

The Wonderful Story of Abe Lincoln

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“THE Cascadians are fools,” said Abe Lincoln. “I know they are fools—I’ve been there, I know!” And this because the Cascadians were planning a trip to the E. side of Mt. Adams to ramble over the big glaciers and to climb the mountain. Therefore, Abe unburdened his mind to Grandma Hause, pioneer of Southern Washington, perhaps in the hope that she would convey to these rash city dwellers some idea of the terrible dangers they were needlessly seeking.

For, when Abe was a young man, without any desire to become an alpinist, he met with an adventure that is probably unique in the history of American mountaineering. And because it was so remarkable, I have departed from my rule and have here set down an experience with which I had no personal connection.

In August of what was probably the year 1869, Abe Lincoln and Charley Olney, two young Yakima Reservation Indians, set out one morning, riding two race horses, with the intention of visiting the camps of their people at the great huckleberry patches N.W. of Mt. Adams. They left the Hadley place on the upper part of the reservation. They must have ridden rapidly for they reached the Klickitat River at noon. Here they rested for an hour, then went on. About the middle of the afternoon they got to a point N.E. of the mountain near what is undoubtedly the present Lyman Glacier. At this place the trail forked.

One who has been over this route can but marvel at the quick time these young Indians made. Their horses must have been wonderful travellers, or they must have been mistaken in the time.

Here what are described as “five, long, slit-like chasms” yawned in the glacier. No doubt the Lyman Glacier, like most glaciers of its kind, has diminished very much in size in the past 56 years; at least there have been many changes in its contour, and it would be impossible to now locate the spot where these great crevasses existed.

¹ The author (1871-1931) was an original member of the American Alpine Club and one of the best-known mountaineers of the Pacific Coast, his biography appearing elsewhere in this issue. This story forms a chapter of an unpublished book. The Indian hero was still alive in 1921.—Ed.

Upon reaching the forks of the trail, Olney, who had never been in the mountains before, asked Lincoln which way he was going. Lincoln, a dare-devil sort of a fellow and one of the most reckless riders among the Yakimas, pointed to the chasms and said: "We cross right there!"

Olney immediately objected. He said it looked bad to him. Lincoln only laughed and told him to stay there if he did not want to go. Lincoln rode on, and Olney remained sitting on his horse at the forks of the trail. But when Lincoln presently called to him and assured him that he knew the trail while his friend did not, Olney finally joined him and they went on.

They reached the first of the crevasses about 3 o'clock. It was arched by a bridge of ice and they rode across without difficulty. The next one was also bridged a few yards farther up; but there was a raise of some three feet to get up onto the bridge, and Lincoln's horse refused to make the ascent. Abe rode back past Olney to the lower end of the crevasse. Olney, seeing that the ice was thin at that place, called to him to wait and let him lead across the bridge which he saw was thick and firm.

Lincoln made no answer. He rode out, over the abyss, upon the snow-covered ice. The horse took two steps. Suddenly the treacherous covering gave way—animal and rider crashed into the depths of the icy chasm. A hole five feet in diameter marked the place where they had disappeared.

Horse and man plunged downward into the frozen void, until at a point far below the surface, the narrowing walls came close together like pitiless jaws and held the body of the unfortunate animal as in a vise. The poor beast died immediately; but the Indian landed near the saddle upon its neck—uninjured.

Olney was horror-stricken. He felt that his friend must be dead, his body likely lost beyond recovery, while he was left alone in a wild mountain region with which he was unfamiliar. Dismounting from his horse, he cautiously approached the jagged hole in the snow, afraid of what he should find when he got there. Soon, however, he heard Lincoln's voice in answer to his own, and his relief was unspeakable. By carefully peering over the edge he could dimly make out the form of the other Indian and the dead horse in the depths far below. Back and forth the two discussed what was best to be done.

