

The Southeast Spur of Mount McKinley

BOYD N. EVERETT, JR.

THE SOUTHEAST SPUR of Mount McKinley¹ is a ridge five miles long rising out of the Ruth Glacier. From its base to the summit of McKinley is eight miles. The route is unusual for those climbed to date on McKinley because it includes several nearly vertical ice pitches. The worst difficulties are concentrated below 12,000 feet. The Southeast Spur was attempted once in 1958 but this party² turned back just above 10,000 feet, mainly because the severity of the technical problems had not been anticipated from photographs.

In 1961, three out of the five parties on Mount McKinley, including the Italian South Face party, suffered serious frostbite injuries. Our group of New Yorkers, who set out to climb the Southeast Spur in 1962, was very conscious of these accidents and while determined to climb the mountain, was equally determined to avoid similar accidents. Because of this, our expedition differed both in philosophy and execution from many of the recent expeditions to McKinley. Ours was essentially a "heavy" or "slow" expedition as we wanted the security of sufficient reserves. Where others have put emphasis on speed and light weight, we were willing to, and did, lay siege to the mountain. This philosophy, though it entailed nothing new or unusual by itself, was so important to the success of the expedition that a few points should be mentioned here.

1) We tried to use the best equipment regardless of weight or cost. It was all carried high on the mountain and while some proved to be superfluous, much that we did not really expect to need was used.

2) The food ration was 2½ pounds per man-day, about ½ pound more than usual. This added about 100 pounds to the expedition weight but was well justified as the improved stamina resulting from improved nutrition contributed appreciably to the expedition's success and safety.

3) Packs were limited to 50 pounds, partly because heavier loads would have been impossible on the vertical slopes, but primarily to avoid fatigue.

1. See Bradford Washburn's articles proposing and analyzing this climb: *The Mountain World* 1956-7, pp. 75 and 77; *AAJ* 1962, 13:1, pp. 50-52 and plates 29-36. The ascent was made almost precisely as predicted.

2. June 10-25, 1958. David Dingman, leader: *AAJ* 1959, 11:2, pp. 291-2.

Hunger and fatigue are the principal causes of personal conflicts on a long expedition and both are common factors in frostbite.

4) Ten high-altitude campsites were used, an unusually large number even in the Himalayas. Camps were placed fairly close together so that the whole camp could be moved in one day with relays. A minimum of seven camps would probably be needed by any party, however.

5) Up to 12,000 feet climbing was done between six P.M. and four A.M. Work in these hours was less efficient because of the cold and darkness but was also much safer on the potential avalanche slopes encountered on the Southeast Spur.

6) Fixed ropes, some 3000 feet altogether, were used on all difficult or potentially dangerous slopes.

All our expedition members—Boyd Everett (leader), Hank Abrons, Sam Cochrane, Charles Hollister, Sam Silverstein and Chris Wren—reached Talkeetna by June 2. On June 9, after waiting seven frustrating days for the weather to clear, we finally flew to the Ruth Glacier, landing a mile from the eastern arm of the Southeast Spur. During one of the landings Don Sheldon, our pilot, damaged his landing gear in one of the numerous crevasses. In spite of this he was able to fly us all in, but he told us that we would have to walk down-glacier eight miles to a more suitable site to be picked up.

Looking up the full five-mile length of the Southeast Spur above Base Camp it was easy to understand why the party in 1958 had been turned back at 10,000 feet. The first 3500 feet, culminating in a large bump at 11,280 feet, was a series of ice walls, crevasses, avalanche slopes and cornices. The worst problem appeared to be a series of huge cornices guarding a face which was the only possible route to the upper part of the mountain. The cornices extended out almost 30 feet over the 200-foot, 70° slope of blue ice. This section we later named the "Arrow" because of the sharp ridge line that extended down the ice below the cornices. Just to reach this face posed significant problems, however. Large vertical ice walls skirted the route between 9100 feet and 9700 feet and avalanche tracks scarred much of the climbable face. By climbing after sundown, six P.M. on this side of the mountain, we could avoid the danger of saturation slides, but a few hanging séracs remained an unavoidable hazard. The crevasses proved to be less of a problem than expected, thanks to the heavy May snowfalls which had bridged most of them.

