

Operation Oppy

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JULY 12th, 1946 . . . The full moon, shining down upon the North Saskatchewan River that evening, silhouetted a curious spectacle. Three human figures piled high with packs and duffel, and carrying long poles in the manner made familiar by St. Christopher, were splashing and staggering through the river's swollen channels toward the Banff-Jasper highway. A little later, they reached their camp and cars, at the corral-fenced gravel flat pleasantly named the "Graveyard," and sat down heavily.

The party consisted of Fred Ayres, of Portland, Oregon; Frank Cavenagh, of Cleveland; and the writer. We had returned from a rather strenuous back-packing excursion up the Alexandra River to the Lyell-Alexandra group on the Continental Divide. I say up the *river* advisedly, as a large part of the trip was under water. It had rained every day; the Castleguard and Alexandra Rivers had risen greatly and submerged much of the trail, where there was any trail; and we could only be thankful not to have been marooned on the west bank of the North Saskatchewan looking hungrily across at the highway. No peaks had been climbed, and all we had to show for our efforts were memories of an acrobatic attempt on the ice cliff of the Alexandria Glacier at the foot of Mount Alexandra, and of another jaunt up the East Alexandra Glacier where we turned back in driving rain, and of views of the great rock and ice cliffs sweeping up into the clouds swirling overhead. We did succeed in photographing the Forbes dirt bands on the Alexandra Glacier, which excited the interest of Mr. Joel Ellis Fisher.¹

And we had seen Mount Oppy, or rather parts of it. According to Dr. Thorington, it was the highest unclimbed mountain in the Canadian Rockies. Its 10,940-foot summit had generally been well concealed, but the real reason why it had remained unclimbed

¹ *American Journal of Science*, 245: 137-45, March 1947. Cf. *A.A.J.*, VI (1947), 331.

was clearly just what might have been expected: no obvious way up. Outram had made the first ascent of Lyell No. 2 from this side of the range,² and Sterling Hendricks and Rex Gibson had ascended the East Alexandra Glacier to the col from which they made the first ascent of Mount Farbus,³ but otherwise this side of the wall of peaks had been left severely alone. Would-be climbers took a circuitous route over Thompson Pass to the north, or came in from the south to attack Mount Lyell up its long and relatively easy south glacier. Writing of Mount Farbus, Palmer and Thorington say, "Cliffs prevent further traverse of the main crest toward Mt. Oppy."⁴

Clearly, an "Operation" was called for. Nothing less would do. After further roaming, which took us up Bugaboo Spire and Howser Spire in the Purcells, Assiniboine, and Mount Louis near Banff, Fred and I parted in the Tetons with plans to meet again in 1947.

August 1947 . . . The "Graveyard" again—this time with rubber boat, lifeboat emergency rations, mountain infantry tents, and air mattresses. "Operation Oppy" was under way! The party at this point numbered five; but illness eliminated one, and Fred bit hard on a date, in unjustified confidence that the pit had been removed as advertised, and split a tooth. With Fred also laid up for repairs, the party set forth without its two best rock climbers. At least the remaining three, Don Davis, Don Woods and John Oberlin, had first names which rhymed, an omen of harmony. We found, in practice, that a certain amount of confusion also resulted, since we did not always enunciate clearly.

After fording the North Saskatchewan by a route Fred and I had previously prospected and marked, we cached some emergency supplies (the boat was not used) and started up the Alexandra River. By keeping to the flats as much as possible we made fairly good time, but as we approached the fork of the Castle-

² James Outram, *In The Heart of the Canadian Rockies* (New York: Macmillan, 1905), pp. 388-94.

³ S. B. Hendricks, "Summer Ascents of Columbia, North Twin and Farbus," *A.A.J.*, III (1938), 151.

⁴ *A Climber's Guide to the Rocky Mountains of Canada*, 3rd ed. (A.A.C., 1940), p. 149.

guard River our troubles began. Both Ron and I lost our footing in the icy water and had to battle hard to regain it, weighed down as we were by 65-pound packs. Eventually we reached the Castle-guard, but it was high, so we pitched camp with the feeling that we had done enough for one day.

The next morning (1 August 1947) Ron prospected a crossing while Don and I broke camp. After retreating with difficulty from an attempt upstream, Ron followed my last year's zigzag route, which I pointed out from the comfort of the bank, and he was soon across. When Don and I followed, we found a fire going to dry out by while we made up a cache of food and equipment not needed on the mountain. Then we crossed the box canyon of the Alexandra on Hendricks' and Gibson's pole bridge and cramponed up the lower icefall of the East Alexandra Glacier. The day was lovely, and the peaks glittered in the sunlight. Oppy, visible this time, seemed as remote as ever.

We had even thought of camping on the Lyell-Farbus col, but reconsidered as the day wore on and the steep upper icefalls came into view. The one which comprises a continuation of the great ice cliff on the northwest wall of Mount Lyell was more broken up than the year before, and we camped just below it on the glacier, but separated from it and the cliffs to either side by commodious hollows which made us safe from avalanches. The slopes of Lyell rumbled day and night as huge sections of the ice cliff broke away and toppled down to the glacier below, while snow and rocks cascaded down Oppy with the roar of an express train passing through a way station. The falls were so frequent that by day we would turn to look only when the noise betokened an unusually large one. At night each one sounded as if it intended to pass right through the little tent in which all three of us lay.