Before attempting to draw his companion from his precarious position, Olney asked Lincoln to let him try an experiment. With great difficulty Lincoln removed the saddle from the dead animal. Olney let down his rope and Abe tied his own rope to it. Olney then tried to draw the saddle up; but the rope cut into the ice and snow so that he could not get it to the surface.

This experiment showed the two Indians that it would be impossible for the one man unaided to draw the other from the icy depths. It was quickly agreed that Olney must set forth alone, unexperienced though he was, through a strange wilderness, to seek the camps of their people, far to the N.W. Lincoln instructed him to go back to the main trail and take the route leading farther to the N., and thus avoid the dangers of the shorter cut they had attempted. So Olney rode away, and Lincoln was left alone in the depths of his icy cavern, crouched upon the body of his dead horse, to face one of the strangest and most heart-breaking nights that ever fell to the lot of a human being.

The walls of the crevasse were dripping wet with the water that was melting from the ice. According to the best possible estimates Lincoln was down between 30 and 50 ft. He had no means of knowing how far he was from the bottom; but he could hear the water gurgling far below him. To save himself from perishing during the long hours of cold that were sure to follow he had only his double blanket which he had succeeded in retaining. He was in a cramped and torturing position; but there he must remain until help came, if ever it should come, for there was no possibility of his reaching any other spot. Added to his physical suffering was the dread uncertainty. Would his friend, inexperienced and alone on a wild mountain, be able to find his way to the camps of his people? Would he himself be strong enough to withstand the numbing cold until the dawn of another day and the coming of a rescue party? And Olney, too, might meet with accident and never deliver his call for help.

The long hours of the afternoon wore slowly away. The great shadow of the mountain was creeping eastward across the wooded hills toward the distant home of the Yakimas. But in the mind of one young Yakima was rising a doubt if he should ever see that home again. The chill increased as the day advanced. The ordeal of sitting cramped up and scarcely able to move throughout a long mountain night would have been terrible enough for a man sitting

on firm, dry rocks; but the imagination fails when one tries to visualize a man held between unyielding walls of ice, under a roof of crystalized snow, with ice-water constantly dripping upon him. Probably a more highly-strung mind would have snapped under the ordeal. But Lincoln was undoubtedly possessed, more or less, of the usual stoicism of his race. Then, too, he was young and inured to hardship; a hunter and rough-rider who had faced many a winter storm. Yet we can but marvel that he could even hope to see another day.

Darkness settled over the great mountain and still Lincoln was alone in his frigid cell. No help had come. Only the gurgling of the water far below; the occasional crunch of a rock settling more firmly in its icy bed; the rattle of stones clattering into a glacier-cleft; the subdued roar of a distant avalanche, gave sound to tell that nature was still grinding away at her age-long business of erosion. Came no halloo of rescuing friends; no cheery shout to say that help was near. The voices of the night were all of nature's making—man had no concern with the noises that were abroad.

Lincoln had to maintain his perch on the body of the horse. Should he once lose his position he would slip farther and farther down into the grip of those frigid jaws, wedging tighter and tighter through the pull of his own weight, the icy grasp of Death closing around him still more grimly, until the chill had sent the last spark of life from his frozen body and no earthly power could dislodge him from his glacial tomb.

Through the hole far above he could see that it was night. Possibly he caught the glint of a few stars, glittering with the deep intensity that marks the gleam of stars at such great altitudes. The rift in the snow was his only dial—to mark the hours of doom or the hours of hope!

How much of consciousness he maintained throughout the night we can but guess. Perhaps the time passed, for the most part, as a hideous nightmare. No doubt the blackness of despair was added to the darkness of his prison. Perchance he now and then dropped into a doze and dreamed of pleasant hunting grounds and gleaming camp-fires—only to wake again to the horror of his situation. Delirium may have held him for a spell. And yet we know throughout it all he kept enough of reason to hold his place upon the body of the horse.