Our first two days were spent in ferrying loads from Base Camp at 7700 feet to Camp I at 9200 feet, just above the first ice wall, which we bypassed on the far left over a narrow snow-bridge. After moving into Camp I a new storm immobilized us there for 71 hours. At the end of

two weeks, we were still no further than Camp I and the major difficulties were yet to come! The end of the storm was heralded by a brisk north wind which in minutes destroyed one of our two Alaskan tents. Fortunately, as we found, a north wind also brought clear skies. The next six days were perfect.

On the evening of June 14 Sam Cochrane and I laboriously reconnoitered the route to the Arrow in deep new snow. We bypassed the ice wall at 9700 feet on the far right over a thin snow-bridge; fortunately it extended 30 feet along the length of the crevasse so that we were later able to find new places to cross whenever our heavier members fell through! Higher up, the windslab covering the 45° slope below the Arrow settled ominously under Sam three times in quick succession, each time accompanied by an audible crunch; luckily it did not avalanche. We ultimately placed about 600 feet of rope to protect this section of the route. It never actually slid. We reached the 70° ice wall at midnight amid wind, snow and relative darkness. After several futile attempts, we retreated before the rising sun could weaken the cornices above.

On the following night Sam, this time accompanied by Hank Abrons, reached the Arrow much earlier and spotted the best route which we had missed in the murky light. Hank started up the ice under one of the largest cornices but by traversing upward to the left, avoided it and reached a smaller one. After several hours of chopping, Hank turned the lead over to Sam who dug a tunnel through the cornice, a tricky job because he had to undermine it in the process. We all shouted our approval when he completed the hole and emerged safely on top. The Arrow was passed.

Beyond it the corniced ridge rose to a large ice wall at 10,700 feet. We made the mistake of thinking this section would be easy. It was not. The first problem was a series of four large vertical crevasses, all running directly down the fall line, something new to us. Entirely bridged by snow, they could not be seen until someone fell through, which often happened. Then came more cornices. Since the side slope was 45° to 50° blue ice, we would have liked to follow the crest, where the snow was better. The cornices prevented this and so instead we followed the narrow area between treacherously inviting snow above and blue ice below. It was necessary to belay, and then secure with fixed rope, every 150-foot pitch. At the end of the third pitch, there was a slight depression which appeared to be a good belay point. In testing this area with my axe, I pushed off a huge and deceptive cornice 100 feet long and 15 feet wide which collapsed with a tremendous crash. The fracture line paralleled my steps which were only two feet below it and reached nearly the full distance back to my belayer, a rope-length away. On the fifth pitch above the

Arrow, Hank came upon another obstacle, a 20-foot overhanging ice wall. Three hours of chopping plus one rappel picket for direct aid got him over this barrier.

Above was another and much bigger ice wall 100 feet high. After a few false tries at traversing low across the face beneath it, we finally had to tackle it high, at the base of the ice wall proper. There a two-foot wide ledge of snow, apparently ready to peel off the underlying ice, crossed most of the slope. Below the ledge the slope fell off at a 65° angle. The ice above overhung and 10-foot icicles extended down to waist level in front of us. Climbing to the first belay spot was tricky because our packs caught in the icicles. It was a spectacular place that no one trusted, even though we used two ice pitons in addition to the rappel picket to protect the belayer. Our first sunrise there was magnificent. Viewed between the line of icicles hanging from above, the fiery scene was a dazzling spectacle of color and reflected light.

