

The North Face of Mount Baring

FRED BECKEY *and* EDWARD COOPER

OF THE MANY sheer mountain walls in the Cascades, those near an existing highway are bound to attract the most attention, and when one remains unclimbed after several attempts, it soon gains a ponderous reputation.

The north and east faces of Mount Baring are notoriously impressive from the Stevens Pass Highway and from Barclay Lake. While it is not known when the first serious attempt was made to scale Baring from the faces above the lake, it is doubtful whether an earnest effort probed any distance until 1951 when Pete Schoening and Richard Berge made two attempts to place a route up the 3500-foot high north face. To their credit is the establishment of the route up the cliffy lower section and the conquest of the first two of the final steps; the location of the route has not materially been improved by those who followed. Heat and lack of time ended their attempt at the left end of a difficult traverse on the third step, an area that remained the high point until the face was climbed in 1960.

Another party in 1951, composed of Don Gordon (Claunch), Dave Collins, and Paul Salness, spent much effort in packing camp loads about halfway up the face but did not reach the final steps. In 1952, Richard Berge, Tom Miller and Fred Beckey hoped to make the climb in a weekend and packed a bivouac load to the top of the first step. Because of the oncome of sudden bad weather, the party decided to retreat and found itself, amid darkness and fog in the cliffy forested area just above the lake. It was here that Richard Berge slipped to his death off a cliff beneath a steep forest slope in a most unusual and very unfortunate tragedy. It was an accident that pointed up the treachery of this mountain; certainly Baring will always be a monument to his skill, daring and sportsmanship.

There were no more known attempts on the face until 1956 when Pete Schoening and Don Gordon made a climb on the face and finally reached the high point of previous attempts. John Rupley and Gordon went no higher than the top of the first step in 1957, thwarted by lack of water and extreme heat. In 1959 Don Gordon, Fred Beckey and Ed Cooper

See plate 63.

bivouacked on the first step and again reached the high point, where a bolt was finally placed in the unusually hard rock. Lack of time and extreme heat kept the party from continuing attempts that summer.

F. B.

Several factors contributed to the defeat of all the parties that preceded us. First, the lower 2000 feet of the face consists of fiendish brush fighting up steep cliffs, through slide alder, vine maple, devils club and other varieties which often make the approach to Cascade peaks more difficult than the actual climb. This brush had an exhausting and demoralizing effect on previous parties even before the technical portion of the route was reached. Weather, another factor, during some summers on this side of the Cascades does not stabilize. Because of its eastern exposure, the face becomes like an oven in the late morning. More than one party has suffered greatly from thirst and was, in part, defeated because of it. Lastly, and what concerned us most, since we could plan for the first three problems, was the unusually hard rock on the last part of the face. The efforts of four previous parties attempting to place bolts had resulted in only one 3/16-inch bolt being set, which was, moreover, unreliable.

The following is a rough description of the route. The first 1000 feet are up a steep forested and brushy hillside to Couloir Camp. The next 1300 feet consist of two precipitous parallel ribs of cliffs and brush separated by a large couloir that contains snow often as late as August. The left rib is followed until it fades into another rib further to the left, from the top of which rib a right traverse on ledges brings one to the base of the first step. At this point, one is back on and directly above the original right rib. From here, four vertical steps of 300, 400, 220 and 250 feet, separated by spacious ledges, lead to the summit. These steps require constant grade V and VI climbing.

The highest point on the peak, reached by three previous parties, was sixty feet up the third step. They had traversed for seventy feet upwards to the left under an overhang, then for twenty feet back to the right, resulting in ninety feet of rope out but only sixty feet of altitude gained. This is significant as the next reasonable belay ledge (not visible from below) is sixty feet higher. Piton cracks virtually disappear, and it was here that the solitary bolt was placed after considerable effort.

This was the situation as of early June this year. A council of war was held, and we decided that only an all-out siege operation could assure a successful ascent. We started by cutting a complete trail through the brushy cliffs of the first 2300 feet, which would make it easier and safer carrying heavy loads. Yellow trail markers were used, and hundreds of feet of 1/4-

inch rope were hung from the brush on this exposed and dangerous section. Various lengths of full width nylon climbing ropes were used at several particularly bad places. Don Gordon, Fred Beckey and I spent from four to six days, on weekends and other free days, preparing the lower part of the route. We were fortunate in securing the help of Ron Priebe who helped carry sixty pound loads to Couloir Camp 1000 feet above the lake, and Ron Niccoli who helped in the arduous task of hauling loads by rope to the top of the airy and difficult first step. Double fixed ropes were placed on this step.

