

West of the Stikine

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PHOTOGRAPHS of unclimbed Kate's Needle (10,002 ft.) and Devil's Thumb (9077 ft.) led me to plan, for my first post-war opportunity, a trip to the icy wilderness W. of the Stikine River. Although they do not rise so high as the great mountains farther to the N. W., these peaks of the Alaska-Canada Boundary are magnificent in their alpine grandeur and challenging in their technical difficulties. They are enclosed by the great boundary ice-cap, which stretches northward over 75 miles unbroken to the Whiting River, near Taku Glacier. Much of this ice-cap, from which rise countless rock peaks, is virtually unexplored, known to us (so far as it is known) only from aerial photographs. In 1907 the Boundary Commission prepared a remarkable topographic map, but left vast areas blank; and, having observed numerous errors, I should say that the Commission must have surveyed much of the region only superficially. Here, indeed, is one of Alaska's neglected mountain regions, not without mystery. The massive granite shaft of Devil's Thumb, visible from Petersburg, has inspired many mysterious Indian legends; and, to the Stikine tribe, ice-encrusted Kate's Needle is God.

Knowing of Fritz Wiessner's 1937 attempt on Kate's Needle, the first serious mountaineering endeavor, I asked him two years ago about a possible return. Together with Donald Brown, we made definite preparations last winter. Our plan was to make the approach from Wrangell by the famous Stikine River, route of early prospectors to the interior of British Columbia. The Great, Mud and Flood Glaciers all flow eastward from the ice-cap, nearly emptying into the Stikine River, and afford possible approaches to the peaks along the International Boundary. The 1937 party made use of the Flood Glacier, some 70 miles up the Stikine; and we decided to use this approach again, as we could thus reach both Kate's Needle and Devil's Thumb. We considered routes up the Patterson and Baird Glaciers from Thomas Bay (tidewater), but deemed them inadvisable: we had only 18 days. Long, steep ice-falls block the route from the Baird Glacier to the ice-cap near Devil's Thumb, and there are 12 additional miles of difficult travel to Kate's Needle.

On July 9th I met Fritz and Donald in Wrangell, whence Al Ritchie transported us up the swift river in his cozy little boat, en route to Telegraph Creek, B. C. Our big pile of duffel was deposited on a sandbar two miles from the 17-mile Flood Glacier. Immediately we set up a permanent base camp and hung all our food on ropes between two trees, the innumerable grizzly tracks having given us cause for worry. With the hope of avoiding excessive brush travel, we attempted to reach the moraine by the N. side of the Flood River. But after half a mile we became entangled in bad thickets, and we were forced off our course by a river fork. Devil's club and slide alder made the heavy back-packing relays very difficult and slow, and the never-satisfied mosquitoes were almost unbearable. Heavy rain, the plague of the Coast Range, added no little to our troubles. I should mention also that we had to pull our loads across a difficult river ford by Tyrolean traverse, a task that consumed half a day.

By July 14th all our gear was at the moraine, several days behind schedule. Moreover Fritz had sprained his knee in the brush, and we had to consider whether we should even continue. On July 15th Donald and I portered loads seven miles up the glacier, and the next day we all moved camp to a green spur at the glacier's edge, 13 miles from the Stikine. Just when our hopes had risen, inspired by Kate's great 6700-ft. N. face, they were dealt a trouncing blow. While Donald and I were a few miles down the glacier, bringing up the first relay, Fritz tested his knee on a steep slope. The response made it apparent that there was no justification for continuing. We all felt rather disheartened. Weather and lack of time had kept Fritz and Donald from success in 1937—and now this had to happen. We deposited some food and much of our equipment here; Fritz and Donald generously left some of their items, in the hope that I could organize another party for an expedition in August. On the 19th we returned to the moraine and on the next day continued to the river beach, building a crude log bridge at the river ford. I cleared a trail through the forest to facilitate future travel and caught the river boat for Wrangell on the 22nd.

A little telegraphing dispelled my pessimism: Bob Craig and Clifford Schmidtke would hasten from Seattle by the next boat! I bade farewell to Donald and Fritz, who had to return to the States, and spent almost a week with a survey party on the Stikine. My

new party arrived on July 30th, having had only two days in Seattle to get organized. The up-river voyage was rainy, but rain could not dampen our meteoric hopes: all of August was at our disposal. Wet skies delayed our departure from the sandbar, so we spent the time in carefully organizing our supplies and equipment. On August 2nd we packed heavy loads to the cache at the green spur. To our astonishment, the cache, which I had carefully protected, had been rifled. After superficial investigation, which was enough, we indicted some sagacious goats, now browsing on a distant hillside, safe from castigation. The main losses were some delicious cheese, salami, butter and sugar. The greedy beasts even chewed an empty Klim can. Clouds parted late the following morning, and we packed loads to the edge of the 6000-ft. ice plateau, some 3000 ft. above camp, which Bob had renamed "Pilferage Ridge." On the heather slopes we met a flock of ptarmigan. Displaying extraordinary accuracy, Cliff killed three with rocks and thus satisfied our lust for carnal revenge.

