The Ascent of Mount Owen

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ONE naturally associates Mt. Owen with the adjacent Grand Teton for their summits are scarcely half a mile apart. Historically, also, these two highest of the Teton peaks are no less intimately related. The altitude of Mt. Owen (12,910 ft.) was triangulated in 1925 by William O. Owen, veteran Wyoming surveyor, who, it will be recalled, was organizer and moving spirit of the successful attack on the Grand Teton (13,747 ft.) in 1898, sponsored by the Rocky Mountain Club. These considerations among others suggested for the mountain its present name, adopted by the Geographic Board on October 5, 1927.

From the Idaho side, Mt. Owen has the appearance of a huge shoulder thrust out from the north flanks of the Grand Teton, but from Jackson Hole, to the east, it is seen to much better advantage. A splendid east-facing cirque separates the two peaks and contains a glacier which, though shrunk to scarce a mile in length, is still tenaciously gnawing at the crystalline heart of the range. Geologically the time is not remote when the cirque head-wall will be broken through and the complete separation of the two peaks effected.

Mt. Owen is obscured by Tee-win-ot from points directly to the east. From the southeast it is seen as a sheer wall nearly half a mile high rising from behind the glacier—a huge vertical slab, broadly triangular in form, but lacking in perspective and depth.

Most impressive of all is the view from the northeast, up Glacier Canyon from near the upper shores of Jenny Lake. Here Mt. Owen soars skyward in a single tremendous sweep—more than five thousand feet of bare gneiss, bristling with pinnacles and spires, and as yet invaded by man only in the upper thousand feet. From base to summit, snowfields of virgin whiteness and soft contours, contrast strongly with the jagged grey rocks—snowfields caught on shelves and crags and linked together by a lacy network of the same lodged in crevices. The eye, willing but unable to comprehend, travels from the foot to the apex a mile apart horizontally as they are vertically; then, reverently, it moves to the left to rest on Tee-win-ot and the Grand Teton; no less colossal in proportions

and as superb in figure, giants of the earth which may be worshipped but never understood.

The story of Mt. Owen must be told in terms of several exploratory skirmishes which led to the ascent. The first try for the top known to me is that made by Robert Spahr, Paul Petzoldt and myself on August 1, 1927, when we climbed from the moraine of the glacier to the saddle between East Prong and Tee-win-ot, thence westward straddling the arête to the summit of East Prong. The difficult traverse around the north of the prong was frustrated by inclement weather. This excursion demonstrated that the route up Mt. Owen must go from the glacier up the cleft between East Prong and the main peak. On August 9 Phil Smith and Ben Lengee, who quite unknown to us were also aspiring to the summit of the mountain, ascended by this cleft to the base of a rock ledge on the east side at 11,500 ft. The same week a third party, under A. R. Ellingwood, also explored the east slopes of Mt. Owen.

The following winter William O. Owen corresponded with Smith, William Gilman and myself, urging a serious attempt at his mountain. Urging was not necessary. The evening of July 28, 1928, found the four of us at the familiar old camp on Amphitheater Lake (9,500 ft.). At 5.30 the following morning we set out, leaving our old comrade perched on a nearby point from which he could command the best possible view of Mt. Owen, and photograph to his heart's content. We crossed the glacier and began climbing directly below the chimney separating East Prong from the peak. Half-way to the col, from a broad snow-covered bench, we gained entrance to the steep, narrow chimney. Here we roped up and by the time we looked over the col at flat-topped Mt. Moran six miles to the north, even Smith (who revels in snow) had had his fill of step-cutting.

Making a right-angled turn west we continued up the east side of the main peak. There was easy climbing to the base of a broad ledge, perhaps 200 ft. high, at 11,500 ft. Gilman's pioneering on the wet, icy ledge was nicely executed. Topping the ledge, we cut diagonally across the extensive upper snowfield to the exposure of bare rock near the middle and then bore left for the base of the summit ridge. The snowfield steepened so much toward the top that we could touch the surface with outstretched arm. This crossing, which necessitated continuous step-cutting, took much precious time.

Twice we saw snowslides to the west, near the far edge of the snowfield.