Our cache at Dolomite Camp, the top of the first step, now included tarps, sleeping bags, a stove, gas, ten climbing ropes, hardware, and a five-day supply of food. A nearby patch of snow assured us of a water supply, and for storage we had brought many water bags. This is a very spectacular camp spot; the view westward was overpowering, across the precipitous northern ramparts of our peak toward the towering peaks of Gunn and Merchant, rising high out of the velvet depths of the valley.

On July 9, Fred, Don and I started up on what we hoped would be the final assault. We reached the top of the first step by prusiking up the fixed ropes, and it was almost dark as we set up camp. Fred continued on, gracefully mastering the first half of the second step and put in a fixed line, returning to camp in the darkness. The next day, Sunday, we reached the high point of the previous attempts, after making the difficult traverse under the overhang. Fred spent four hours at this one point trying to drill a hole for a bolt. Results were very discouraging as only one 1/4-inch bolt, its hole partially spalled, was placed. This was only possible because the hole of a 3/16-inch bolt, which had popped out, was enlarged after breaking several drills. Don spent another two hours on a hole Fred had worked on but got nowhere. This was the low point of the climb as it appeared there was still another sixty feet of similar going above.

The next morning, Fred left in a very downcast mood, as he had to return to work. It looked as if it might take all summer, at this rate, to get enough bolts in to progress beyond this one spot. However, before he left, he told us both to go ahead and climb it if we could. We decided to stick with it at least one more day.

After several more hours drilling the next morning, and abandoning all hope of further progress by bolts, I managed to place a chrome-moly knife-blade piton. Not much progress, but it gave me confidence to place a wafer, a spoon, and an angle in a vertical flake, none of which I dared put full weight on. Although I was now ready to give up the attempt at Don's first suggestion, neither of us expressed our thoughts, and so Don

prusiked up the knife-blade after my descent. To my horror, he stood on my pitons, and although one and a stirrup came crashing down, Don miraculously managed to place a good piton while standing on a high stirrup rung. We were now on our way. Another good piton, then a second chrome-moly led to some fair piton cracks. After some twenty feet of extremely delicate, exposed climbing, we returned to Dolomite Camp. Without these special knife-blade pitons, which Fred had secured from Chouinard, the ascent of the face of Baring could not have been done.

The next day the weather started to deteriorate, but we started anyway. Prusiking back up was hard work. Don continued the lead of vertical, extremely delicate climbing while I belayed from some one hundred feet below. Standing on a sling which hung from an insecure knife-blade piton, he pendulumed across a blank vertical wall to a groove on the left and then climbed fifteen feet up the smooth groove without adequate protection. He finally worked his way to a good belay ledge. I followed and removed the pitons. We rappelled down, leaving the rope there for the next day.

On Wednesday morning we prusiked up into the fog and questionable looking weather to our high point. I led over a 120° roof, using stirrups, and then up a long vertical dihedral which accepted pitons reasonably. As I approached the branch tips of the scrub firs overhanging the top of the third step, I could see the dream of the last three years coming true. I was just able to touch them—next I could pull myself up on them—then 300 feet of scrambling and the north face of Baring, the climb Don and I had wanted so badly, was after five days on the face below our feet. After we had signed the register, we began the tricky descent, which involved long rappels down the upper walls. It is fortunate that most of the time we were enveloped in dense fog which hid from us the awful drops into the valley below.

This climb gave us more satisfaction than any other climb in many years. We had alternated between hope and despair, from the depths of depression to the heights of sublimity. There may be more difficult climbs, but there will never be another north face of Baring.

E. C.

Summary of Statistics

AREA: Cascades, Washington.

ASCENT: First ascent of the north face of Mount Baring (6200 feet), July 9 to 13, 1960.

PERSONNEL: Don Gordon (Claunch) and Edward Cooper completed the climb. Fred Beckey was also a member of the final team. Members of preliminary team; Ron Priebe and Ron Niccoli.