

Mt. Sanford: An Alaskan Ski Climb

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MT. SANFORD is remarkable because of its unique shape. Although presenting precipitous cliffs from the edge of its 16,206-ft. summit toward the S. and E. where it faces the rest of the Wrangell Range, it nevertheless develops on the N. side a rounded cone from the summit down to the 10,000-ft. level. But below this level, the mountain even here falls away in impossible cliffs, with but few opportunities for access. These opportunities are provided by the surface of a single glacier, and by a few knife ridges which offer approaches to the gentle upper reaches of the mountain. On the N. side of the mountain many glaciers originate in cirques at the base of the cliffs, and send long tongues of ice into the foothills and out toward the Copper River Valley beyond. These glacier tongues terminate near the 4500-ft. level; below this they send their terminal streams flowing for some 20 miles N. and W. through tundra wilderness to the Copper River itself, which here swings in a great arc around Sanford, the western terminus of the range.

The mountain undoubtedly remained unclimbed so long because it was considered too easy! More than once the writer had been present at the discussion of some proposed trip to Mt. Sanford. Each time the discovery that "you could probably drive a dog-team to the summit of the mountain" seemed rather to cool the ardor of the other prospective climbers. Surely there would be nothing very exciting in making the first ascent of such a mountain! However, the possibility of an "Unbroken Ten-Thousand-Foot-Downhill-Ski-Ride," and more particularly the prospect of another visit to the mountains of this part of Alaska (whether difficult to climb or not!) proved so attractive to my wife and myself, that when it was proposed by Bradford Washburn in the spring of 1938, the suggestion proved much too interesting to refuse.

The approach to the mountain was greatly facilitated by Washburn's station-wagon, which had been brought by steamer to Valdez. The entire assembly of expedition "boxes, portmanteaus and bags" just filled this vehicle neatly. We enjoyed a most delightful ride over the unspoiled Richardson Highway, and Nabesna

side-road, to Chistochina, arriving at this settlement (which consists of one house) on the afternoon of July 2nd, 1938.

Here we found ourselves at the nearest point to Mt. Sanford which could be reached by automobile, and stared in wonder at the mountain's great bulk, rising some 14,000 ft. above us, but still nearly 30 miles away to the S. E., across the Copper River. The original plan had been to meet our ten horses and dog-team here, ford or raft the Copper River (there is no bridge, since none but occasional Indian families live on the other side), and then proceed directly up the Sheep Creek¹ stream bed, which would take one in a straight course to the terminus of the most promising glacier. Had this been done, three days might have sufficed to make our way to the Sanford glacier system, instead of the eight days of bushwhacking over the roundabout route which we actually followed.

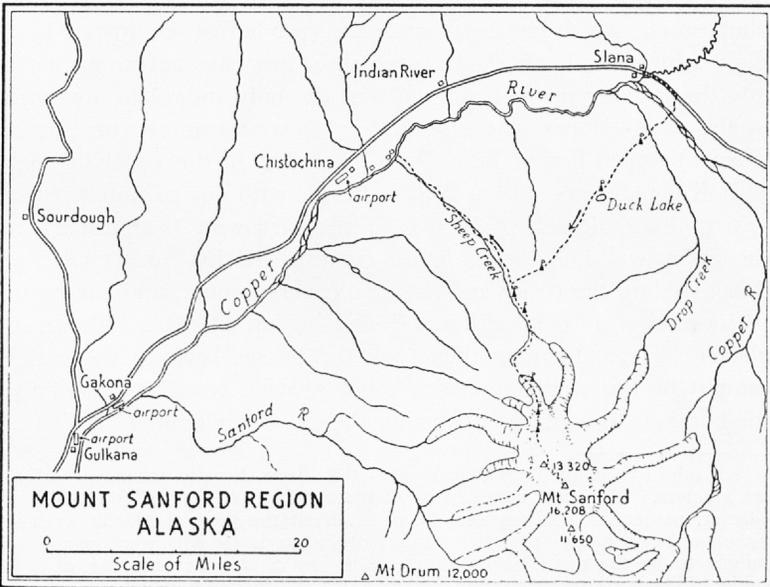
It now developed that Bill W, the horse wrangler, either having no faith in the ability of our inflatable rubber-boat to ferry the boxes, portmanteaus and bags across the river, or else being in doubt of the ability of his horses to swim the stream, insisted that we should drive 30 miles further up the Nabesna road and join him at Slana, where the river was shallow enough to ford.

