Reminiscences of Mt. St. Elias

William Williams

FOLLOWING a recent dinner of mountaineering friends in New York at which I gave an impromptu talk on the attempt made in 1888 to ascend Mt. St. Elias, I was asked to reduce to writing what I had said. This I am glad to do, for notwithstanding the party of which I was a member failed to accomplish its main object, our experiences, including particularly the sights we saw, were of so varied and interesting a nature that even after 53 years I still look back on them with great satisfaction.

I was finishing my course at the Harvard Law School in the spring of 1888, when out of a clear sky I received a letter from Mr. Harold W. Topham, of London, inviting me to join him and his brother in an expedition to Mt. St. Elias that summer. Of this mountain I knew nothing beyond the name, but after some thought, supplemented by the study of pertinent maps, the proposition took hold of me, with the result that we all met at Sitka, Alaska, the end of June, and on July 3rd found ourselves with four white and six Indian packers on board the schooner *Alpha* bound for the small Indian settlement of Yakutat some 250 miles north. Our equipment and provisions, weighing together about two tons, had been gathered in London, New York, Victoria and Sitka. We had no guides and but slight knowledge of what lay before us.

The expedition did not begin under pleasant auspices, for the *Alpha,* the only available vessel, was a bad sailer, in poor condition and manned by an inefficient crew. Her so-called cabin included the galley and had eight bunks, two of which were used as pantry and larder. The vessel having just returned from a sealing voyage, almost every part of her was impregnated with unpleasant odors. Encountering some tempestuous weather we were often seasick and were seven days in covering 250 miles. Our inefficient captain celebrated our entrance into Yakutat Harbor by landing his ship on a clump of rocks, and my only pleasant recollection of the voyage was the superb mountain scenery afforded by La Pérouse, Crillon and Fairweather, arising almost abruptly out of the Pacific

Ocean to heights ranging from 10,000 to 16,000 ft., with splendid glaciers terminating at the water's edge. I did not know that such scenery existed anywhere.

At Yakutat we caught the first sight of our peak, then some 80 miles distant, rising majestically to a height of over 18,000 ft. and snowclad almost to its base. A mere glance at it was sufficient to give us our first realization of the magnitude of the task before us, the next step in which was to find a means for proceeding from Yakutat some 60 miles through the ocean to a point shown on the map as Icy Bay, but in fact an open roadstead on which we might be compelled to land through surf.

This journey was accomplished by means of three canoes which we had the good luck to find at Yakutat, two very large ones analogous to that in the hallway of the American Museum of Natural History, and one much smaller. The large canoes were propelled by paddles and oars arranged alternately, two of each (if I remember rightly) on either side. All of us in turn took a hand at rowing or paddling and the journey to Icy Bay was thus successfully accomplished in about nine hours. While the surf was low, yet the ocean swell had to be reckoned with as it broke on the beach, and the moment we touched land the occupants of the canoes jumped into some very cold water to prevent them from being drawn back by the receding swell; then with the aid of a few succeeding waves they were eventually brought to a place of safety and unloaded. By midnight we had established a camp on the beach but were denied much rest, for a heavy storm soon broke loose which wrecked several of the tents and otherwise incommoded us.

Since it is not the purpose of this paper to recount the many details, recorded elsewhere,[1] of an old story which has doubtless ceased to be of any general interest, I shall mention only those features of our adventure which I recall vividly after 53 years. Once on land we were thrown on our own resources, for while a party had preceded us in 1886 it had failed to reach the mountain and its experiences were not of material help in determining how we should proceed. The shortest way to the mountain appeared to be through the adjoining bush but a day of reconnoitering made it clear that we would be unable to push our way through it with packs for any considerable distance, the only openings we found being occasional

[1] *Scribner's Magazine,* April, 1889; *Alpine Journal,* August, 1889.

bear tracks. So next day we proceeded westerly along the beach some 5 miles to, and then northerly through, the delta of the Yahtse River, the Indians packing about 80 lbs. each, the white men about 60 and we travellers about 30. The Yahtse proved a trying object to negotiate, for its banks and its bed were largely of glacier mud, offering no sure footing, and its waters issuing from a great glacier were very cold, with some current; and yet we were obliged that day to wade through them many times, often immersed to well above the waistline. One of the Indians alone appeared to relish this work and upon observing my discomfort proceeded to show off a bit, but in doing so missed his footing, underwent a complete ducking, dropped his pack and was thereafter more modest.

That night, wet and bedraggled, we slept on moss in what under ordinary conditions would have seemed to be a lovely forest, but here (as well as elsewhere in the low lands) we encountered swarms of those energetic mosquitoes and black flies which have been so ably described by the later and successful Italian expedition under the Duke of the Abruzzi, and I now mention them merely to show that after all these years they still remain unforgettable.