On the 4th clouds closed over Kate's Needle, our first objective, but the next day was better. On skis we moved camp four miles across the Flood Glacier to the northern foot of the icy giant. At midnight it began to rain; so we slept again, after cooking oatmeal by candlelight. But the fickle weather changed yet again; and at 7.15 we left camp, much concerned over the lateness of our start. For 3500 ft. our route was along the arête of a steep spur separating two icefalls from Kate's upper slopes. Once a very thin snow bridge gave us the jitters, and later a rotten bergschrund proved troublesome. I placed three ice pitons to safeguard a steep traverse and crawled over a difficult cornice to a healthier spot. The upper portion of the pointed spur was feasible, though steep. At noon we rested and ate some rations. We crossed a long, flat section of the upper glacier in a torrid heat and made our way in excellent time to the ridge W. of the final summits, at 9200 ft. The last 1000 ft. had been most tiring, because most of the snow was knee-deep and unsettled.

We could now see the quaint trio of ice summits close above us. Tremendous cornices overhung the N. faces. The W. summit had a striking fluted ice-face. Apparently the only route to the center summit was by the S. side, away from cornices and an unconsolidated, very steep leeward slope. All N. slopes seemed powdery and unstable; the wind-crusted S. and W. slopes were safer. We

alternated leads up the ice ridge toward the spiked W. summit, sometimes climbing on wind crust and at intervals breaking through to our knees. The climax of this ridge was a menacing cornice. We traversed several hundred feet to the right and then mounted, kicking steps in steep, firm *névé*, to the ridge that leads S. from the W. summit. We ascended the narrow snow *arête* to a point within a few feet of its apex on the W. summit and then began gingerly traversing eastward, constantly belaying. Because the S. face began to drop very abruptly, we had to stay uncomfortably close to the cornice system atop the fluted ice-face. As we passed the draw between the W. and center peaks, difficulties decreased. We quickly kicked steps on thin ice, slightly over 45°, and climbed happily to the summit at 7.

To do justice to our feelings then would be almost impossible. We had, however, little time for exhilaration. It was cold, clouds had enveloped the landscape, and a storm was all about us. We briefly admired the magnificent scenery, especially Devil's Thumb, the region E. of the Stikine, and the great E. face of Kate's Needle dropping to the Mud Glacier. Here we noted an error in the map—the omission of a large glacial cirque to our S. We left a ski pole 50 ft. below the summit, jammed in a rock crack, and began the delicate traverse and descent. Our steps facilitated travel greatly, and we made excellent time to the gentler slopes below 9000 ft. The weather was not so helpful: a howling wind struck the mountain. We ran and waded down the unsettled glacier slope to the top of the spur, becoming engulfed in inky darkness. A light drizzle fell as we moved down in our steps on the 50° spur with flashlights. The rain had made the slope mushy and created an acute avalanche danger. Reconnaissance by flashlight having revealed the impracticability of an alternate route, we descended via the awkward cornice and *bergschrand*, again using ice pitons. Sleepy and wet, but with some semblance of happiness, we crawled into our tent at 4.30 A.M.

Because of the precipitation we had no incentive to break camp that day, and anyhow we thought we deserved a day of rest before beginning the push for Devil's Thumb, the next objective on our itinerary. On the 8th we skied back to "Pilferage Ridge" and were happy to see that this time the goats had not annoyed our cache. Effective rock barriers would have stopped them, had they tried. On the following day, packing 70-lb. loads up the rocky 3000-ft.

spur, we established base camp for activities on the plateau, at the site of our earlier cache. We built a rock base on the ice for our tent; and, considering the violence of the weather the next day, we felt that our labors were justified. In such a raging storm as this, we had to postpone our push across the ice plateau to Devil's Thumb. A storm like this one shows the necessity of always being stocked with a safe margin of food. At times travel becomes absolutely impossible.