When morning came, having awakened to the sound of rain pattering on the tent, we lay in our sacks and ate. The mountain infantry tent had an entrance at each end, considerably reducing condensation; and it proved of exceptional convenience in other ways. By 11.30 A.M. the rain had stopped. We crawled forth and set out to prospect a way up the icefall. Keeping well to the right, we made good time kicking steps in the steep snow along a somewhat devious route between crevasses and yawning holes. As soon as possible, above the steepest part, we angled toward the center of

the glacier to avoid possible avalanches from the Farbus cliff. Several huge crevasses stretched from side to side, but each was provided with a reasonably convenient and substantial bridge. Seeing the col not far above us, we descended, knowing our route was assured thus far. Some water drips in a crevasse near camp saved us the necessity of melting snow on our little Primus stove, and we therefore fared very well in the matter of cooked meals, which Don prepared sitting cross-legged in one end of the tent.

Sunday, August 3rd, was the day, and we started out at a fairly early hour. The weather seemed reasonably settled, and the sun shone brightly on the Columbia Icefield. Mounts Athabaska and Saskatchewan also showed to advantage, while Castleguard became diminutive. The view from the col quite took our breath away, and we spent 20 minutes there to regain it, giving all our cameras a thorough workout. My supposition that the Lyells, Nos. 3, 2 and 1, could readily be climbed from here was confirmed, as the snow slopes did not look too difficult.

The ascent of Farbus proved an easy walk, partly on quartzite and partly on snow. This was the second ascent. The summit was, of course, corniced, so we dared not venture far enough out to look down to our little tent on the glacier below. Dropping down a little on the south side, we swung around the slope and came out on the edge of the southwest rock wall supporting the upper snow. The view here of the Oppy cliff was most depressing, and we all felt that our chances of getting up it in the time available were none too good. Moreover, the steep snow ridge leading down from Farbus to the Farbus-Oppy col was unexpectedly spectacular: it had a continuous cornice toward the north while on the south it swept down at a steep angle in a series of scallops to the top of the rock cliff. We roped up here, and I started stamping out large steps in the soft snow while Ron came last as anchor man. For considerable stretches the shaft of the ice-axe would slice through the snow in a manner which cast some doubt on its dependability in the event of a slip; and I backed down carefully, stamping platforms for both feet, side by side.

The col, once reached, was easily passed, although it too was corniced above the abrupt northern precipice. We then climbed up the broken ledges marking the continuation of the ridge to the first of the two long shelves which extend across the entire base

of the 500-foot cliff on this side of Mount Oppy. Traversing to the left about 150 feet, we now ascended to the second shelf and were forced to decide whether to try the cliff or to follow the ledge southward around the corner, where we might eventually reach an ice tongue running down from the summit snow field. We chose the cliff because it no longer looked quite so nasty and the other route was probably too long.

An upward traverse to the right, up steep snow, took us almost to the left-hand side of the prominent chimney which splits the cliff from top to bottom, and we started up the steep but not very difficult limestone ledges. The cliff to the left began to steepen and eventually overhung, forcing us into the chimney about half-way up the cliff. A waterfall had the limestone rock in an unpleasantly slippery state, and I skidded back onto a ledge with a jolt when two handholds broke out as I tried to haul myself up an overhang. After putting on the rope which had been removed at the col, and also a couple of Band-Aids on my fingertips, I tried a layback a little to the left, but spray from the falls made the rock too slippery for my boots to grip. Not having time for many such false leads, we now determined to descend about 25 feet and cross the chimney to a smooth wet ledge which could be seen disappearing around the corner to the north. This proved to be the sought-for key, and we were soon hurrying up a series of easy ledges "just like stairs."

The ledges petered out into steep snow slopes crowned with a continuous cornice which was much too large for us to think of breaking through. The section of cornice overhanging the snow slope funnelling into the head of the chimney was particularly impressive. I had some notion of traversing on the snow shelf or scoop directly under it, but gave this up when I found that the intervening slope was very steep ice with a deciduous snow covering. Dropping down a few feet to the head of the chimney, however, we had to cut only three or four steps to get across, and we soon scrambled up under the cornice. Here we traversed left along the top of the rock cliff until we found a point where the cornice was only about eight feet high. Hacking a gap, I drove in my axe and hauled myself up. The others promptly followed, and we looked across the snow to the summit of Oppy, still some distance away and well above us. First over a snow hump and then down slightly we

trudged along, the snow holding for a moment and then breaking through at each step. For a short distance we sank in to the thighs, but happily the snow soon became firmer as we pushed along. Clouds were blowing by from the west, but there was no rain or sun—just a chill, gusty wind. The cornice was huge, of the massive mushroom type, and we carefully belayed each other up to the summit, which we reached at 3.15 P.M.

Alexandra still looked imposing, but unclimbed Douai, in between, was of no consequence. The snow ridge between Oppy and Alexandra, though long, did not appear at all difficult. We no longer had any thought of following it and turned in our tracks, giving Ron the job of setting the pace to reach camp comfortably before nightfall. I built a little cairn at the top of the cliff and left a record, this being the nearest rock to the summit on our route. Reascending the steep snow ridge of Farbus, we found the wind becoming more capricious. Several gusts forced us to stop and hang on. It also blew some of the waterfalls back up over the cliff to provide us with a reasonable facsimile of rain. We thus soon had completed the second ascent, first traverse, third ascent, second traverse, and first ascent by the west ridge of Farbus. We were through with Farbus!

After a halt on the Lyell-Farbus col, Ron led us down the icefall to camp in short order, well before dark. We turned in, pleased with the day, and slept soundly.

With the morning came rain, which meant we would not climb the Lyells. When eventually it stopped, we broke camp in leisurely fashion and descended to the cache where we had a real camp, with a fire. Off to a good start next day, we forded the Alexandra rather than the Castleguard and reached the highway by 5.00 P.M. A little later we were reporting in to Chief Warden Black, consuming hot tea and cake served by his hospitable wife, and telling them all about it.

ALEXANDRA GLACIER, 1947

Left to right: spur of Oppy, Mount Douai, Alexandra. Woods and Davis in the foreground

Photo, J. C. Oberlin