Completing the traverse around and above the ice wall, a section we called the "Corner", was the crux pitch of the Southeast Spur. Twenty feet beyond the belay spot the ledge ended. We rappelled off a picket for 20 feet down to a bit of rotten snow over the 65° ice, which was wet enough to pack fairly well. By scraping this snow off the ice and catching it with our feet, we could build up a solid snow step on the ice. The resulting steps plastered against the ice were weird but effective. After 50 feet of this we tunneled through the slightly corniced ridge corner beyond which we hoped the going would be easier. Almost immediately, however, we came upon something completely unexpected, a Swiss cheese type of ice, two-thirds of which was air! It broke easily under the impact of an ice axe or heavily placed foot. One 10-foot section of this ice acted as the roof of a giant cavern. Had the bars of this "Jungle-Gym" collapsed, it would have meant a mean fall into the hole. A rappel picket placed loosely between a few spurs of ice provided doubtful security. For another 50 feet the surface was poor but by clearing away four feet of rubble, we got down to firmer ice. Solid snow was reached just at the end of the 150-foot rope. It took an entire day to lead and carry loads over the Corner.

Camp III was placed above the Corner at 10,800 feet. Beyond it a broad plateau extended a half mile up to the summit of Peak 11,280. Another half mile of descent led to Camp IV in a saddle at 10,800 feet. Just beyond rose the last of our major technical difficulties. This was a section of knife-edged ridge about 1000 feet long which we called the "Fluting" because of the fluted ice faces that dropped from its crest on both sides. Hank Abrons and Sam Cochrane spent the better part of one



PLATE 45

The EIGERWAND.

Photo by Bradford Washburn



PLATE 46

Photo by Bradford Washburn

AIGUILLE DU DRU. Robbins-Hemming direct route is on left; old route on right. Route near top is approximate only. B = bivouac.



PLATE 47

Photo by Henry Kendall

The North Face of the GRANDES JORASSES. The Walker Spur rises sunlit to the summit.

PLATE 48 *Photos by Henry Kendall*

Retreat across the *Bandes de Neige* on the WALKER SPUR
in bad weather.



PLATE 49

Gary Hemming leads on the
Tour Grise on the WALKER
SPUR.



PLATE 50

Photo by Samuel Cochrane

The SOUTHEAST SPUR OF MOUNT MCKINLEY from Base Camp.

Boyd Everett on the FLUTING.

PLATE 51

Photo by Samuel Silverstein





PLATE 52 *Photos by Boyd Everett*

**Hank Abrons on the Arrow on
McKINLEY'S SOUTHEAST
SPUR.**

PLATE 53

**The corniced ridge between the
Arrow and the Corner.**



PLATE 54 *Photo by Boyd Everett*

Cochrane belays at pulpit before the Corner.