By means of a couple of chimneys we reached the crest of the summit ridge, crossed over, and worked westward up the smooth, steeply-pitching slabs of its south side. At the west end of the ridge we attained what appeared to be the extreme summit knob with a granite face which was nearly vertical at the base but rounded off above into a smooth, polished, convex surface remarkably barren of projections and fissures and suggesting in miniature the Half-Dome of Yosemite. After a hasty examination we thought it best to try the east face. About fifteen feet up was the only protuberance, a couple of inches high, and Smith succeeded in looping the rope over it; while this was held taut, Gilman climbed up, got his foot on the projection, and with such impetus as he could summon, started up the cliff. He reached a point some fifteen feet higher, but then had to desist through exhaustion. It was a noble effort, deserving the success which, we learned a year later, it so nearly attained.

Since it was past 3 o'clock and the sky had become threatening, we ventured nothing more, but (after leaving a cairn and record at the base of the cliff) started down. We barely reached Amphitheater Lake by dark. Starting on at once, Gilman soon became indisposed and, with Smith, camped by the trail till morning. Owen and I gained Jenny Lake shortly after midnight.

The Grand Teton National Park became a reality on February 26, 1929, and the following summer all three of us were back as members of the first park staff. No opportunity to challenge Mt. Owen presented itself that summer, though recollection of our experience in 1928 was a perpetual thorn in the flesh. Nevertheless important developments did take place. Kenneth A. Henderson and Robert L. M. Underhill, following their splendid conquest of the Grand Teton from the east, became interested in Mt. Owen and agreed to return in 1930 to help finish the job begun in 1928. Also, Smith and I had several occasions to explore the range north of Mt. Owen and to examine the latter with glasses. The route of 1928 and details of the summit were clearly visible, and several significant facts were established: that the stubborn granite knob *was* the extreme summit; that it was if anything lower than we had supposed, Gilman having gotten up the really bad part of the east face; and that a snow-covered inclined ledge extended from below

the base of the knob around the north face practically to the summit. If the east face could be negotiated the problem was solved; if not, the north ledge offered a promising alternative.

On July 5, 1930, Smith and I climbed Nez Percé, which left Mt. Owen the only unscaled major front-peak in the range. Henderson and Underhill arrived a week later and, after hiring a cook and securing a week's provisions, packed up to Amphitheater Lake. Superintendent Sam T. Woodring assigned the ascent of Mt. Owen to Smith and myself as our day's job for the 16th. Gilman, who had been visiting us, unfortunately had been called home to Denver a few days earlier. The evening of the 15th Smith and I hiked up to the base camp and found our new partners comfortably located.

Cook was ready to serve at 4 A.M. and Smith and I shared a breakfast qualitatively and quantitatively the best in our climbing experience. Pack horses, cook, tents, alarm watches—this was mountaineering *de luxe*, a novelty and rare treat for us. A beautiful morning, everything in our favor. We were off at 5, and began climbing from the glacier at 6.15. Not only was there much less snow than in 1928 but it was soft and we could kick steps, thus making rapid progress. Our route repeated that of the earlier trip except that, distrustful of the chimney, we kept mainly on the slabs to the left. The ledge at 11,500 ft. was climbed farther to the right, where it was nicely broken. Again we crossed the upper snowfield by way of the rock exposure, now much larger. We did not rope up till we crossed over the summit ridge. Underhill, who had groaned and murmured soft profanities over the tedious early hours, gradually became more and more deeply interested.

At 9.30 we reached the base of the granite knob; four hours earlier than in 1928, the better part of the day still ahead, and all of us in fresh condition! Unburdening ourselves of packs, cameras, ropes and axes, we composed ourselves for lunch—that is, all except Underhill, whose transformation was now complete and who, with blood in his eye, was already off over the ridge. Soon a triumphant yell told us that Mt. Owen was as good as conquered, but we made no move till the serious business in hand was finished. Then taking the ropes we crossed over to where he was examining a narrow ice-filled chimney which, about thirty feet east of the granite knob, descended the north side of the ridge. After some discussion we let Underhill down the chimney on the rope to investigate around the corner to the left. The report was good, the *rappel* rope was

fixed, and Henderson, Underhill, Smith and I descended in order. At the bottom, perhaps thirty-five feet down, a twenty-foot downward traverse west brought us to the lower end of the north ledge, noted the summer before from the peaks to the north.

