

## The Ascent of Glacier Peak

13-21 August 1905

THOMAS RIGGS

[A letter from the Hon. Noel J. Ogilvie, International Boundary Commissioner for Canada, makes the best preface to this account of a climb by our late Honorary Member Governor Thomas Riggs, former Governor of Alaska and for many years before his death International Boundary Commissioner for the United States. Glacier Peak is 10,436 feet high.—*Ed.*]

“My acquaintance with Tom Riggs goes back to 1905, when we were engaged on the survey of the International Boundary between British Columbia and Washington, through the mountainous country west of the Skagit River. He was in charge of a United States party and I of a Canadian; and on one occasion, when completely out of supplies, he came across my main food cache and helped himself. He kept an inventory, and a settlement was made at the end of the season; but the incident seemed to bring us together and was the beginning of a lifelong and sincere friendship.

“As years passed our lives followed different routes, but we came together once more as heads of the enterprise on which we had met as young men. In 1935 he was appointed International Boundary Commissioner for the United States; and, as I was his colleague on the Commission, we spent the last ten years of his life in close and happy association.

“Here he describes a climb to the boundary triangulation station on the summit of Glacier Peak, one of the more difficult mountains in that very rugged bit of country. The following summer I had occasion to make the same climb myself, but by a different route. Such trips, which would ordinarily entail a planned expedition, were tackled by the boundary surveyors as incidents in the day’s work.”

NOEL J. OGILVIE

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I HAD just occupied Whitworth to the northwest of Glacier, and Glacier was the only point to the west of the Skagit River to be occupied in connection with the work of the International Boundary Commission.

Raeburn, the year before, had climbed the peak and erected a signal, but then he went light, carrying merely a hatchet and a drill. I had not thought to ask him the route he took, and his only comment on the trip had been that he had slept out on the mountain for two nights and didn't want any more of it.

On August 10th, I moved my camp from Whitworth over to a ridge running into the north side of Glacier. At this time the air was too smoky for observation, so I decided to explore for an easy route up to the triangulation mark. The first day I sent Neuner—my assistant—down into the creek bottom and around up to where the stream breaks out from the mountains, while I kept on over the ridge, looking for a shorter route.

After getting to a peak on the ridge, I ran up against what I thought was an insurmountable barrier in the shape of an almost perpendicular cliff running down to the creek; but after looking around, I ran across a narrow cleft in the rocks. This I determined to explore. It was steep—awfully steep—but the footing was good, and with the help of a rope I carried, I lowered myself over several jump-offs of 20 feet or more, and in the course of an hour or two found myself just below where the stream seemed to gush from the rocks.

Another hour put me at the source, and a most wonderful scene unfolded itself before my eyes.

Nothing I have ever seen can equal it for grandeur. Here at an elevation of 8000 feet lay a lake of indigo, over a mile long, its lower end confined by a narrow ridge of rock in places not more than 20 feet wide and broken in one place only where the outflow dashed through a crevice only a few feet wide and fell almost sheer for several hundred feet.

At the upper end the huge glacier, from which the triangulation point gets its name, breaks off in the water from a perpendicular wall of 75 or more feet, covering the surface of the water with innumerable miniature icebergs, carved into most fantastic shapes; all around stood steep rocky cliffs, while back of the glacier towered the peak with its little cairn of rock on the topmost pinnacle.

From where I stood it looked feasible to make the ascent from the north up over the glacier to a hogback running toward the east, so by dint of hard work I skirted the lake and climbed up on the glacier. For a time I thought I was going to meet with success, but soon the ice became more broken, and after jumping several crevasses from three to six feet wide, I ran up against a crack which must have been at least 20 feet wide, extending from one side of the ravine to the other—and no way of getting around it.

I lay down on my stomach and tried to estimate the depth of the ice but had to give it up. Bottom was not visible, and all one could see at a great depth was a haze of blue. Like the villain in the play, I was "foiled again" with my goal in sight. So, dejectedly, I made my way back toward camp. At the mouth of the lake I met Neuner, and together we climbed back down to the main creek and then up to camp.

The next day we explored the west side, but soon gave that up as we ran up against a precipice which did not even have a roosting place on it for a bird.

I then determined to have a try from the east, so moved my camp into the creek about five miles from where I was camped.

For several days it stormed almost continuously, which laid the smoke and gave us time to move a box of provisions, the two theodolite boxes and tripod up on the ridge, a day's journey.