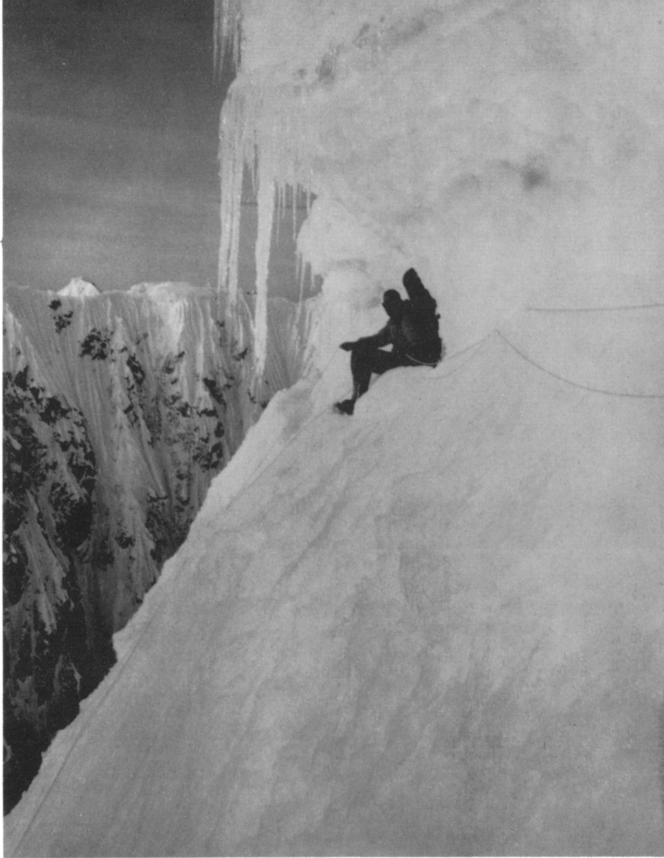


PLATE 55 *Photo by Samuel Silverstein*

The FLUTING on the SOUTH-EAST SPUR of MOUNT MCKINLEY.



PLATE 56

Photo by Boyd Everett

The SOUTHEAST SPUR from 13,000 feet. McKinley's summit is at right.

The upper slopes of MOUNT MCKINLEY. The route to Camp X is at left.

PLATE 57

Photo by Samuel Silverstein



night trying to force a route up it. Not only was it tricky because of the 60° slope on which they were working but also because of cornices. After sticking his foot into the cornice crack several times Hank called it quits and decided to traverse the north face 200 feet below the ridge crest. While Hank and Sam Silverstein went to work there, Sam Cochrane and I continued on the ridge crest. Around midnight of our second night, when we had almost completed the ridge crest route, Abrons and Silverstein appeared on the top of a knoll 200 feet ahead of us. They had climbed the Fluting, which was no small accomplishment, particularly by their route. It was probably the most dangerous section of the Southeast Spur. After descending 200 feet, they had traversed under the worst of the fluted ridge. Hank had then made another spectacular lead with aid up the 20-foot overhanging bergschrund. The next six pitches, all fixed with rope, zigzagged up the 55° slope, unusually steep for a snow face. Though the snow was not particularly solid and did occasionally slide, the principal hazard was the danger of cornices and séracs falling from above and landing with sufficient shock to sweep the snow off the entire face. Between the first and second load-carrying over the Fluting this actually happened. The impact of one sérac caused an avalanche 400 feet wide and four feet deep!

After six perfect days the good weather ended. For all or part of the next eight days it snowed. The first storm caught us with Chris Wren and Charlie Hollister above the Fluting at a temporary camp, Camp IVA. It was after this first 18 inches of snow that we saw the huge avalanche track already mentioned crossing our route. Even with fixed ropes our last load-carrying took 5½ hours for seven pitches.

While the four of us struggled up the Fluting, Charlie and Chris were scouting the way above. As Bradford Washburn had predicted, the going there was not too difficult, but route finding was still a problem because of poor visibility. Fortunately, it cleared slightly for three hours on the 23rd which permitted our moving to Camp V at 11,800 feet in a sérac field. For the few clear minutes we had, it offered a beautiful close-up view of spectacular, unclimbed Mount Huntington. Then the clouds closed in again and we had two feet of new snow by midnight.

Except for a Swiss cheese ice pitch directly above Camp V, there were no technical problems to the top of the Southeast Spur (13,100 feet) but after three feet of new snow in two days, trail breaking was slow. We sank up to our chests in the fluffy powder snow and climbed only 1300 vertical feet in six hours. The very lightness of the snow encouraged it to slide. Both Charlie Hollister and I were caught in surface slides which started among the séracs higher up. Luckily they lacked any real power

on the 30° slope. We placed Camp VI in a crevasse at 13,000 feet on the far side of the Spur's summit. Late in the day, on our second load-carrying, four members of the group got lost on top of the windy spur for an hour where some of the willow wands had been knocked down.