Next day upon reaching the edge of the Malaspina Glacier we were to encounter two novel and arresting sights, the first, a dense forest growing on the slopes of the glacier to a height of some 500 ft., the second, great trees at its base which in its progress of several feet a day had been felled and partly ground into pulp; evidently nature here was not in accord with the leisurely motion of the Swiss glaciers. After cutting our way with hatchets through the glacial forest we found ourselves on an immense moraine with a fine view of the great mountain, direct access to which was barred by a chain of partly wooded hills[2] some 8 miles long.

At this point we had to make an important decision, namely, which of the two visible faces of Mt. St. Elias we would first explore, the southeasterly or the southwesterly. Choosing the former as our first object, we proceeded over rough moraine and ice to the hills referred to, camping on them several nights amidst a variety of lovely wild flowers, and in due course after some reconnoitering (involving frequent wading of a very cold, swift stream running along the border of the glacier), pushing on till we encountered and

[2] These hills lie directly between Icy Bay and Mt. St. Elias and are called the Chaix Hills on the International Boundary Commission map of this area.—*Ed.*

then ascended as far as we could the glacier coming down from the face we were aiming at. Here an imposing sight lay immediately before us, for we were confronted with approximately 16,000 ft. of formidable, precipitous masses of rock and ice, including hanging glaciers, with heavy avalanches of snow frequently descending from them. The day was fine (as were most of the days after leaving the beach) and we lingered at this spot some time, drinking in the fascinating scene which included in the distance Mt. Cook, Mt. Vancouver and several other fine mountains, then unnamed. Even without the use of our telescope we were able to determine that no route lay to the summit of St. Elias by the face we were observing, and thus we were obliged to turn back.

Five days later we were encamped at the foot of the mountain on its southerly side at an altitude of about 3000 ft., having in the meantime circuited the chain of hills, travelled up the glacier leading to this side, established four temporary camps (some pleasant but those on the ice less so), corralled with the aid of pistols and ice-axes a dozen excellent wild geese for fresh food in an ice cavern, seen on the glacier two enormous St. Elias bears which appeared to be ignorant of the fact that we had left our rifles at the beach, and enjoyed much splendid scenery. Some of the ground over which we had travelled afforded very rough going, especially where we met badly broken ice and treacherous snow bridges over crevasses. At our new camp we had with us only two of the white packers, and here I may state that a majority of our packers were at all times engaged in relaying food supplies from the beach to various points which we estimated from time to time would be on our general route.

From our camp at the foot of the mountain we explored carefully during three days each of two arêtes leading to the rim of the great amphitheater which is a prominent feature of the southerly side. Neither arête presented any undue difficulties, though much loose shale and slate rendered the climbing quite unpleasant. Attaining the rim on August 2nd by one of them at an altitude of about 7500 ft., we continued along the same for some eight hours under bad snow conditions, with many ups and downs and with much step cutting. On one steep slope of less than 200 ft. we were an hour cutting our way, the steps filling with granulated snow as fast as we could make them. For a short space we enjoyed some fine climbing on sandstone rocks and were duly grateful for this pleasant change from the earlier shale.

MOUNT ST. ELIAS FROM OVER ICY BAY
Showing approximate route followed by Williams Party, 1888

MOUNT ST. ELIAS FROM THE SOUTH
Showing (×) highest point reached by Williams Party, and (background) Boundary Commission Final Camp and Route

Photos, B. Washburn

As we progressed along the rim we were able to observe on our left the southwesterly face, and that it was unclimbable was obvious to the naked eye. Ahead we were confronted with a steep ice slope some 1400 ft. in height, followed by stretches of steep rocks and snow (or ice) leading up to the southerly arête of snow (or ice) which came down from the summit apparently some 4000 ft. No party, however strong, would be able to assail such obstacles without the support for several days of a camp at or near our highest point which was at about 11,400 ft. For lack of porters experienced in climbing we were unable to establish, still less maintain, such a camp and hence had to turn back. Pioneers must usually accept less than they set out to accomplish and this was our fate.

Whether under conditions of snow more favorable than those we found during an unusually warm summer an adequately equipped party could overcome the obstacles which caused us to retreat, and reach the summit by the southerly arête referred to, must remain an open question and one too large to discuss here. Both Harold Topham and I recorded our views to the effect that the true route to the summit lay probably on the northern side and these views were followed by the Russell expeditions in 1890 and 1891 and that of the Duke of the Abruzzi who, accompanied by guides from the Alps, ably led a party to the summit in 1897. I had occasion to meet representatives of each of these expeditions in New York on their way to Alaska.

Our defeat did not cause us for one moment to regret what we had undertaken to do. On the contrary we found ample reward in the experiences we had had, including particularly the many superb sights of nature we had been privileged to witness throughout many days of almost perfect weather. One of these was the panorama from the rim of the amphitheater which gave us for the first time a full sense of the vastness of Alaskan glaciers and of the majestic curves through which they alter their courses, suggestive in some cases of huge race tracks. Then from another angle our eyes met a formidable rock wall towering perpendicularly some 6000 ft. above the ice and snow and extending several miles westward. Many other sights of beauty and grandeur lay before us as we reluctantly retraced our steps to our camp which we reached after an absence of 16 hours.

