# The Fairweather Mountains

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To sail on salt water to the base of an ice-laden mountain range is a rare adventure. To disembark, step onto ice and begin an ascent of 12,000 ft. or more, involving glacier and rock work of the best mountaineering quality, all within a horizontal distance of ten miles from sea-level, is only possible in a few places in the world. It is almost unbelievable to find this salt water in perpetual calm and always a haven for boats, its shores covered with splendid forest and a verdure of berries, ferns, grasses and flowers, the surrounding hills the range of numerous goat and bear: a region unique in its combination of sport and scientific interests, glorious in its thrilling wildness and massive grandeur. Such is Lituya Bay, the *Port des Français* of La Pérouse, the haven of Russian fur hunters one hundred and fifty years ago. The mountains are the Fairweather Range.

This range has been known for many decades and seen, but passed by, by thousands. Its culminating peak, Mt. Fairweather, lies less than twenty miles north of the bay and is a mountain of shining promise to those who would climb high. Its pyramidal central summit and broad shoulders, approached only by the steepest of great snow and ice arêtes, give delight in a symmetrical grace and beauty that I know of no other great massif. From an altitude of 3000 ft. its fluted walls rise almost too steeply for the mountaineer on every side. The snow and ice hang as though glued upon them. Upon every line of approach that the eye follows in an effort to plan a route to the summit there is some obstacle demanding the best art of the mountaineer.

Besides this great culminating summit rising 15,300 ft. above the sea there are several lesser peaks challenging the climber.[1] Some of these appear to be very difficult. From north to south these are Mt. Lodge (10,530 ft.), Mt. Watson (12,495 ft.), Mt. Root (12,800 ft.) and two unnamed peaks (11,000 and 10,750 ft.), all north of Fairweather. Mt. Quincy Adams (13,560 ft.) lies due east of Fairweather, connected with it by a great snow arête. South

[1] See bibliography for all references.

of Mt. Fairweather the next commanding peak is Mt. Lituya (11,750 ft.). Then comes a series of three lesser peaks all under 10,000 ft., but rising directly from the salt water of Lituya Bay. Toward the southern end of the range is Mt. Crillon (12,725 ft.), a fine individual massif. Mt. Bertha (10,182 ft.) lies to the east of Crillon, and terminating the range at the south is Mt. La Pérouse (10,750 ft.) with a nearby 10,000-ft. peak. From Mts. Crillon and La Pérouse the La Pérouse Glacier flows to, and at present breaks into, the Pacific Ocean south of Lituya Bay.

A traveler can leave New York, proceed to Prince Rupert by rail, thence by steamer to Juneau and hired motor boat to Lituya Bay, and reach this bay one week to a day from leaving the city.

So far as we know there has been only one attempt to climb in the Fairweather Range. This was reported by Allen Carpe in 1926.[2] During the same year there was a reconnaissance of the approaches from the east by W. Osgood Field.[3] These two papers should be consulted for an accurate description of the topography and location of the range.

This part of the Alaskan coast has been historic ground since the days of the Spanish and Russian navigators of the 18th century. It will be interesting to consider the historical background of this region now so little visited, the origin of the names and of some of the topographical notions which have gained currency about it since it was first frequented by white men. We shall refer briefly to Mt. St. Elias, because of its historical relation to the discovery of the Fairweather Range.

There have been errors in the literature referring to this region owing to the difficulty of obtaining the historical sources. The discovery of Mt. Fairweather has been attributed to both Bering and Chirikoff, one of his lieutenants.

Bering's second expedition[4] was composed of two ships, the "St. Peter," commanded by Bering, and the "St. Paul," commanded by Chirikoff. They sailed eastward together from Kamchatka in June, 1741. Part way across the Pacific the boats became separated and both continued to the coast of Alaska without sighting each other.

The "St. Peter" sighted land on July 15, and again on the 16th Steller says:[5] "I cannot recall having seen higher mountains anywhere in Siberia or Kamchatka." The log of the "St. Peter"

mentions one of the mountains as a high volcano. (Snow or fog or dust blowing from the summit? This erroneous conception of Mt. St. Elias was frequent in later years for this reason.[6] Or it may have been merely that its shape resembled a volcanic cone.) The identification of this high mountain as probably Mt. St. Elias was made by Capt. E. P. Bertholf, who carefully worked out the corrected courses of the two ships.[4] The "St. Peter" proceeded in a northeasterly direction and on July 20 reached Kayak Island. This island was named *St. Elias Island* by Bering, for it was made on the day of that Saint. The southwestern extremity of the island was called Cape St. Elias. Many years later Cook[7] sighted and named Mt. Fairweather, 4:30 A.M., Sunday, May 3, 1778, "with a fine gale at northeast, and clear weather." The next day he saw and named Mt. St. Elias.