If the 24th was bad, the 25th was worse. It should have been an easy day, a one mile traverse from 13,000 to 13,800 feet. Although the wind had begun to consolidate the powder snow and form a breakable crust, most steps were still thigh to waist deep. The leader had to break a trench, sometimes with the ice axe, sometimes with a knee, or sometimes with his whole body. The wind and snowfall increased in the afternoon. Face masks were worn. After eight hours, Chris and I, who were breaking trail, had managed to get little more than halfway to 13,800 feet, averaging in the last four hours about three rope-lengths an hour over nearly level terrain. Chris aptly described it as wading in cold oatmeal. Both of us also fell neck-deep into hidden crevasses during the day. We were exhausted, more exhausted than at any other time on the expedition, except on the summit. Nor were our efforts of much help to the others who were relaying loads behind us. The wind blew over the hard-earned trench almost immediately so that those following had to break most of the trail again. It was a miserable day for all. Finally, about nine P.M. we set up Camp VII on the sheltered side of the ridge at 13,200 feet.

Conditions were not much better the next day, but we had a shorter horizontal distance to go to reach the last campsite at 13,800 feet, just below the South Buttress. In perfect weather we might have climbed the 15,885-foot South Buttress in one day from Camp VII but with our weather it was out of the question. At 13,500 feet Charlie Hollister, who was leading, encountered a 200-foot section of ice that required step cutting. After wading in loose powder for three days it was a welcome change. As we set up Camp VIII later that night at 13,800 feet, the weather improved rapidly, providing us with a brilliant sunset. It looked deceptively as though the weather were clearing at last and we made optimistic plans for the following day. Within hours, however, the storm returned.

Primarily because three of us were running out of vacation time, but also because we were down to nine days of food, we needed to reach the South Buttress that day, June 27. In bad weather, however, it seemed unwise to break camp completely and set out heavily loaded for a new and exposed camp 2000 feet higher. Visibility was nil. After a long discussion it was decided that the only way to climb the mountain safely and within our time limits was for all six to carry light loads for a party of two. This would not put a physical strain on anyone in the storm and we would have a campsite to return to in an emergency. Sam Cochrane and I were

chosen for the advance party. We would have the responsibility of reaching the summit for the expedition. It was not an easy choice because every man was feeling strong and wanted to go. No one had had any altitude problems.

With an average of 20 pounds apiece, we climbed the 2000-foot slope to the South Buttress the afternoon of June 27. A strong north wind, which had in the past brought good weather, forced us to wear face masks and slowed our progress; but after six hours we did reach the buttress' crest. Snow conditions were poor but still represented an improvement over the previous two days.

The South Buttress was a forbidding place, windswept and arctic in character. The temperature was 2°, not bad for that altitude at seven P.M. but still cold enough to be unpleasant. Even so, the joy and satisfaction of reaching its top was evident in every face. There were shouts, yodels and handshakes. Having climbed the Southeast Spur, an important first ascent, we had every right to be pleased. Our group pictures taken there looked like toothpaste ads! This was the high point of the expedition emotionally. After dumping their loads in a small hollow on the buttress that was to become Camp IX (15,600 feet) the others descended, leaving Sam Cochrane and me alone. Unknown to us, these four were to have an "incident" before reaching Camp VIII that night. At 14,100 feet the last man on the rope, Hank Abrons, slipped on a short section of ice and pulled Chris Wren off as well. Charlie Hollister, next on the rope, had passed a sérac on the traverse when he felt the jerk of the rope. Fortunately, the sérac acted as a fulcrum and made the fall easy to catch. Hank fell over 100 feet to the lip of a crevasse but was unhurt.

The next morning Sam and I carried full loads to what was to be our final camp. We did not plan to follow the circuitous but easy Thayer route, hoping instead to climb the southeast side of the summit cone directly. This would make our climb a completely new one. This side of the summit averages about 45° from 16,000 feet up but is quite broken and proved to be much easier than expected.

