

Gothics East Peak and Sundry Other Matters

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TWICE in my climbing career it has been my good fortune to join forces with the same two pleasant companions. It was on the 1946 St. Elias Expedition that my admiration for Bill Putnam and Ben Ferris received its conclusive confirmation; and it was there, too, that I was privileged to witness the establishment of that renowned firm, Colossal Enterprises, Inc.

Those few poorly informed persons to whom the term Colossal Enterprises is meaningless should carefully scrutinize the lines below in penance for their shameful ignorance. Colossal Enterprises is a construction company, famed for its engineering and architectural feats, such as the building of bridges, snow houses, stone monuments and peculiar cairns. The management consists of President Bill Putnam and General Manager Ben Ferris, who comprise the directorate and have a permanent controlling interest in the corporation's affairs. Part ownership in the company (but under no circumstances more than 5%) may be obtained by purchasing the common stock, available at this time only at the Main Office. On payment of one hundred dollars (\$100.00), the President will hand you an engraved certificate, bearing the great seal of the Corporation and representing one (1) share of common stock. This certificate may be redeemed at the option of the General Manager or the President for the sum of one cent (\$.01) upon surrender of the certificate, properly endorsed. Or it may be disposed of on the open market, at the owner's risk. Current quotations read "Nothing Bid, Nothing Asked."

It was with the management of this company, and with the corporation's mascot, Skagway (a well-known mountaineer who once almost slipped into membership in the American Alpine Club), that I set out on 5 July 1948 from Swan Creek on the banks of the Columbia River on a long-projected undertaking. Plans called for a complete crossing of the Northern Selkirks, from the Adamant Range to Flat Creek on the Canadian Pacific Railroad—a distance, as the eagle flies, of roughly 70 miles. This country, rarely visited,

consists of high ranges, deep valleys and almost impenetrable forest. A second party, under Sterling Hendricks, was to set out simultaneously from Flat Creek and move in the opposite direction, somewhat in co-ordination with our group.

The route we expected to follow had never previously been crossed in its entirety.¹ In addition to our wanderings, we planned to ascend as many peaks as convenient along the way. We had only three weeks at our disposal—not much time if we were to accomplish all we set out to do. Fortunately, arrangements had been made to have a plane drop supplies on a convenient snow field in the Adamant Range.

Limitations of space prevent me from giving a detailed account of our feats; but perhaps this is all for the best, since such an account would tend to become tedious. In brief, three weeks later, right on schedule, after crossing eleven high passes and cols, and with six to ten first ascents to our credit (the figures vary according to the individual, the audience and the amount of alcohol consumed), we emerged victorious at Flat Creek. Our trail—for indeed Colossal Enterprises had virtually transformed everything along the way into a graded trail—was marked with countless stone monuments, some of them 15 feet high, as well as the entrails and blood of voracious wild animals, whose attacks had been repelled by the prompt and courageous action of the General Manager. We still looked strong and well-fed, for on our way we had consumed vast quantities of food, including a supply of bottled beer and rum successfully *free-dropped* from the plane.

Familiar Colossal Enterprise tactics were employed throughout the expedition, best exemplified by a long-legged, infuriated pace, with hourly pauses for the construction of stone idols. To discuss in detail my struggles to keep abreast of my more energetic companions would be superfluous as well as humiliating. That they

¹ See the note on page 227, below. A note from Dr. J. Monroe Thorington summarizes the general route as follows: from the mouth of Swan Creek to its source; thence through Thor Pass and across a pass in Azimuth Mountain; thence across Silvertip névé through Palisade Pass to Sir Sandford Glacier; thence across Sir Sandford Glacier S. to Moberly Pass; thence via Centurion Glacier and part of Argentine Glacier to a high pass at the head of Gold Stream and one part of Bachelor Creek; thence across unnamed glacier and glaciated col to the Bachelor-Downie Pass; thence along flanks of Sorcerer Mountain to Tangier summit; thence to Farm Creek, up Farm Creek to Bostock summit, and finally down Bostock Valley to Flat Creek.—*Ed.*

condescended to tolerate my clumsiness, and even to hurry to my rescue on countless embarrassing occasions, is a tribute to their spirit of cooperation; that they maintained their good humor in the face of my grumbles and general incompetence bears testimony to their good sportsmanship. While I may deserve a certain amount of credit for drawing up the general plans of the expedition, the directors of Colossal Enterprises deserve virtually all praise in the execution.

One day in particular marked the climax of our trip. July 16th has been our lucky mountaineering day. On this date two years before, we stood on the summit of Mount St. Elias; and one year ago, with other companions, I had reached the top of Mount Butters in the Battle Range. Perhaps it is more than coincidence that this success should come to us on the feast day of St. Elias, the mountain-saint whose special mountain we had scaled two years previously.

Under a cloudless sky we set out at 6.30 A.M. on July 16th from our campsite in the lovely heather meadow on the south edge of the Granite Glacier at 6000 feet altitude. Our plan was to make a second ascent of Pioneer Peak (10,660 ft.) and to attempt a first ascent of its precipitous neighbor, the east peak of the Gothics (10,550 ft.). Both of these peaks belong to the sharp, igneous outcropping which makes up the Adamant Range. The mountains here have the needle-like yet heavily glaciated characteristics of the Chamonix Alps. For instance, the east peak of the Gothics, undoubtedly one of the more formidable summits, has been described by Howard Palmer in the following terms:

"The easterly peak of The Gothics near us presented a most forbidding aspect, for it was nothing but a thin wall and, seen end-on, looked like a steeple . . . We had never seen such a summit on a mountain of equal importance anywhere in the Rockies or Selkirks before. It reminded us strongly of views of the Grépon."²

Since there was some thought in my mind that this peak might prove itself beyond our collective powers, I was relieved when Putnam, masterfully plotting a route through the huge crevasses, began to lead the way in the direction of Pioneer Peak, temporarily by-passing the east peak. From the Pioneer-Gothics col, where we

² Howard Palmer, *Mountaineering and Exploration in the Selkirks* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1914), p. 215.

emerged a few moments later, the east peak cut like a dagger into the morning air, remote and terrifying. A steep rib of snow—or ice—led to the rocks, which, as far as I could see, were unclimbable. I cast my ballot in favor of Pioneer Peak, and was heartily seconded by Ferris and by Skagway's bark of assent.