One who has spent a sleepless night knows how interminable

are the hours. Even in the comfort of a warm bed, how the moments drag! And when the time is marked by suffering or discomfort, how that awful tedium is accentuated and drawn to the limit of endurance. Then what must it have been to this young Indian, freezing and alone, possibly assailed by superstitious fears, feeling, no doubt, that this was his last night on earth, facing an eternity that has appalled the wisest of mankind?

Seconds dragged into minutes and minutes into hours. The advance of the night was marked by the increase of cold. The poor Indian's cramped limbs became an intolerable torture. It seemed that the limit of human endurance had been reached; but the end was not yet. How far, how unsufferably far, we any of us may go after it seems that the end has been reached! Ages of agony were crowded into that one August night. But the world still turned on its axis and another day must come.

At last the light in the hole above grew stronger, so faintly stronger, and he knew that a laggard dawn was creeping on. With incredible slowness the pale glow increased, minute by minute, until at last, Abe Lincoln knew that the slumbering earth was waking to new life. Soon the great warm sun would come thundering up across the sage-brush plains of the Yakimas; but would it bring relief to him? Would his fellow Yakimas come with the coming of the sun?

The full day broke. But with it came no help for Lincoln. With numbed and blunted senses, hope dead in his heart, he now awaited the end. Morning wore toward noon; the glacial sounds revived; the tremendous drama of the mountain swept onward in its age-long course; but there was no note to herald the entrance of human actors. Ten o'clock, and still he was alone; growing weaker with each dragging minute. Another half hour passed, and then an hour. With the despair of coming death upon his heart, scarcely conscious now, his body huddled for its last sleep, the spirit of Abe Lincoln prepared to mount its steed and ride away to the happy hunting-grounds.

Meantime Charley Olney, stranger in a strange wilderness, after indescribable hardships, had succeeded in finding the camps of their people. The last one he came to was the camp in which his wife and his father-in-law were located. Just before he reached this, his horse had given out and had to be left. At 9 o'clock in the morning, Olney and his father-in-law, Yesmowit, set out with

ten followers on their mission of rescue. Yesmowit was mounted and Olney rode his wife's horse; the others were on foot. On the way another horseman joined them, thereby increasing the party to thirteen. In one of the camps they found an old blind medicine man named Spe-hah-kin who had two horses. He gave them the animals and told them to ride double turn about, until the horses were killed. They now had five horses for the thirteen men.

And now began a race against time for the life of Abe Lincoln. They rode double—two on each horse—the extra men running ahead on foot, some stripped to their shirts and moccasins with loin cloths about them. When a tired man was overtaken a rider changed with him, and thus they travelled, up the long slopes and over the jagged lava, until the two horses of the medicine man were exhausted and left on the trail.

The high lava trails on the N.E. slope of Mt. Adams are heart-breaking ones, under the most favorable conditions. The agonizing hardships endured by that determined band of hardy Indians, as they raced up the mountain-side to the rescue of their friend, may be imagined by those who have travelled similar trails—but never described.

It was full noon when at last they reached the scene of accident—exhausted and dreading what they might find. They cautiously approached the chasm roped together in couples. To their joy they found Lincoln still alive, but with legs cramped and stiffened almost beyond the power of motion—the whole man on the point of utter collapse. They succeeded in rousing him sufficiently to do what he could to aid in his own rescue.

They had rawhide lariats, each of which was from 25 to 30 ft. in length. It took a length and a half to reach the imprisoned man. Two lines of rope were let down, one from either side of the cleft. The edges of the ice were padded with folded blankets. Lincoln had strength enough left to place the prepared loops around his body. He was then drawn up with the two lines. As he approached the top, one rope slackened so as to permit him to swing to the other side. One of the Indians caught him by the hair and he was dragged out into the full light of day.

If the Indians' estimate of time was approximately correct, he had been in that icy hell for 22 hours, enduring what few men are given strength to endure.

After a two hours' rest he rode to camp behind Olney!