen's tracks up Hunters' Creek, the other from Long's Peak campground to climb over the col between Long's and Meeker Peaks. A third support party left Wild Basin later in the morning. The two advance parties met in the snow cirque south of Long's Peak between 10:00 and 11:00 a.m. and after some searching found the bodies of Willmon and Jones in the snow. Both had evidently fallen while trying to get off the rock with the help of two 120 foot ropes which were found tied together and anchored to a piton by a rough cave of snow and rock. The bodies were brought down to a frozen lake just below timberline, from whence they were evacuated next morning by helicopter.

From Jane Bendixen's account and from evidence found at the scene, what apparently happened was this. The climb went well until the storm struck, at which time they were still several hundred feet from the summit. Rather than try to find the usual route, which is narrow and exposed at one point, they traversed over slabs to the "Notch" (south of the summit) and passed through it about 4:30 p.m. Visibility was almost zero with the driving snow. They went up to the right to try to find the "Keyhole route" which leads down from the summit, but were too low and got hopelessly lost. Compass readings were of no help. They came to steep rock which required a rappel. Jones rappelled once more

and called back to Willmon and Miss Bendixen to stay where they were. They had shelter of a sort under a rock overhang with a snowdrift in front. Here they spent the night, Willmon and Miss Bendixen in the "cave," Jones in a small niche in the rock a hundred feet below.

Next morning Willmon was too weak to do much, and all were frost-bitten. Miss Bendixen tied the two ropes together and drove a piton for an anchor; at Willmon's insistence she rappelled down to Jones and beyond, then, feeling too faint to rappell further, she tied in loosely to the rope and was belayed by Jones. Near the end of the rope she slipped and lost consciousness. When she recovered, she could see nothing of Jones. She unroped, and slid and fell to the snow, where marks showed that she slid for some distance.

The rappel route was a slanting one following a shallow chimney. From the position of the bodies, Jones must have fallen from a point close to where Miss Bendixen last saw him. Willmon, on the other hand, must have rappelled or climbed down the rope almost to its end before he fell; the marks he made in the snow were close to Miss Bendixen's. Both men died from hitting rocks as they fell. Both were badly frostbitten. Had they not been frostbitten, they probably would not have fallen.

As one rescuer said, "They were inadequately clothed for Long's Peak at *any* time of year." Neither had warm underwear; Willmon had no mittens, only light belaying gloves and one spare sock. Jones was not wearing mittens when found, but he had been wearing good mittens and evidently had removed them shortly before he fell.

*Source:* H. F. Walton.

*Analysis* (H. F. Walton): Willmon was not only a first class rock climber but a good mountaineer who had had winter experience. It is incredible that he should not have gone prepared to meet bad weather if it came. He and Jones had just been climbing Shiprock and other rock pinnacles in New Mexico and southern Colorado; perhaps it was hard to adjust psychologically to the fact that they had come back to a major peak where it was still winter. Moreover, in their enthusiasm to make the most of a week's Easter vacation, Willmon and Jones pushed themselves too far. They had had little sleep for several days and did not have the reserve of strength needed on a major peak.

Had they known the mountain better they could have saved themselves. A continuous snow couloir leads down from the Notch to the shelter of Wild Basin.

*Colorado, Mt. Blanca*—On June 18, 14 members of the Los Alamos Mountaineers were camped below the N. Face of Mt. Blanca (14,364 feet). Plans called for the main party to ascend the NE ridge; two members (H. Hoyt, S. Landeen) elected to climb to the NE ridge via a series of 45° snowfields; two members (N. Campbell [29], M. Cooper [35]) chose to investigate the N. Face direct route, that had been climbed less than a half-dozen times; the best time known from camp to summit is 8 hours, made by G. I. Bell and D. Coward in August, 1958. From camp it was clear that more than normal snowfall during the winter had left the face in bad condition for climbing with considerable snow on