Just three hours later (for the col is only some five or six hundred feet from the top), Putnam removed an aluminum cylinder from Palmer's cairn on the summit of Pioneer Peak. It was with thrill and curiosity that we stared at the signature of Holway, Butters and Palmer, inscribed at this very spot more than 35 years ago. In the intervening years this crest had remained inviolate.

Though Skagway and I strongly dissented, Putnam's enthusiasm for the east peak kept increasing in proportion with his growing realization of its difficulty. As for Ferris, he seemed willing to try anything once. Since Putnam's vote, under the charter of Colossal Enterprises, heavily outweighed the combined voices of the dog and myself, it was decided, not without voiced and growled opposition, to attempt the east peak.

We retraced our steps to the Gothics-Pioneer col, where Putnam exhibited his sense of the macabre by rolling huge boulders down the black 2000-foot abyss on the south, much to my discomfort. Then, after a few moments' pause, we started up the steep slopes, Putnam in the lead.

Fortunately, the ice was covered by a thick layer of snow, so we were able to kick steps to the base of the rocks some 200 feet above. Here we left our few extra belongings and tied the dog to a boulder. That lucky animal was not to endure our trials!

We proceeded next for a brief distance over easy rocks along a sharp knife-edge, which fell vertically on either side. We were now climbing one at a time, Putnam leading the way with a stout belay from Ferris. Reluctantly and ignominiously, I brought up the rear.

We had gone barely 100 feet when Putnam came to a halt beneath a vertical gendarme which refused to yield to persistent frontal attack. Half-heartedly, and without much enthusiasm, I volunteered to attempt to circumvent this obstacle by crossing below on tiny exposed ledges which overhung the 2500-foot south wall. This process, I reasoned, might take me to an evil-looking recess which vanished out of sight behind the gendarme. It was

my hope, rather than my conviction, that this recess would lead fairly easily back to the ridge above.

Hardly had I made the suggestion when Putnam rejected it as impractical and naive. Instead, he insisted on leading the way around the slightly less exposed but perhaps more difficult north side. Here a tongue of 70-degree ice adhered precariously to the near-vertical cliff, and led towards something which, from below, had appeared to be a small crack in the smooth granite face.

As I watched, Putnam worked his way carefully over frost-loosened stones to the base of the ice, armed with axe, pitons, hammer and karabiners. Slowly he chopped his way up the 15-foot ribbon of ice, exercising extreme care in order not to shatter the thin veneer which provided the only footing. At last he reached the base of the rock.

Additional struggles, plus the solid hammering of two pitons, brought him into a small sentry-box, where Ben joined him a few moments later, while I worked my way to a solid position at the edge of the ice. Then Putnam accomplished the outstanding feat of the day. A narrow, 30-foot vertical chimney, broken by a cumbersome chockstone, still blocked the way to the ridge. Gradually and with manifest effort, our leader wormed his way upward. Several times he paused to rest. Ice and water in the chimney numbed his fingers. Anxiously we watched him as he negotiated the last few treacherous feet above the chockstone. Finally a shout of triumph heralded his discovery of a secure belay-point. Ben followed quickly; and, in my clumsy manner, I scrambled up third.

Putnam continued ahead, along the knife-edge ridge, towards the summit. A final short tricky pitch, overhanging the south cliffs, delayed him for a moment. Seconds later we three sat atop the east peak of the Gothics.

We scratched our initials into the lichen-covered granite, constructed a suitable monument, and then started down. Our descent was uneventful: Putnam belayed Ferris and me down the difficult crack and ice slope, then rappelled off the face of the gendarme to join us. A few feet beyond, Skagway's tail-wag welcomed us back to somewhat less than vertical terrain.

I might also recount our ascent of Mount Wotan, in the course of which Skagway engaged in a spectacular feat of daring. Or I might tell of the Quadrant climb, where I was supposed to star, but

did not. Or I might mention the General Manager's fine work on Mount Argentine, near Bachelor Col, which we believed to be unclimbed, but on whose summit an unmistakably large cairn ridiculed our efforts. Or I might recall Mount Colossal and the ascent of the Houdini Needles, or our long pilgrimage to Flat Creek. But I shall let these adventures go by the board and keep them in mental reserve for the future.³

The east peak of the Gothics remains, in my mind, our crowning climb of the season. Indeed I think I can say that the climb was perhaps the finest mountaineering achievement in which I have had the privilege to participate. I have warm memories of two splendid companions, and of their courage and resourcefulness.

³ Evidently the author's reticences, in this paragraph, are as colossal as the corporation's enterprises. Dr. J. Monroe Thorington lists the following first ascents to the expedition's credit: Colossal (first peak N.W. of Unicorn), Quadrant (N.W. edge of The Gothics), Wotan, Damon and Pythias (N.W. end of Gothics *névé*), E. peak of The Gothics. He mentions also the expedition's second ascents of Pioneer Peak and Sentinel, and its climbs on Argentine and Azimuth.—*Ed.*