Before beginning the steep climbing we had a half-mile traverse on top of the Buttress. The wind had at last made the snow firm, but even so, we did not make very good time. Perhaps it was our first reaction to the altitude. Between 16,000 and 17,000 feet we climbed a prominent snow couloir which alternated between snow-ice and deep powder. At 16,800 feet we moved onto the rocks which would have been easy without packs. We had hoped to gain an obvious campsite at 17,800 feet. By six P.M. we were still at only 17,000 feet and so decided to camp there

on a small snowpatch between the rocks. While we were setting up Camp X, the others were arriving at Camp IX.

Friday, June 29, was the first clear day since June 20. For once the weather seemed to be giving us a break. We were not so lucky with some of our equipment. Sam's air mattress had collapsed at Camp IX and caused him a second cold and lumpy night. For the first time our kerosene stove malfunctioned, so we had only a little cold pea soup and dried fruit for breakfast. We saved a pint of water for the climb. Until Camp IX was set up for the two of us, we had had extra stoves as well as air mattresses. Technical difficulties had been anticipated between 17,000 and 18,000 feet but, as we climbed above Camp X, we were pleased to discover that one potential problem after another could be easily skirted. The route zigzagged on the face. There was an interesting rock step at 17,300 feet, a steep snow couloir from 18,100 to 18,300 feet and a little ice at 18,600 feet. Although we were not moving fast, we felt good and were confident of success.

At 2:30 P.M., after seven hours of climbing, we reached the top of the steep going and emerged onto the summit plateau at 19,000 feet. Coming over the rim, we were met for the first time by a stiff north wind which necessitated face masks and down jackets. At 19,000 feet we were exactly one horizontal mile from the summit. Technically there were no further difficulties. Only the wind remained a problem. Because of the configuration of the plateau, it was necessary to follow the rim of the South Face westward toward Carter Horn (20,220 feet), a false summit about one fifth of a mile from the true summit. At about 19,600 feet it was necessary to traverse around it to the northeast. This traverse brought us directly into the face of the wind. The sidehill slope of the traverse was only 25° to 30° but the wind had sculptured it into icy hardness. The crampons held well but the wind constantly knocked us down. Several times, we crawled in self-arrest position over patches of ice. Under the conditions it was pretty much each man for himself. For several hours Sam and I made no communication with each other. Only the rope kept us together. Sam later told me that he had twice fallen about 20 feet when the wind knocked him over but he caught his own falls with a self arrest before pulling me. The wind was 50 to 60 miles per hour and directly into our faces until we reached the summit.

For five hours we fought this wind. Finally, at 7:20 P.M., we sighted three poles. This had to be the summit. There was no view; a light snow had been falling for several hours. We took a few pictures at the center pole which carried a large flag of the Seattle World's Fair, a souvenir from a 1962 expedition. Within minutes, we had left the summit.

The descent was not as bad with the wind behind us but still it had taken its toll and we were exhausted. After seven hours without a rest we stumbled over the rim of the summit plateau and onto the South Face. Since both of us had exhaustion shakes we took dexedrine and empirin pills. They may or may not have helped. Recognizing our weakened condition, we took extra caution belaying on the descent. This was fortunate; at 18,600 feet Sam took a 200-foot fall on the ice which a solid ice-axe belay easily caught. Sam was unhurt. There were no further problems on the descent. At 1:30 A.M., after eighteen hours of climbing, we reached Camp X where we were greeted by the other four. The following day, June 30, everyone started down. It was difficult for the others to give up their chance for the summit after such a long attack on the mountain, but our time had run out. The descent required three days and was accomplished without incident. From Base Camp we walked eight miles down the Ruth Glacier to a better landing site for Sheldon at 5700 feet. He picked up the whole party on the afternoon of July 4.

Summary of Statistics

AREA: Alaska Range

ASCENT: Mount McKinley, 20,320 feet, — first ascent by the Southeast Spur, June 29, 1962 (Cochrane, Everett).

PERSONNEL: Boyd N. Everett, Jr., leader; Henry Abrons, Samuel Cochran, Charles Hollister, Samuel Silverstein, Christopher Wien.

