

An American Ascent of Mont Blanc in 1856

Through the courtesy of Mr. Arthur Fairbanks, of Dartmouth College, and Mrs. Chauncey A. Adams, the American Alpine Club has received the alpenstock used by their father, Henry Fairbanks (1830-1918), who reached the summit of Mont Blanc on August 5th, 1856.

Fairbanks was born at St. Johnsbury, Vermont, graduating from Dartmouth in 1853, and from Andover Theological Seminary. He was professor of Natural Philosophy at Dartmouth, 1860-65, and was an inventor as well as a clergyman, being recorded in *Who's Who in America* and the *Dictionary of American Biography* as the co-inventor of the Fairbanks scales.

He revisited Chamonix in 1891 with his wife, who survives him, and two of their children, finding his name as the one-hundredth in the register of those who had made the ascent. This was probably the fifth complete American ascent.

We present a letter written by Charlotte (Chatty) Fairbanks, Henry's sister, to her mother, giving an interesting account of the procedure and ceremonies attendant upon an ascent of Mont Blanc almost eighty years ago.—*Ed.*

Vale of Chamouni, Aug. 6, 1856

My dear Mother:

If I remember my last letter was a journal and I know of no better way than to continue it now, for I take it for granted that you are anxious to know just what we are doing and seeing. I could fill sheets with an account of the last week, but it is well for you that I have not the time. I should soon weary you with descriptions of mountain climbing, of crossing glaciers, of clambering over rocks and such like things which are the life of Chamouni.

From Lauterbrunnen where I sent my last letter we came almost directly here passing Interlachen, one of the loveliest spots I have seen, lying in among the mountains between two tranquil lakes and commanding a view of the long range of snow covered Alps. Our carriage took us to Frutigen a place of little interest and from there we took mules the next day and began the long and tedious ride over the Gemmi pass. You remember Harry's account of his experiences less eight years ago when the snow hanging over the rocks was the only foothold he had for several hours and all that time looking directly down a precipice 5 or 600 feet. I can conceive of nothing more frightful than this pass is now with a good footpath. It requires pretty strong nerves to walk down without assistance and invalids who are carried over on men's shoulders to the baths of Leuk on the other side are generally blindfolded in order that they may not see the terrors of the way. That night we slept at Leuk and went into

the bath houses to see the poor unfortunate persons who are obliged to sit their eight hours a day with the water heated to a temperature of 124 degrees. They are clothed in long woolen dresses, with only their heads above water and in order to pass away the time are all together so that as you look in upon them, you see in one corner a very funny group around a chessboard which is floating on the surface of the water, or in another a little company quietly taking their tea or reading a newspaper which they hold over their heads. There were some forlorn faces among them though, and I was glad that it was not my lot to sit in the baths of Leuk, week after week. A carriage ride the next day brought us to Martigny and from there we came on mules over the Col de Balme, one of the finest passes in Switzerland, to this loveliest of all valleys. From the top of this last pass we had our first view of Mt. Blanc from its base to the very summit surrounded by a perfect wilderness of sharp peaks or needles as they are called, guarding the Monarch of mountains. Chamouni is more beautiful even than I had expected, a little paradise shut in by giant Alps, and lying at the base of the highest mountain in Europe. The whole valley is beautifully cultivated and the rivers Arveron and Arve flow through the center of it. Chamouni is the place which of all others in the world I have wanted to see most, and I am not disappointed in it. The next morning, after we arrived here a party started for Mt. Blanc, the first one of the season. All Chamouni was in a state of great excitement and this English gentleman with his daughter¹ (the fourth lady who has ever attempted the ascent), started off with some twenty guides and porters for the summit and came down the evening of the next day. On their arrival cannons were fired, flags were flying on the Hotels, a band of music preceded them to the village, and the whole village place was in a perfect uproar. The young lady was of course the great attraction and hundreds of eyes were fixed upon her in astonishment. She however didn't look very much fatigued and walked behind the band surrounded by her guides to the hotel, and stood at her window a long time, listening to the music and seeing the display of fireworks. Some one gave her a wreath of flowers which she carried in her hand through

¹ Richard Forman and Miss Emma Catherine Forman, Aug. 1, 1856. Miss Forman's feminine predecessors were Marie Paradis (1809), Henriette d'Angleville (1838), and Mrs. T. Hamilton (1854).