Five days after leaving the mountain we were again at the beach from which we had been absent 25 days. Arriving there late one

MOUNT ST. ELIAS FROM THE EAST
Showing Abruzzi Route of 1897

BOUNDARY COMMISSION PARTY ROUTE OF 1913
Photos, B. Washburn

afternoon and observing that the surf was relatively low we determined, however tired, to take no chances with the weather and to leave while we could. So launching our canoes without much difficulty we started out for Yakutat, arriving there next morning at 10 after a night of paddling and rowing. We had been without sleep for the last 30 hours.

A word about our Indians, one of whom spoke a bit of broken English. While I doubt that our mentalities ever really met, and while I am satisfied that they thought us a bit unbalanced, yet we got along together quite well. Though they appeared sluggish while at rest, yet when put to work they performed their assigned tasks, usually disagreeable ones, efficiently. They were perhaps at their best and at their happiest when in their canoes and these they handled with great cleverness. One thing they particularly loathed was travelling on ice and in this connection we had to use some tact, yet once embarked on it they moved along with their heavy loads at a good pace and were as good at getting over rough places and across crevasses as we were. They had been provided with nailed boots, yet they clung to their moccasins though in so doing they often reached camp with bleeding feet; it seems that they did not wish to use up good shoes in *our* service. They were terrified at the very sight of a bear. There was no apparent limit to their curiosity and we learned that in our absence they frequently looked over the unimportant belongings we had left in camp and even tried on our garments—but we never missed anything. Above all they were faithful and never left us in the lurch. The canoes we had left in the care of two of them at the beach were our only means of getting back to Yakutat, and we found them there upon our return from the mountain.

But Yakutat did not mean the end of our troubles. The schooner *Alpha,* which we had chartered, was not there to take us back to Sitka and for four days no other vessel appeared even on the horizon. Finally on August 12th we awoke to find a small schooner, the *Active,* at anchor in the harbor. Paddling out to her to make inquiries, we found her to be but 33 ft. in length and with eight men already on board—Captain Murphy and seven miners who had been prospecting for gold. For obvious reasons none of us was wanted on board and for that matter the two Tophams lost no time in saying that under no circumstances would they undertake an ocean voyage in such a craft, which left me free to endeavor to coax the captain

into accepting me as a passenger. At first I was turned down, but later he relented upon my explaining that I knew how to sail a boat, that I would share with him the work at the tiller and that I would sleep in the forecastle, provide my own food and do my own cooking. All went well, and one of my unforgettable experiences will always be that of sailing this boat from 10 P.M. till 2 A.M. by compass on a moonlight night past Fairweather and Crillon with everyone else asleep below. Later, the wind having died down off Cape Edwards, we took to the oars, proceeding thereafter through inland passages. Rowing for several hours at a time from a flush deck cannot by any stretch of the imagination be described as an interesting pastime, but that is exactly what we did for the last 24 hours of the voyage.

At Sitka I learned that while we were on the mountain the *Alpha* had come to grief, so I chartered another schooner to proceed to Yakutat and bring down the Tophams who arrived a few weeks later but only after they had suffered many trials and tribulations on a vessel that proved to be even less seaworthy than the *Alpha.*

Thus ended a summer which had afforded us many interesting experiences in the open, with a bit of adventure thrown in.

Notes on the Illustrations

No. 1 is the S. W. face of St. Elias seen from an altitude of about 12,000 ft. over Icy Bay. The approximate route and camps of the 1888 party are shown. The highest point was reached on August 2nd, 1888, just to the W. of the summit of Haydon Peak. Castani Lake in the foreground has drained out since the time of the expedition and its original position is outlined in white on the picture. At the time of the expedition Icy Bay did not exist at all, the Guyot and Tyndall Glaciers uniting in an active stream which emptied right into the Pacific Ocean with a great ice cliff then known as Icy Cape. I have not shown the route followed in 1886 by Seton-Karr and Schwatka as it was almost the same as that used two years later by Topham, Broke and Williams. The Karr party reached an altitude of 7200 ft. on the base of Haydon Peak July 26th, 1886.

No. 2 is a close-up of the S. face of St. Elias. The X marks the highest point reached by the 1888 party. The little camp symbol indicates the position of the 13,500-ft. camp of the 1913 Boundary Commission Party which was forced to give up just at the tip of the 16,500-ft. shoulder.

No. 3 shows the route of Abruzzi up St. Elias in 1897, the summit having been gained on July 31st of that year. The glacier has of course changed a great deal since that time, but the positions of the camps have been determined as closely as a careful study of the pictures can yield. The 12,300-ft. camp is located on Russell Col. The highest point reached by Russell on August 24th, 1891, was about one-third of the way from the col to the summit (14,500 ft.).

No. 4 is the W. face of St. Elias showing the route of the Boundary Party in 1913 as closely as it can be reconstructed. The 16,500-ft. shoulder was reached on June 30th, 1913.