From Slana then we started on July 4th, with ten horses, and with a team of five dogs, the latter loaned to us by Mr. W. Ackerman of Chistochina. The dog sledge proving too bulky to ride safely on top of a horse's load, we tried the experiment of simply driving the dog-team with their sledge empty across the tundra in the wake of the horses. It turned out that the empty sledge slid over the tundra vegetation with no more difficulty than a loaded sledge over a firm snow surface. Moreover, to our surprise and delight, the dogs were entirely responsible and well-behaved for us, despite the fact that Washburn and I had made their acquaintance only the day before. Not the least of the marvels of this dog-team was the manner in which the animals unconcernedly forded the shallower branches of the Copper River, dragging the sledge behind them. When the water rose beyond their depth, they were unhitched and swam, supported through the current by a rope tied to

¹ Marked on U. S. G. S. maps as Boulder Creek, but known locally as Sheep Creek, apparently from the many mountain sheep found among its surrounding hills.

the lead dog's collar and pulled from the pommel of one of the saddle horses.

The evening after this unconventional crossing of the Copper River, it developed that Bill W., the chief horse-wrangler, was suffering from a fever,² with a temperature of 103°. Washburn vounteered to ride back with him to Slana, and subsequently returned with the Indian Adam Sanford as helper to Jack Kennedy, who now became our chief and only horse-wrangler. Let it be said here that Jack Kennedy proved to be a most agreeable and pleasant companion, and in every way an unusually competent Master of Horse.



At last across the Copper River and reorganized, we located ourselves on the U. S. G. S. map at a point due N. from the summit of Sanford, and a little over 30 miles distant from it. From here we now proceeded in a general S. W. direction across an irregularly wooded and pond-spotted tundra. The old Millard Trail (marked on the map) seems to have disappeared completely, and we steered by certain obvious features on the skyline formed by the Mt. Sanford foothills, intending to strike Sheep Creek some five or six

² Later diagnosed at Fairbanks as pneumonia.

miles below its emergence from the glacier system, and then follow it up through its valley among the foothills. Because of the detours required by occasional swampy ground, ponds and dense stands of spruce, and by such misadventures as horses caught in bog holes, four day-marches were necessary to reach Sheep Creek. In Sheep Creek valley at last, we made our fourth camp in a beautiful mossy patch among spruce trees, within a day's march of the glacier snouts.

Although clouds had hidden the mountain continuously for these four days, and we were now camped in the valley out of sight of it, the important choice of a climbing route had already been clearly indicated. A study of an excellent series of aerial photographs which had been made the year before, confirmed by a flight which Washburn had made only a few days before we came into the country on foot, proved that the only unbroken approach to the upper slopes was offered by the westernmost (or Sunset Glacier) which flowed into Sheep Creek.³ On the following day Jack Kennedy was able to get the horses with our mountaineering gear up to an altitude of 6000 ft. in the narrowing trough between the valley wall and the E. lateral moraine of this Sunset Glacier, thus avoiding the rocky and moraine covered snout, and saving us the necessity of backpacking and sledging up an extra 1500 ft. of glacier. He and Adam then took the horses back to the valley camp (the last campsite which could provide wood and feed for the horses), to wait for us during the days of climbing.

³ It might be pointed out that Sheep Creek flows directly from two different glaciers. The most conspicuous of these, which we named Sheep Creek Glacier, projects a few degrees W. of N. from the general glacier system, direction being taken from the summit of Sanford. It fills what would be judged to be the main Sheep Creek valley by a traveller moving up this valley. The lesser glacier and the next one to the west, which we named Sunset Glacier, projects 10-15° W. of N. from the general glacier system direction being taken from the summit of Sanford. A traveller up Sheep Creek valley would not notice this glacier, even when he was approaching the snout of the main Sheep Creek Glacier, because the valley of the Sunset Glacier makes an exceedingly abrupt turn at the snout of its own glacier, and proceeds in an almost E. direction to join the main valley just below the snout of the Sheep Creek Glacier. The traveller therefore sees only the narrow blind valley coming in from the right, when he has nearly reached the terminal moraine of the conspicuous Sheep Creek Glacier. The distinction between these two valleys and glaciers would be of the utmost importance, however, particularly to a future ski party, since the obvious Sheep Creek Glacier leads to nothing but impossible icefalls in its upper reaches, whereas the hidden Sunset Glacier actually offers an excellent route (and probably the only practical one for skiers) to the upper slopes of the mountain.