the crowd. I never saw such excitement in a little village before. But you would be amused if I should tell you that your children had become objects of as great curiosity as this young lady. I hope you will laugh over the ridiculousness of it as much as we have. The next day after this party came down their success encouraged another one to attempt the same. Henry of course was a good deal excited for the opportunity was a very rare one and for a good while he hesitated, not knowing whether he had strength to go or not. He however decided to go as far as the Grand Mulets which is half way up the mountain and spend the night there with the party. The morning was so beautiful that Emma and I thought we would take our mules and go with them to the end of the mule path, and come back with one of our guides. When we got there Henry suggested the idea of our going on with him and returning the next day. This part of the way is considered the most difficult of the whole ascent and few ladies attempt it. Emma did not feel quite well and thought best to go back to the hotel but Henry was so anxious that I should go on, that I consented to try it. My guides were strong men and said they could assist me, so that there would be no difficulty. So they placed me between two Alp-stocks and one went before carrying an end of each in his hands, and another followed supporting the other ends. In this way I clambered up rocks for an hour and a half and then came to a glacier which it is necessary to cross in order to get to the Grand Mulets. This is considered somewhat dangerous on account of the width and number of the crevasses. But they guard against this by attaching themselves together by ropes and stepping carefully. I had two ropes around me, and these were fastened to two men on each side, so that I considered myself entirely safe. Henry was secured in the same way, and we went on for two hours, jumping crevasses, and sometimes when they were very wide, crossing them on ladders. This brought us to a hill of snow which required some strength to climb, and we soon found ourselves at the Grand Mulets. This place is so called because there are several large rocks rising directly out of the snow and supposed to resemble large mules or Grand Mulets. On one of them our little house stood. In the evening, we sent up several rockets which were answered way down below us, at Chamouni, and cannon were fired there for us.

At one o'clock in the morning the two gentlemen² with their eight or ten guides started off for the summit by the light of lanterns. It was rather aggravating to Henry to be so near, and not go, and they had been gone but a few minutes before he began to talk with our guides about the difficulty of the way, expense etc. and at 5 o'clock I was watching him with his four trusty guides making his way through the snow towards the summit of Mt. Blanc. It was a splendidly clear morning, and as everything seemed to be favorable and he was half way there, I was anxious to have him go on. At two he came down somewhat exhausted, having been gone but nine hours, one of the shortest excursions that have ever been made to the summit. I was left at the Grand Mulets in care of two guides, while he was gone. The rarity of the atmosphere and the summit did not affect him unfavorably but the wind and hail blistered his face and eyes so that he is suffering a good deal with them today. After refreshing ourselves with wine we commenced the descent to Chamouni, a distance of over 20 miles. It was so late in the day and the snow on the glacier so soft from the heat of the sun, that we were obliged to go very carefully lest the snow which covered some of the crevices should give way under our feet. Still there was no danger attached as we were to so many guides, with ten feet of rope between us, so that if one slipped, there would be enough to support him. In attempting to give my Alpenstock to one of the men, before jumping a crevice, so that I might fall into the arms of the guides who were ready to catch me on the other side it slipped from my hand, and I heard it as it struck the ice several hundred feet below me. I had become greatly attached to it for it had saved me from fatigue and perhaps accident. But it could not have had a more romantic death and burial. Do not be frightened mother at my account of glacier crossing. All these preparations would indicate that there is a good deal of danger, and so there would be *without* them but I feel perfectly safe with these guides—they are a most noble set of men, and perfectly devoted to their employers. When we came here Henry looked up the same man who conducted him over the Gemmi a few years ago and such a self-sacrificing kind hearted fellow I never saw. After we were safely across the ice again, we untied the ropes and sat

² Probably three—Messrs. John and William Leech, and Thomas Houldsworth.

down on the rocks to eat our lunch, and never did chickens and dry bread taste better. Some ten or fifteen miles were yet between us and Chamouni, but the path was so steep that in a short time we found ourselves at the foot of the mountain. As Henry did not expect to go to the summit when he left, we thought that perhaps we might escape the parade which always accompanies a return from Mt. Blanc. But the other party who had got down before us, had brought the news of his ascent and just as we reached the village we heard the cannon from our hotel which announced our arrival. Instantly the streets were filled with the most curious faces—peasants and visitors were all out and such an absurd sight. Henry and I walked, first followed by our guides with their axes and alpenstocks, and the crowd would make way for us to pass just as we came to them I never was placed in a more ludicrous position, and could not control my laughter at all. I don't know which was the greatest object of curiosity, Henry or I, for it is considered as much of a feat for a lady to go to the Grand Mulets as for a gentleman to reach the summit, as it is the longest and most difficult part of the way. Until we reached the hotel, cannon were firing, & crowds following us, but we were not relieved from this most embarrassing position even then, for we found the hotel keeper ready to meet us with a boquet of beautiful flowers. He then conducted us to a little table in the court yard, adorned with flowers. Here we found the party who had ascended with us, and all together drank champagne. But I assure you we did not stay here any longer than was necessary, for the landlord had prepared warm baths for us and we were rejoiced enough to retire out of the reach of so many staring eyes. Just after the excitement for us, a gentleman came down from another mountain which had never before been ascended,³ and the crowd gathered around another hotel to witness his entry. In the evening, a continued firing was kept up between the two hotels. Both were illuminated, and bands were playing under our windows. We called for our tea to be served quietly in our rooms, but before we had finished, Henry was called down to receive another boquet and more honors, which latter however he declined. Did you imagine that your sober son was coming so far away, to create such a sensation? We have