Three days we spent in sleeping, cooking complicated dishes, discussing philosophy, and reading a volume of Emerson's essays. This delay meant a shortage of food; and on the 13th we left camp intact, enjoyed a 1000-ft. ski chase, and rambled down the glacier in the rain to the Stikine. When we returned on the ensuing afternoon, we were greeted by a chilly snow storm. But the wind that brought it managed also to clear the skies. On the 15th, under a brilliant sun, we skied five and a half miles across the plateau, with heavy loads. Devil's Thumb looked terrific—like a truncated Matterhorn, only steeper. Verglas and ice patches clung to the granite diorite at amazing angles. Binoculars helped us to study our proposed route on the S. face and E. ridge. We pegged our tent at 6000 ft., in a wind-eroded schrund adjacent to a rock wall, and went to sleep with plans for an immediate attempt.

When we left the tent at 3, the sky had become overcast. A warm wind and red sunrise left no doubt of the meteorological prospects for the day. But because of the yet high clouds we decided to make a hasty reconnaissance and laid out a route up the glacier to the S. base of the Thumb at 7000 ft. We crossed the bergschrund by a rotten snow bridge and worked with great care up the crusted 50° névé slope above. Well belayed, we climbed along the base of a rock wall, chopping numerous steps, and then climbed steep rock and ice to the tip of a rock buttress at 8000 ft. Swirling mists soon enclosed the forbidding upper S. face. After pushing onward another 200 ft., we descended again, caching most of our food and equipment at the buttress point. The last hour of our return to camp was very miserable: an icy downpour soaked us. The next day we were still wet and very unhappy.

We arose late on the 18th, expecting the worst, but found our peak "out" and the skies clearing. We left camp at 10.30, fully expecting to be benighted, but hopeful of success. We felt that, if we were to wait another day, the weather might turn bad again—

and our opportunity would be gone. Again we crossed the rotten bergschrund and climbed the difficult ice and rock to the cache in the early afternoon. Then we continued up precipitous snow and rock slopes on the S. face, carefully belaying the entire distance, to a point at above 8600 ft., just below a notch in the E. ridge. The summit of Devil's Thumb is at the extreme W. corner of the S. face. This extra distance increases the difficulty of attaining it.

Overhangs and verglas seemed to preclude possibilities of reaching the E. ridge closer to the summit, at least for the present. We climbed three rope lengths of wet rock in tennis shoes on the E. ridge, moving several times along the edge of the S. face to avoid impassable ridge steps. Then we were frustrated by a sheer pinnacle, which had previously aroused our apprehension. There appeared to be absolutely no route over or around this barrier, but after some bickering we decided to make an attempt from a subsidiary block and hope for the best. Well belayed by Bob, I set out and began hammering pitons in two tiny cracks on the slightly overhanging left face of the holdless block. The right side of the block was crusted by verglas and not even blessed with piton cracks. I stood on a sling in the highest piton, placed two more pitons, and with the help of slings swarmed over the edge of the block onto an uncertain slab. This was cold exercise: the rock was wet, and the wind was blowing in icy gusts; and we had been in the shade for some time, since night was coming on. Another 15 ft. of slab and I reached the base of the pinnacle, spotting a possibility of traversing the overhanging S. face. After considerable effort I managed to place a key protecting piton and then inched down, along the edge of the pinnacle. With tension and the aid of a knotted sling, I lowered myself obliquely down an awkward overhang and traversed a few feet to the only belay ledge on the outward-leaning face.

Cliff soon joined me on the tiny ledge, now overcrowded; and we stood shivering, eyeing the V-shaped crack leading to the ridge behind the pinnacle. Cliff had Bramani boots, which would be more useful than tennis shoes in the icy crack. An ice piton and a sling helped him over an ice bulge, beyond which he worked up a treacherous slope to a notch in the ridge. He then called that all was well and belayed Bob and me as we moved to his perch. I was happy to put my boots on again, because my feet were almost frozen. Darkness was closing in, so we began to look for a bivouac spot. We worked another 100 ft. up the ridge—Cliff placing sev-

eral safety pitons—and were greeted by an even icier wind. We rappelled down this last pitch to a more sheltered spot, leaving the rope intact for an ascent by Prusik knot slings in the morning. By 11 we had dug a cavity in a snow patch and anchored ourselves. We were in no hurry in this digging: the exercise kept us warm.

Time seemed to pass slowly as we shivered in our cramped habitat. Worse yet, the weather, which had been clear and cold, looked treacherous. When light appeared in the E., we continued our upward climb along the ridge, up a very narrow snow arête to a sharp point. The summit was not unduly distant, but Fate was against us: snow began to fall. Reluctantly we began a retreat, not oblivious of the consequences of being caught in a storm on this exposed ridge. When we reached the buttress at 9, the clouds rifted as suddenly as they had formed—a perfect bluff. We made a frustrating decision to return to camp on account of a general food shortage and the danger of extending ourselves on the ridge in this uncertain weather. We rappelled down the rocks and ice to the bergschrund and made our way back to camp. After a hot meal Bob and Cliff skied five and a half miles to the edge of the plateau for the remainder of our food. They returned after dark.