Stormy conditions permitted no delay, and I recall but hazily the great north precipices and snowfields below us. When I reached the ledge, which in reality was a slab extending up to the ridge, Henderson was already leading off. It was perhaps twenty feet wide at the bottom, steep and wet. Above was the overhanging north wall of the granite knob. The inner angle of the slab was encumbered with loose rock and ice. It was about one hundred fifty feet long; and thirty feet from the top, where it widened, we edged right into a vertical crevice. I was last, and when I wriggled out of the top of the fissure I found my three partners perched, like gargoyles, on an exposed knife-edge of rock, shaking with cold and shouting to make themselves heard above the roar of the wind. The ridge projected from the overhanging north face of the knob twenty feet below the top. In wind and sleet, scaling the overhang presented a serious problem, but Henderson abandoned it only when the rest of us, letting the wind drown his arguments, started down the west side of the ridge.

Events now followed swiftly and with bewildering unexpectedness. Twenty feet down we found a spacious ledge which led around to the west side of the peak. We had now half encircled the granite knob in search of a vulnerable point, and here we found it: the middle of the west side of the knob was breached vertically clear to the top. In a trice we had stormed the knob by this crevice and were on its summit. It was not yet noon—11.15, to be exact.

The summit of Mt. Owen is unique among the Teton peaks, shaped by exfoliation of the granite to a rounded, knobby top having sheer or overhanging sides that are apparently unbroken on all but the breached west face. Langford's description of the Grand Teton, so curiously inapplicable to that mountain, fits Mt. Owen well: "Exposure to the winds kept it free from snow and ice, and its bald, denuded head was worn smooth by the elemental warfare waged around it."

There were few boulders on the summit so we had to content ourselves with a tiny carn. The east face did not look so bad from above. Some thirty-five feet down was the spot where Gilman had been forced back. From rim to base the east face dropped

sixty feet, for the 120-foot *rappel* rope, doubled and passed through a sling attached to a large boulder, just served. In short order the descent to the ridge below was accomplished, thus completing our circuit of the north half of the knob.

The hazards of the east face, in part psychological, by this time appeared much less formidable, and Underhill's suggestion that we now "do the mountain up right while at it" was met with enthusiasm, so we pulled down the *rappel* rope, and donned tennis shoes. While I anchored from below, Underhill went up the cliff and was soon back at the sling. He now anchored me from above and I followed suit. It was remarkably easy, for rubber soles held well. Henderson and Smith followed in similar style. Lingering on top the second visit only long enough to add a note to the record, we again descended on the *rappel.*

At twelve-thirty we started down, roping together (since no one fancied carrying the rope) and remaining so to the lower edge of the big snowfield. The ledge was descended at the nearest point by a double *rappel.* Descent from the col was made to the accompaniment of caustic comments in the rear relative to the route which Henderson and I selected in avoiding the chimney. At four-fifteen we reached Teton glacier, the parting of the ways, as Henderson and Underhill returned to their camp and Smith and I cut down the canyon direct to Jenny Lake, which we reached at six-thirty.

The press publicity accorded the ascent of Mt. Owen was justified only by the fact that in a sense it closed an epoch in Teton mountaineering—the pioneering stage, begun at least eighty-seven years before.[1] The climb itself proved good, though more difficult ones have been made in the range. However I doubt that any Teton ascent has contained more of variety and interest. Further, Mt. Owen is unusual in necessitating much snow-work in contrast to the other Teton peaks which involve little or none. The "corkscrew route" to the summit of the granite knob is quite as unusual and distinctive as the famous "cooning place" of the Grand Teton, and is perhaps more hazardous than the shorter route up the east face of the knob. Future climbing parties using Amphitheater Lake as their base of operations will probably divide their attention between the two highest Teton peaks, both so readily accessible from this

[1] Michaud's attempted ascent of the Grand Teton in 1843 is the earliest recorded effort to scale a Teton peak, and is taken as the beginning of what may be termed "the pioneering stage" in Teton mountaineering. There may, of course, have been earlier attempts than his.

point. The route from Glacier Canyon up the north or northeast side of Mt. Owen, intersecting our route on or near the summit ridge, is also quite feasible, though it will involve starting from a base camp about 2,000 ft. lower than Amphitheater Lake. Little is known of the west slope below the granite knob, but scrutiny from other peaks to the north and south has convinced us that this approach may be the most formidable of all. The upper of the snow-bands on the southeast face, and the southwest arête deserve further consideration. It will always be a matter of regret to us that on the occasion of the ascent Gilman was prevented from accompanying us, as he merited so richly the privilege of taking part in the conquest of Mt. Owen.