³ The first ascent of the South Face of the Aig. du Midi (S. summit) was made on Aug. 5, 1856, by J. A. Devouassoud, A. and J. Simond.

given ourselves up to laughter ever since. Today Henry's eyes are so much inflamed that he has not been able to leave his dark room but otherwise is very well indeed. I have some blisters on my feet as the result of my long walks but do not feel at all tired today. I cannot help laughing when I think of our Passumpsic walk of six miles, which was looked upon as such a wild undertaking. I should like to tell you about some of our other excursions about Chamouni but have not time. We have seen about everything here, and are now ready for Geneva—then Paris—then England—then home.

Geneva—Aug. 10 Sunday aft. Yesterday we left Chamouni in the morning, taking leave of our pleasant home and that charming little valley. I had formed a great attachment for it and drove away not without many regrets I assure you. If I should select one place of all others in Europe to see again, it would be Chamouni, with its surroundings, its cultivated lands, its cascades and mountains. Our ride of eighteen in a little char or very small carriage, was a pleasant one. We talked of home all the way, and of every one there and then we tried to realize that perhaps in five or six short weeks we should be there ourselves.

Henry is very well, but has been so busy today that he says he cannot send even a line—much more I have to say, but adieu.

Chatty

In a letter written a week or more afterward, Henry Fairbanks speaks of the ascent "than which I scarcely ever enjoyed a day more," and goes on to say that sun and wind blistered his face so that he was unable to see for three days.

He preserved the expense account, which follows:

CHAMOUNI GUIDES 1856

le Compte au monsieur du momblanc

1 pour a voir changer le tour.....	5 fr.
2 pour a voir étez au chapeaux et au montanver...	10
3 pour moit au brevent.....	8
4 pour les trois mullet.....	18
5 pour le jeardin les guides.....	26
6 pour les trois mullet a 9 franc partête qui féz...	27
7 pour le garsont qui etaliz a veque nout.....	6
8 pour le garsont qui a gardez les mules.....	3
9 pour les 4 guide du momblanc.....	320
10 pour les 3 mullet a 9 fran féz.....	27

11 pour le garsont qui les a ramenéz.....	4
12 pour le porteur du monsieur au grand mullet....	10
13 pour les deux porteur qui son réstéz au grand mullet a veque la damme.....	10
14 pour la perres de bat pour la dame.....	3
15 pour le tête noire et barberine.....	18
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total.....	495 francs

The certificates illustrated measure 10.5 x 7.5 inches, and are in manuscript, printed certificates being first issued in 1857. The paper bears the Savoy cross as watermark, Chamonix not being annexed to France until 1860. The text now follows:

Nous soussignés guides à Chamonix certifions à qui il appartiendra que mademoiselle Charlotte Fairbanks a fait la course du jardin à la mer de glace le deux août 1856, et celle bien plus difficile et fatigante des grands-mulets le 6 même mois,—dans ces deux voyages elle a constamment fait preuve d'un grand courage et de beaucoup de force au point que c'est à peine si elle a eu besoin de l'appui de ses guides, en voi de quoi nous apposons notre signature, chamonix le neuf août 1856.

Nous soussignés guides à Chamonix certifions à qui il appartiendra que monsieur Henry Fairbanks a fait la course du jardin à la mer de glace le 2 août 1856; et celle autrement périlleuse et fatigante de l'ascention à la plus haute cime du montblanc le 6 même mois, dans ces deux courses particulièrement la dernière et la plus difficile incomparablement, il toujours fait preuve d'un courage admirable de beaucoup de prudence unie à force et une adresse étonnante en voi de quoi nous apposons notre signature. Chamonix le 9 août 1856.

(Both documents are signed by Tissay Joseph Victor, Frasserand Michael Ambroise, Simond Louis, François [*sic*] Favret, Balmat *Guide Chef*, Favret *Sindic*. On the back of the expense account, Fairbanks has written the names of Michel Ambroise Frasserand, Louis Cymon (Simond), François Favret and Pierre Ducros, his four guides on Mont Blanc.)

Of the alpenstock only the uppermost twenty-seven inches remain, surmounted by a small chamois horn. The shaft bears the following names, spirally arranged: Rigi, St. Gotthard, Furca, Grimsel, Handech, Reichenbach, Gr. Scheidec, Semilhorn, Faulhorn, Vengernalp, Urchinen, Gemmi, Col de Balme, Chapeau, Montanvert, Brevent, Mer de Glace, Jardin, Gd. Mulets, Mont Blanc.