

First Ascent of the Titcomb Needles

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IN the western part of Wyoming, almost midway between the N. and S. boundary lines of the state, lies one of the most spectacular alpine wonderlands of the United States—the Wind River Range.

In this majestic region of past and present glaciers, the snows of many winters have formed themselves into large icefields, hundreds of feet thick; and high steep-walled peaks, scarcely ever trod by human foot, reach toward a blue sky filled with fleecy clouds; avalanches, seldom heard by human ears or seen by human eyes, roar down the steep slopes; while afternoon torrents rush from the melting snows to the emerald lakes below. These are the headwaters of the mighty Colorado River, the same stream that a thousand miles away has carved itself deep into the Grand Canyon.

By the summer of 1939 practically all of the great peaks of the Wind River Range, except the Titcomb Needles, had been climbed.¹ Though not the first, we ourselves had already attained the summits of Gannett, Warren, Dinwoody, and Mt. Helen, and two of the party had successfully climbed Mt. Woodrow Wilson. Our greatest adventure had been when we made the *first ascent* of the N. E. face of Mt. Warren, approaching near calamity when a large section of that face had treacherously peeled away with the leader. But those adventures are another story.

On July 17, 1939, the three of us, Notsie Garnick and Frank Garnick of Rock Springs, Wyoming, and Orrin H. Bonney, of Houston, Texas, left Pinedale, Wyoming, and on foot led our pack horses 18 miles over the route of the old Shoshone Indian trail to Island Lake, then through the unbroken wilderness 6 miles farther, a total of 24 miles, to our base camp at the head of the Titcomb Lakes. We were joined by Adolph and Rudolph Dobnick who came up from Island Lake, and two days later the five of us left our base camp at 6.30 A.M., for the Great Needle which lies at the N. end of the group.

¹For climbing history of the Wind River Range see *Appalachia*, December, 1932, 204; June, 1933, 354; December, 1938, 233.

Turning westward across the valley about three-fourths of a mile above the upper Titcomb Lake, we proceeded upward to the shelf in which lies Summer-Ice Lake, so named by us because of the large bergs which always remain in it late in the summer. On this particular morning the lake was completely frozen over. Rudolph chopped a hole in the ice with his ice-axe and each of us in turn stretched out and took a drink of the clear, cold water. We circled the lake to the S. and W., gradually gaining altitude upward on the frozen snow slopes. We found much more snow than at any previous summer trip into the Wind River Range, and were able to kick steps most of the way until we reached the higher slopes. From the upper snow slopes we reached a lateral ridge lying S. W. from the lake and running out from the foot of the E. ridge of the Great Needle.

From the valley as I studied the Needles through the binoculars, I had wondered if the Great Needle would be attainable at all. But here, directly beneath the broken surface of the S. E. face, foreshortened as it was, it looked much easier than it later proved to be. In fact it looked so feasible that we then and there abandoned our original plan to cross through the notch and attack it from the W., and decided to proceed directly up the face. I could trace the slight lines of a fault which led westwardly about two-thirds of the way across the lower part of the face, where it was crossed by another fault, turning back to a point near the geometrical center of the face, so we followed this route, hoping that we would discover another line of breakage when we reached this center.

Easy going disappeared with the fault line, and it became necessary to rope up. Frank thought we should turn right at this point, and I thought we should turn left. I roped in second and let him take the lead so that he might work out his route of ascent. It was a wise decision. Two hundred miles a day on the Pinedale mail route had put him in better physical condition than any of the rest of us, and the technique of climbing he had learned on at least three previous expeditions with us was well applied.

It was not long until we were involved in a real tussle with the mountain. As Frank went up a perpendicular stretch, the holds seemed to disappear. His finger tips held by friction, but his boot nails scraped vainly without taking grip. He came back

down to a stance and rested; then tackled it again. It was not possible for me to give him any great amount of aid. With muscles tense and straining, and with boot nails scraping and sliding, he gained a higher finger hold, and with grim determination pulled himself up, gained another hold and brought himself to a point where he had a secure foothold underneath an overhang. Our 120-ft. rope was not enough for a five-man party on this sort of climbing, so while Frank rested for a minute, I stepped out² of the rope and added my 30 ft. to Notsie's 25, so that Frank could tackle the overhang. Stretching himself on tiptoe and reaching above the overhang in what at first seemed a fruitless search for another hold, he at last found a small depression, packed hard with gravel. Frank dug out the gravel with his fingers, took a firmer grip, and soon was out of sight above the overhang.

Notsie went next, then unroped and passed his rope down to me. And we in turn brought the other two up. Upward and onward we went, changing ropes now and then in the more difficult passages.

Near the top an overhanging boulder stopped us. Notsie, being the smallest of the five, disappeared underneath the boulder, and squirming somehow managed to get through a marmot-sized hole and above the boulder. None of the rest of us could do it, so Notsie swung the rope over and to the right of the boulder and we all came up in more human fashion. Fifteen feet from the top we all crawled through another hole. We gave Frank the honor of being first on top and then we all went up, took pictures and made two cairns, putting our names in tin cans in both of them.

Descending we turned N. along the ridge for some distance until we were about halfway between the summit and the col to the N., then descended the W. wall of the ridge to a point just above where a couloir reaches the center, then turned southward up a ledge which led directly to the notch or col on the S. side of the Great Needle. This route of descent was my originally projected means of approach to the summit and appears to be the easiest of the routes to the summit.

² This procedure is not to be recommended. It takes additional time and, through some slight misunderstanding in the handling of the rope, a man could be easily thrown off balance when getting in and out of the rope. It would have been better to have suffered the weight of an extra rope in the pack.

From the notch we glissaded for several miles over the snowfields to Summer-Ice Lake. Notsie and I loitered to photograph the falls and wild flowers. The others were back at camp two hours after leaving the summit, whereas the ascent had taken six hours—such is the wonder of fast glissading over soft afternoon snow.

Two days later we climbed all three prongs of The Trident³ (the central group of the Needles) and The Thimble (the southernmost of the sharp summits). That again is another story too long to encompass within these few pages.

And the rest of you mountaineers! Go to the Wind River Range some time. You will find plenty of excitement there.

³ Starting as we had on the previous climb we turned S. below the bench on the W. side of the valley then climbed up to it opposite The Trident, crossed over to the col N. of The Thimble and went up the S. ridge of The Trident to its S. prong; then we descended a short distance, turned the S. prong to the W., crossed to the E. and then traversed the ridge to the middle prong; then continued northward along the ridge. After straddling a knife-edge for a short distance, we turned right a foot or two and followed ledge and footholds up the final 40 or 50 ft. Roping down a short way and then proceeding alone back to the middle prong, I photographed Notsie and Frank on the N. prong. We climbed The Thimble with ease from the col N. of it, going directly up from the col and turning slightly left so as to approach the final 30 ft. from the E. Descending from the saddle, we crossed to the snowfields and took another fast ride down to Summer-Ice Lake. The names: *The Great Needle*, *The Trident* (with its S., middle and N. prongs), *The Thimble*, as well as the name *Summer-Ice Lake*, are the names we have given and are not yet official.