The "St. Paul" fell in with land at the northern end of Chichagof Island and proceeded in a northwesterly direction, sighting "very high snow-covered mountains" on July 26. From the position of the ship on that day it is probable that this was Mt. Fairweather and its range, as the boat was off Lituya Bay.[4] Chirikoff may or may not have seen Mt. Elias; within the next day or two he was as close to it as Bering had been on the "St. Peter." Bering, on the other hand, probably did not see Mt. Fairweather, as he was too far to the northwest.

Soon after this voyage, the Russians exploited the fur industry around the shores of the Gulf of Alaska. Settlements were established at various places, notably Kodiak Island, Yakutat Bay and Sitka.[8]. Great fleets of as many as 400 *bidarkas* with Russian mother ships paddled and sailed eastward along the coast from the Aleutian Islands as far as Sitka.

The discoverer of Lituya Bay, and an important contributor to the geography of the region, was La Pérouse.[9] He called the bay *Port des Français*. He found it while looking for a salt water passage across North America, and until he observed the wall of mountains at its eastern end he thought he had succeeded in this illusive but persistent dream of his time. La Pérouse made Lituya Bay in June, 1778, and stayed there until August. We have his excellent chart, based upon a careful survey preserved among his records, together with profile drawings of the coast as seen from the ocean, and a picture of the disaster which befell twenty-eight of his men in the narrow and perilous entrance to the bay. The

picture compares well with photographs made from the same point. The story of this accident, together with the notes on the inhabitants of the bay, their customs and industries are well worth reading by anyone who intends visiting this spot.

La Pérouse's published views of the coast,[10] in the vicinity of Mt. Fairweather, show two glacier tongues—he does not use this term in the text but such is the evident interpretation of the engraving—at the points designated *C. Beautems* and *G^d^. Plateau.* Between them is a wooded hill. Further north we come to another hill, set a little back from the shore, and then to *Baie Behring,* the present Dry Bay; La Pérouse called the Alsek River *Behring's River.* Some distance beyond this is *Baie Monti,* the *Port Mulgrave* of Dixon, a part of Yakutat Bay. To the south of *C. Beautems,* separated from it by hills and a stretch of wooded coast, is the *Port des Français.* In the background rise Mt. Fairweather and Mt. Crillon, the latter appearing here for the first time and apparently named by La Pérouse. This view is in good agreement with the topography as we know it today and is the first accurate record of the region.

In June, 1791, Capt. Alessandro Malaspina explored the coast from Chugach to Fairweather.[11] He measured the altitude of Mt. St. Elias as 17,651 ft., that of Mt. Fairweather as 14,695 ft. In 1796 Schulz,[12] for the Shelikoff Company,[13] explored Lituya Bay and the head of the Lynn Canal. At about the same time Bechareff and Ismyloff also explored south to Lituya Bay.[14]

In July, 1794, Vancouver passed Cape Fairweather.[15] He describes the mountains, and a glacier, with curious speculations as to its origin; its exact identification is difficult.

A Russian map by Tebenkof,[16] dated 1849, shows an ice-mass adjacent to Dry Bay, in the position of the *G^d^. Plateau* of La Pérouse. The river is called the *Alsekh.* This and other Russian charts[17] were the sources for the first U. S. maps of the region, and although criticized by Dall,[18] are on the whole in agreement with La Pérouse and with the actual topography.

In 1874 Wm. H. Dall and Marcus Baker visited this portion of the coast.[19] Dall gave the name Mt. La Pérouse to "a high peak near the sea at Icy Cape, just south and east of Lituya Bay." This describes also fairly well the position of Mt. Crillon, but Dall knew La Pérouse's data and the mountain which he called La Pérouse is certainly the one bearing that name on the map today.

Dall made triangulations of Mt. Fairweather and Mt. Crillon, estimating their altitudes as 15,300 ft. and 15,900 ft., respectively.[14] This is probably the reason why John Muir refers to Mt. Fairweather as "not the highest" in the range.[19] Or it may have been that Muir identified the peaks incorrectly from the head of Glacier Bay.