By noon on the next day a promising young storm had grown into a torrent and wiped out any doubt man might have had of nature's power in this region. The 60-mile-an-hour gale poured rain through the tent all afternoon. Before we devised a system of drainage canals, 14 gallons of water had been passed out the door by the Bucket Brigade. The fury continued for three more days, unabated, and we were glad that our supply of food was adequate. We later learned that the Stikine had risen three feet during this blizzard! Rain had eaten away nearly all our peripheral tent support, and we were sleeping on a tiny, wet citadel. A new worry arose when a crevasse opened four feet from the tent door and Bob almost stepped through. Hopes for success were now rapidly fading, for our deadline was near. Much of our conversation, indeed, had to do with plans for a new assault next year, definitely slated for June. We finally had to repitch the tent, hindered in our efforts by winds, a steady snowfall, and our general stiffness.

On August 24th we awoke to find the weather gloriously clear, but the Thumb towering in powdered whiteness. We climbed to 7500 ft. and, as we expected, found the fresh snow unreasonably hazardous on the steep ice slope. The hot sun melted much snow

off the rocks, however, and we laid plans for a final attempt on the morrow. This would allow little extra time, for we had to catch the boat on the 27th. At 3 A.M. we were off again, and under a crystal-clear sky we made excellent time to the buttress point. For once it seemed that we were due for more than one day of fair weather. We spent some time exploring the possibility of obliquely traversing the great slabs of the S. face to the W., toward the summit; but, because of the fresh and loose snow atop the smooth slabs, I considered it unduly dangerous. Cliff led up the very difficult block, using the previously placed pitons. This time he found the ice piton in the V-crack unnecessary. The sun was strong and the wind negligible. The climbing was enjoyable, except for fresh snow on the rock.

At noon we reached our previous high mark at the snow point, high on the E. ridge, and were elated to see a route more hopeful than we had expected over a sharp ridge step, the last apparent major obstacle. We worked along the ridge, straddling several narrow blocks, and reached a recess at the foot of the imposing ridge step. From a piton belay I traversed left and up, over the overhanging S. ridge rim, using a lateral crack and tiny claw holds, to a fine belay ledge. Then a traverse over steep, snow-covered rock brought us to the crest of the ridge atop the icy step. Now the worst was over. Success seemed certain. We lowered ourselves in turn down an icy, tilted block and then traversed the narrow ridge 600 ft. to the summit, all but forgetting the tremendous exposure. The ice-plastered N. face plummets 5000 ft., almost vertically, to the S. arm of the Baird Glacier. The summit is an airy perch.

We spent a most enjoyable hour, lunching, admiring the glacial vista, studying various peaks and glaciers, and taking bearings. Atmospheric conditions were so clear that Mounts Fairweather and Crillon were plainly visible, 228 miles to the N. W. We regretted that we had no time this summer for Mount Ratz and Mount Burkett, with its satellite needle. Peaks farther N. along the ice cap were attractive, if not spectacular. Several jagged rock peaks fringing the Baird Glacier looked as if they would provide interesting climbs. The Baird would offer a good route to the Mount Ratz area, but steep icefalls make the final approaches to Devil's Thumb difficult. To the E., in British Columbia, we again observed several interesting high summits, in the vicinity of Mount Hickman; and in the opposite direction we could make out the forested chan-

nels and islands of the Inland Passage. We built a cairn on a ledge beneath the summit block and left the customary notes in a can. At 3 we left. We made the descent mostly by roping down. The rappel from the pinnacle was very spectacular: one kept 15 to 20 ft. away from the wall for the last 85 ft. We found the rest of the descent uneventful, but took great care, and reached camp at about 8.

Before leaving camp at 11 A.M. on the 26th, we spent an hour skiing, in wonderful conditions. Skis were a blessing on the plateau; they saved us from much laborious plodding. In beautiful weather we skied to the slopes above the Flood Glacier. The remainder of the jaunt to the river was somewhat tiring, especially in the moraine and the forest, where I had to find the route in the dark. At 2 A.M. we reached base camp, having travelled 20.5 miles. We built a roaring bonfire and watched another glorious sunrise while we devoured a much needed breakfast. In a few more hours Al Ritchie's boat skimmed around the bend on its downstream voyage.