

Expedition to Mount Hayes

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AN unsuccessful attempt to climb Mt. Hayes was made in August, 1937, by a party of four, Dr. Roger Whitney, Andrew Taylor, Grant Pearson and Oscar Houston. The expedition was defeated by the bad weather that prevailed rather generally in Alaska in that month.

Mt. Hayes, 13,750 ft., is the easternmost of the high peaks of the Alaska range. It lies about 100 miles south of Fairbanks, and is a conspicuous landmark from the valleys of the Tanana and Delta Rivers for many miles. So far as is known, no serious previous attempt had been made to climb the peak, but Bradford Washburn flew around it and photographed it from the air in 1936.

The party flew from Fairbanks on August 12th and landed on a natural gravel bar, made by the outwash of a small glacier on the northeast flank of the mountain. They then circled the northern foothills of the mountain for two days and established a base camp on the west slope of the N. ridge—a site that had been selected from Washburn's aerial photographs. The bulk of the supplies for the expedition were then dumped from a plane on a slope of fine scree in the trough between the ridge and the glacial moraine. The altitude of this base camp was about 5600 ft., about 2000 ft. above the last timber. At the time of first arrival, the snow stopped about 400 ft. above the camp, but on the return from the climb the snow lay more or less heavily down to about 4000 ft.

On August 15th the party reached the crest of the ridge with light packs, finding a way up a shallow but very steep couloir filled with snow in which steps could be kicked, and the following day established the first camp on the ridge at about 7500 ft. The following day some of the supplies were advanced to the proposed site of camp two. Then followed three days of snow storm (August 18th, 19th and 20th) which prevented any advance. As the expedition had no scientific purpose, it carried no scientific instruments for determining wind velocities. However, during the greater part of one day at this camp the wind blew with such

force that the tents could not stand even in the shelter of six-foot walls of snow, and had to be lowered and weighted down with the duffle and rocks to prevent their blowing away.

The weather cleared on the afternoon of August 21st, permitting the advance of the remainder of the supplies and, on the following morning, the establishment of a second camp at about 8400 ft. Then followed three days of snow and storm (August 22nd, 23rd and 24th). During these days the snowfall was the heaviest experienced and formed drifts eight to ten feet high about the tents.

August 25th was the one wholly clear day of the entire trip and permitted the establishment of the third (and, as it turned out, last) camp at about 9500 ft., in a notch at the foot of the N. peak of the mountain (12,000 ft.). There was a beautiful sunset, about 9 p.m., with a long pink afterglow on the summit, and a view of Mt. McKinley, 150 miles to the W., rising like a dark blue saddle in the pink sunset.

The following morning was promising and Whitney and Pearson made a trail up to about 11,200 ft., while the others brought up the remainder of the supplies to the tent. In the afternoon, snow and wind began again, and continued for two days, until the afternoon of the 28th. By that time there remained food and gas on the ridge for only three days more and, as two days were needed for the descent, the party would have been in danger if another storm came (as in fact it did) and therefore began the descent in a light fog on the afternoon of August 28th. The party camped that night on the ridge and reached the former base camp the following afternoon. By that time the clouds again enveloped the upper part of the ridge, indicating that a fourth snowstorm was probably in progress, and this condition continued until the party reached Fairbanks (again by plane from the same bar) on September 1st.

The mountain consists of a long U-shaped ridge, the high summit near the center. The E. extension of the ridge is very long and contains several substantial peaks; it would be difficult climbing. The N. ridge is shorter, and contains only the N. peak (12,000 ft.) which it may be possible to avoid. The ridge is a knife-edge for substantially its entire length and the sides are uniformly very steep and show the tracks of avalanches over their entire area, so far as they could be seen on this trip. The easiest

and safest (and possibly the only practicable) route is by ascending the N. ridge near its end; that is the route actually followed. A way might be found up the E. ridge from the bar which the party used as a flying field, but this way would necessitate following a ridge about three times as long. The ridge, so far as seen, presents no particular difficulty, although in at least one place it requires delicate handling, and care is needed to follow a course avoiding both the cornice on the E. slope and the steep snow slope on the W. which has a marked tendency to avalanche.

The airplane is by far the best means of reaching the foot of the mountain. A packtrain coming from any direction would have to cross at least one large and dangerous river and traverse from 50-100 miles of difficult swamp and tundra, wholly without trails. In a winter trip dogs could be used, but the transport of their food would present difficulties. In April it might also be possible to land with an airplane on skis on the glacier opposite the base camp. At that time of year the glacier is probably covered with deep snow. Whether the additional snow on the ridge would prove difficult is another question.

Any future party should be able to make the ascent either if they had normal luck in weather, or were prepared to spend a month on the ridge.