We had assumed up to this point that the dog-team would make this mountain trip a really luxurious one—lots of delicious food, big tents, heavy warm sleeping-bags, and best of all, no back-packing! Actually it might have turned out just this way had it not been for misadventures in the matter of dog food. Though the dogs had buckled down nobly to their unaccustomed labors in the tundra and among the boulders of the moraine, we were concerned to discover at this point that all five seemed to be in distinctly poor condition. Next day the reason for this was only too clear; we found that the dried salmon, which with cornmeal mush formed the staple of the dogs' diet, had been imperfectly cured and were crawling with worms. The Indians from whom we had bought the fish had advised us to spread them out whenever we could for further drying, but continuous rain and cloudy weather had made this impossible. The loss of the fish was a serious matter, as we had counted upon fish and reduced the heavy cornmeal to a minimum to save weight. Washburn generously offered to go back to the woods camp and bring up a load of our reserve cornmeal, and set off at once. During the two days of his absence, my wife and I made two trips up to the next campsite at about 8000 ft. to relay supplies, both times in thick cloud and driving snow. Between times we nursed the dogs, who had a complete rest and as much cornmeal mush as we dared feed them. On July 14th Washburn returned, carrying not only cornmeal but about 40 lbs. of fresh bear meat. Adam had only the day before shot a mother bear and cub who had been annoying the horses. The fresh meat completed the recovery of the dogs, who were in fine form from then on.

The following day dawned cloudless, and in our first taste of decent weather Camp II (about 8000 ft.) was established. Here we had a splendid view of the jagged gendarmes of Capital Mtn., now below us to the E., and of the purple-blue expanse of the Copper River Valley with the peaks of the Hayes and Kimball Ranges beyond.

July 18 saw the last of the loads up at our third glacier camp, at about 10,000 ft. The dogs had been working well, pulling about 150-200 lbs. on the sledge, even in the deep soft-powder snow which we had encountered all the way. Of course a trail always had to be broken out for them by at least two of us on snowshoes. From this camp we made a short reconnaissance on skis up over the edge of the gentle ridge under which the camp was pitched.

A clear route now lay open straight toward the summit, some 6000 ft. above us and about 5.5 miles away across an immense snow plateau which sloped very gradually up to the final cone, where the slope steepened sharply above about 13,000 ft. Obviously weather was going to be a decisive factor in any attempt on the summit, and since it now seemed to be clearing, we agreed that we ought to make a try for it that night. After cooking dog food and our own supper, we lay down for a few hours' rest.

July 19.—About 3 A.M. we were ready to leave our high camp. The air was windless, the temperature 18° F. Brilliantly colored sunrise clouds provided light as we lashed the Fairchild aerial survey camera and theodolite to the sledge and began breaking a dog trail upward on snowshoes.

The first three hours were inspiring. The sun slowly emerged from intermediate cloud strata like a fire-opal. Mt. Drum sprang into flame while the shoulder of Sanford still lay in shadow. The gendarmes of Capital Mtn. were clearly visible far below. In the north the Hayes range was tipped with light; Mt. McKinley projected as a little tooth upon the western horizon. After the first steep pitch we emerged upon the smooth snow plateau several miles long with the summit cone gleaming at the end. The air was exhilarating. The dogs mushed along with their light sledge load easily, all three of us breaking trail for them.

About 5 A.M. the first really ominous weather signs began to appear—a “sun-dog,” clouds building up and piling in from the S. E. and above us a wispy cap forming over the summit. A little wind began to blow over us, a high overcast began to develop and thicken downward. There still seemed to be some chance of reaching the summit before diminishing visibility made it hopeless to continue. Presently the slope steepened, and the snow also became deeper and softer, so that the sledge held us back seriously in what was now obviously a race with the rising storm. At about 12,500 ft., we unhitched the sledge and leaving it in the trail behind us, proceeded, the dogs now walking lightly and sticking close to our heels, still teamed together in their harness.

By 9 A.M. we had reached the base of the summit cone, and the angle of the slope steepened very much more than we had expected, so that the choice of route here became very important. In some places treacherous windslab appeared, and the angle of the slope was such as to create serious danger of avalanching.

The storm meanwhile had been thickening rapidly, with a rising wind. Finally at 11 A.M., eight hours out, and at an altitude of 14,500 ft., it was clear that further advance was useless. Jamming our remaining trail marker wands into the snow to serve as a cache for a further attempt, we now turned back along our trail toward camp.