The name "Grand Plateau Glacier" appears for the first time on a map accompanying Dall's first report.[14] Its location agrees with the Russian sources and with the *G^d^. Plateau* of La Pérouse. In subsequent publications, however, the name is applied more loosely as to location, and the size of the ice-sheet is increasingly exaggerated. It is evident that Dall did not land, and that he was much handicapped in observations from ship-board some distance off shore. In 1883 he writes:[18] "From the mast-head of the U. S. Coast Survey schooner Yukon in 1874, seventy-five feet above the water, no end could be seen inland to this vast plain of ice, nor could any high land be seen north from it." In 1896:[20] "Coasting within a few miles of the shore, as we did in 1874 and 1880, this seems an illimitable plain of ice. . . ." It subsequently was thought to be nearly as large as the Malaspina and Bering Glaciers.[22] The Atlas of Award of the Alaskan Boundary Tribunal,[23] sheets 16 and 19, and other maps of recent date,[24] show a large coastal ice-sheet, designated "Grand Plateau Glacier," extending from Cape Fairweather to a point immediately southeast of Dry Bay; in other words, the *C. Beautems* and *G^d^. Plateau* glaciers of La Pérouse are merged into one. This condition was carried over to the preliminary issues of the International Boundary Commission map available to us in 1926; it should be understood that the Boundary Survey occupied no stations between Lituya Bay and Dry Bay, and was not responsible for the mapping of incidental topography not required in fixing the boundary.

Such was the condition existing in 1926, when we landed some miles north of Cape Fairweather for a reconnaissance and possible ascent of Mt. Fairweather. This part of the coast, now deserted, had been at times during the past hundred years or more the residence of thousands of Indians,[8 21] and had been visited frequently by white men in search of gold or furs; but no such accurate description as that of La Pérouse had since been made. Probably no other group of men, at least none leaving a record of their travels, had ever penetrated inland any distance from the beach. Certainly it

seems that the expedition of 1926 was the first to observe from a commanding elevation what others had incompletely viewed from ships.

We found that the coast from Lituya Bay to Dry Bay is paralleled by a broken range of hills, forming a continuation of those shown on recent maps only just northwest of Lituya Bay, and again immediately southeast of Dry Bay ("Deception Hills"). Between these hills and the main range of Mt. Fairweather is a relatively narrow trench running from the head of Lituya Bay to the Alsek, which is filled for the most part, but not completely, with ice. Glacier tongues protrude from this toward the coast between the hills, but only two of these are of large size.

The most southerly one coincides with the *C. Beautems* of La Pérouse and forms Cape Fairweather by pushing its partly forested moraines into the ocean.

The most northerly one corresponds to the *G*$^{d}$. *Plateau* of La Pérouse and lies southeast of Dry Bay and the Deception Hills.

Both of these glaciers reach to within a fraction of a mile of tidewater and have a width of several miles. Between them, the timbered area extends from four to six miles inland, and trees are found also on the spurs of Mt. Fairweather on the east side of the longitudinal glacial trench. The glacier utilized for our approach in 1926 is the next one north of Cape Fairweather and does not reach within five miles of the coast. The coastal hills are 2000 to 3000 ft. high and are apparently composed of a sedimentary rock distinct from the highly metamorphosed material of the western slopes of Mt. Fairweather; their eastern escarpment, bounding the longitudinal glacial trench, is abrupt and of a great regularity.

Upon our return, photographs and data on the topography of the coast were submitted to the International Boundary Commission, and the nomenclature was discussed with members of the U. S. Geographic Board. Sheets 11 and 12 of the Boundary Commission's maps, which are now available, were modified accordingly, both along the coast and to some extent on the slopes of Mt. Fairweather.* The name "Grand Plateau Glacier" has been given to

* The party of 1926 followed the stream designated "Seaotter Creek." A curious error exists in the showing of a lake behind the coastal hill *north* of this point; the lake should be four or five miles southeast of the indicated position, between the next hill to the south and the spur of Mt. Fairweather.—[Ed.]

the ice-sheets which debouch toward the sea immediately south of the Deception Hills, thus restoring, we believe, the original usage of La Pérouse. The glacier which comes down to Cape Fairweather is called locally the "Fairweather Glacier," which seems topographically logical.

The coastal plain and hills from Lituya Bay to Dry Bay, except for that portion occupied by the ice-tongues, are forested with characteristic north Pacific Coast vegetation. Fir, spruce, cedar, hemlock, pine and poplar are the chief trees, many of which attain a diameter of two or three ft. The summits of the coast hills are in large part rounded off and when not covered with snow form luxuriant grassy meadows.

There are apparently no caribou, moose, deer, elk or sheep on the western side of the Fairweather Range. Why this is so we do not know, for the country could easily support them. Brown and black bear, foxes and goat were the animals commonly seen; also many small animals and birds, including humming birds. Eagles are plentiful, and seal or sea-otter were seen in the water.

Lovers of the sport of mountaineering will find no more glorious setting than the Alaskan Coast Range. Here are not merely climbs, up and down from a valley base; for those who seek these great summits will live and have their being upon the heights. From camps perched on high glaciers they will see the sun set in the placid Pacific, and will thrill with John Muir to the "strange unearthly splendor" of the dawn on the peaks of the Fairweather Mountains.

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