At last on the 19th at daybreak we pulled out—Neuner, Beall and I.

Six hours of climbing took us to the instrument boxes and the grub. Three hours more took us to the foot of another glacier on the southwest slope which looked climbable.

I led out, cutting steps in the ice for half a mile or so and then ran up against the usual crevasse and had to turn back.

The only other possible course was over a high cliff connected with the main mountain by a hogback.

I yelled back to the boys to try that route while I explored around the glacier a little more. I soon gave this up and hurried on to join them.

They had started up a cleft when I caught up with them and were in trouble at a stiff little climb over some smoother rocks. I saw what I thought was a better way over a wall of jagged rock.

For a way, the climbing was easy, hand- and footholds were

where they were wanted except near the top, where in one place it would be necessary for me to swing myself out over a projecting rock. I wound my fingers into the crevices of the rock and gave a heave, expecting to draw myself to the top.

Then—the rock gave way, and I was falling.

Backward I went. Strange to say, I was not frightened. I thought, "Well, I am dead. I'm sorry for my family." Then I struck on my shoulders and back of my neck. "No, I am not dead," I thought, "but I have broken every bone in my body." Another bump, this time on my chest, and a slide, mixed up with rock and debris, and I came to sitting on a ledge with my feet hanging over another drop of 50 feet or more, and filled with a feeling of mild surprise and, strange to say, unhurt, with the exception of a sprained wrist and one or two cuts on my head and shoulders.

I had evidently turned a back somersault, landed on the ledge with my shoulders, some 15 feet below, bounced around in the air, dropped to another ledge lower down and then slid down the only place where it was possible to slide and not drop for a hundred feet to where I brought up.

Altogether my tumble was about 75 feet. As soon as I could get my breath I answered the inquiries of the boys as to the state of my health and climbed up to where they were, gathering up my hat and tripod on the way.

We then climbed to the top of the knob without accident. It being then nearly five o'clock, we cached the instrument and got back to timberline where we made supper and camped for the night.

It froze hard that night, and the wind blew, and altogether we were most miserable. No blankets, very little wood and a failure.

The next morning as soon as we could see to move we were at it again, and a pretty little crew we were—sleepy, hollow-eyed and hungry, as we had only brought enough for the one day.

We climbed without incident to the instrument and found we had another cliff to go down before we could reach the hogback.

Neuner's nerve gave out, and with some profanity he told me what he thought of trying to get to the top.

"All right," I said, "go back to camp, but I am going to try once more and if I can't make it this time, I'll give it up."

I then told Beall that I would take one of the boxes and the

tripod and if he saw me wave "all right" to come on with the other box.

Here was really the hardest part of the whole trip. After getting down on to the hogback, I found that it ran up to a sharp point with only a few little cracks on the side to navigate on. In places I had to straddle the top and "coon" it, while the wind nearly toppled me over. In another place was a jump of four or five feet with a narrow ledge to light on and both sides nearly perpendicular for a thousand feet or more.

At last I got to the main mountain and waved O. K., and Beall started over and Neuner started back.

I watched Beall for 15 or 20 minutes and saw that he was wavering, so I crossed the hogback once more, took his pack and piloted him to the main mountain. From here to the top the climb was steep but not dangerous, and at half-past one we stood on the summit.

The day was a grand one. To the west lay Baker and Shuksan with the dim line of the Olympics across Puget Sound, to the south the rest of Custer Ridge, to the east Hozomeen and the Okanogan Mountains, visible to the ridge way east of the Similkameen River, and to the north the low rolling hills of the Caribou country.

My work took two hours and a half and then we started back. Beall swore he could not carry his pack across the hogback, but he did and we were at timberline by dark.

One more night we spent in misery, and by the time we reached camp the next morning at ten o'clock, we were pretty nearly all in.

I told the packer to get up the mules and we would move that afternoon to the top of the ridge. Then I lay down on my blankets for a short rest. I had just gotten to sleep when they woke me up and said everything was packed except Beall's and my blankets. It was then three o'clock.

That night it snowed on Glacier and in consequence it was impassable for the rest of the season.

A few days later a letter came in from the chief topographer telling me to re-occupy Glacier and tie on to a new point in the south.

To him went my regrets that, owing to snow on the peak, I would not be able to make the trip again this season.