The intensity of the wind and the amount of falling and drifting snow that it carried were so great that after we had retraced no more than a few hundred yards of the trail, our footprints had become indistinguishable. Clouds now completely enveloped us, and we soon found ourselves entirely dependent upon our trail marker wands to regain our camp. The nearest wand could barely be identified in the white smother in which we were wandering, and the trail was completely obliterated. Never before in my experiences has the worth of willow-wand trail markers (actually $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch birch dowels, 36 inches long, dipped for half their length in black paint) been so thoroughly demonstrated. Entirely by their aid we regained first our cached sledge with its instruments, and finally at 3 P.M. the 10,000-ft. camp itself.

July 20.—The storm continued with only a brief respite the entire day. During the afternoon Washburn and I dug a large room into the side of the glacier near the tent door, and after equipping it with firm snow shelves and benches, moved the entire kitchen within. No more than a few hours' work were necessary to excavate this snow cave large enough to accommodate all three of us comfortably, which it did regardless of the storm outside. The new kitchenette was proclaimed a great success, and all cooking and feasting were now done here.

July 21.—Awoke to find snow still falling with undiminished vigor. A careful check of the remaining food supply revealed that, while there was sufficient human food to outwait the storm even if it should last a week more, the dog supplies could only be stretched for two or three days more at most. For this circumstance we could thank the dog Woolly, who had succeeded in getting loose one stormy night, and having located the cache of bear meat, had either devoured a whole bear haunch at one sitting, or had dragged it off and buried it where we could not find it! The weather having been so persistently bad, it now seemed wise to seize the first clearing spell and make a dash for the summit on skis, rather than run the risk of missing the summit with the slower

dog-team and instruments as before, and then being forced immediately thereafter to leave the mountain because of dog-food shortage. My wife very kindly volunteered to stay alone with the dogs at this high camp, should a promising break in the weather occur, while Washburn and I made the attempt for the summit with skis.

In the early afternoon, shortly after this decision was made, the clouds began to break. Washburn and I immediately started up from camp, getting away at 1.30 P.M., and carrying nothing but two small cameras, the Fairchild aerial camera and a little lunch.

Following almost exactly the route of the previous attempt, we progressed at a much faster rate. Nearly all the trail marker wands still stood erect and in position despite the three-day storm. Shortly after 3 P.M. clouds began to threaten as before, and soon it became clear that we were in for another race to reach the summit before the upper parts of the mountain were again enveloped in storm and cloud. Leaving the aerial camera in the trail, we now redoubled our efforts, and by 6.30 P.M. reached the bundle of willow wands at 14,500 ft. marking the highest point of our previous attempt. We continued on, and at about 9 P.M. reached what was obviously the highest part of the mountain. Never has the writer visited the top of a high peak and found such a large flat summit as that of Mt. Sanford. We wandered about an area at least a 100 ft. or more square, without being able to choose just which spot was actually the highest. There could be no doubt of identification of the summit, for, although the clouds against which we had been racing filled the N. to E. quadrant beneath us, at no point did they as yet actually rise above the horizon, and anything higher in this direction would have been clearly evident. From S. E. around through S. and up to N. W. the atmosphere was crystal clear right to the horizon, and we were rewarded by the magnificent sight of the peaks of the St. Elias Range projecting into the sunset light as tiny rose-colored flamelets from the S. E. horizon. The nearby peaks of the Wrangell Range dominated the view to the S., and from Mt. Wrangell itself, an active volcano, a substantial pillar of vapor was rising lazily. Mt. Drum, although a very impressive peak as seen from the Copper River Valley, had practically vanished when viewed from the summit of Sanford, but, when we did find it, was clearly recognizable. The closeness of the sun to the N. W. horizon at this hour precluded the possibility of a complete 360° photographic panorama. A temperature of —2° F. and a

stiff little breeze encouraged us to leave promptly, and we turned our skis away from the summit at 9.25 P.M. The return run of over 6000 ft. downhill through perfect powder snow to camp has become one of the unforgettable memories of the trip. Lingering from time to time to marvel at the sunset coloring of the several thin and broken cloud layers through which we passed, we reached camp at 10.45 P.M.

The return journey to Chistochina was rapid and uneventful, thanks to our merely following Sheep Creek down to its confluence with the Copper River. This we reached on the afternoon of July 24th; and the crossing of the Copper River in the *Hesperus* (Washburn's rubber boat) proved more hilarious than difficult.