

The Squamish Chief

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FIVE YEARS ago the ascent of the face of the Squamish Chief, previously erroneously referred to as "Goose Rock," would have been unthinkable, but improving techniques and equipment now made it feasible. The remarkable ascents in Yosemite Valley in recent years encouraged Jim Baldwin, of Prince Rupert, B. C., and me to attempt it. Certainly it was the most bizarre climb we had ever participated in. The Squamish Chief is located only thirty-five miles north of Vancouver, B. C., and cannot fail to attract the attention of anyone who drives below it. Rising 1700 feet in one vertical sweep above Highway 99, it appears incongruous in its setting at the head of beautiful Howe Sound, with glacier-clad Mount Garibaldi in clear view less than ten miles away.

Several routes up easier portions of the face had already been completed (the north and south gullies, and the ridges next to them) but the flawless face above the highway held our interest. Early in May Jim and I quietly arrived at the town of Squamish and set up a base camp in an abandoned dynamite shack near the foot of the cliff. The prevailing weather, which at this time of the year is rainy, proved true to form. In three days we cut a trail to the bottom of the face, packed up equipment, and climbed the first two pitches, all in varying degrees of dampness. The view looking straight up the face from a small clearing in the forest at the first pitch is absolutely incredible. Little did we know that the first lead, seemingly difficult due to the rain, had the best piton cracks of the entire climb. In retrospect the second lead was the easiest of the climb, and one of only two non-artificial leads, a + IV.

Piton cracks disappeared at the end of the second lead, and the remaining distance up the "apron" to the bottom of the "grand wall" (at the 450-foot level) required the use of many bolts. It was on our slow progress up the "apron" that we attracted attention. First a few people saw us, the word spread, and soon the few turned to many, until one weekend 12,000 cars jammed the highway to the little town of Squamish. We accepted the kind offers of the people of Squamish, and were sponsored with a hotel room, new boots, our choice of restaurants, and 1500 feet of very badly needed nylon rope. When seen walking back to our cars after coming off the face it was not uncommon for cars to gather, many people

asking for autographs. When we were on the face, every afternoon the school bus would stop at 3:30 and the children would cheer from the highway. All this seemed contrary to the spirit of the mountains, and completely different from anything that I had ever encountered. This was not without its effect upon us. Our climbing, which had been enthusiastic, suffered considerably. Soon we avoided appearing in town, even moving out of the hotel.

After two weeks, interrupted by some bad weather, we had the first 850 feet of fixed rope in. We found only a few piton cracks into the face, almost all of them being behind flakes of various sizes. Most notable were the pitons placed behind the "Split Pillar." This 200 foot column could be seen through, and it split further from the wall as pitons were set, causing lower pitons to loosen and in some instances to come out. The "Sword of Damocles" flake, which vibrated like a 200 foot gong, and the "Detached Flake" just below the tree ledge also were interesting.

Several ideas previously used in Yosemite were borrowed. When prus-siking, loads were left hanging behind us, like a tail. The difference in comfort is unimaginable, except to those who have tried both. Soft two-inch wide tape stirrups were used for direct aid, rather than metal step stirrups. A combination of two tape stirrups and one step stirrup was found to be ideal, since tape stirrups are difficult to step into in a hurry.

When the weather had stabilized enough for the final assault, we started the last five-day push. Remembering this, I am reminded of the statement "Everything that could possibly go wrong, did!" We were not at all prepared for the intense heat, the temperatures in the high humid nineties being most unusual for this country. We had lowered a two-gallon water supply to the large tree ledge, and our plan was to reach this cache sometime before noon the second day, when the sun reached the face. We finished our initial two quarts of water apiece on the first day. The usual unforeseen problems delayed us, and on reaching the ledge in the late afternoon after an extremely exhausting overhanging lead in furnace-like heat, all of our strength had melted away. We finished half of our water on the spot and did no further climbing under afternoon conditions until the last day. All water was gone early on the fourth day; it was here that we made mistakes in route finding that seriously delayed us.

The fifth day, starting from the amazing chockstone at the bottom of the "Roman Chimney," which seemed to be suspended, I climbed the flaring overhang at the top of the chimney and saw the final 50-foot vertical *dièdre* which had at all times been hidden from view from below. There were only a few pitons available that fit the crack, and Jim climbed

it by removing the lower piton and placing it higher while anchored to the center piton. The last piton came out as Jim chinned on a bush overhanging the top. At six P.M. we stood together looking down the last 50 feet, the remainder of the route hidden from view. Now, for the first time in a month, we could relax.

There are many who criticize such climbs as mere engineering feats, or as stunt climbs that anyone with adequate time could do, maintaining that it could not be possible to enjoy such a climb. I admit that such climbs do not always give the immediate satisfaction gained on many ascents, yet the reward from a sustained assault over a period of weeks comes just as surely, and is a lasting satisfaction that one can continue to enjoy. These climbs require thorough training and preparation, and if good judgment is called for in mountaineering, it is required even more on an ascent where one depends completely on artificial aids for hours or days at a time. It just is not true that anyone with adequate time could do them. Aside from the conscientious conditioning necessary for such an undertaking, there are places in such an ascent that require more than just piton or bolt placing to continue. With a few word substitutions, what I have written above might have been said of a Himalayan expedition.

Our ascent of the face of the Squamish Chief required some 135 bolts and probably 200 pitons. Many mistakes were made, and perhaps others would have done better. But we made it, after nearly giving it up because of obstacles both on and off the face. No doubt the climb will be repeated, perhaps without the use of fixed ropes. Two days would be reasonable time for a competent party. But the challenge remains—that of a climb where only those who are thoroughly prepared should seriously consider the ascent, and even then eventual success remains in doubt.

Summary of Statistics

AREA: Head of Howe Sound, off the Strait of Georgia, British Columbia.

ASCENT: First ascent of the face of the Squamish Chief, May 16 to June 18.

PERSONNEL: Jim Baldwin and Ed Cooper. Acting in Support—the town of Squamish, B. C.