

# The North Face of Mount Slesse

ERIC BJORNSTAD — *Mountaineers*

NORTHWEST climbers have a backyard of rugged, imposing mountains, ranging from extinct volcanos, Rainier and Baker, to the great rock monoliths of Mount Index, Mount Baring, and the Pickets. Half a mile north of the international border, in the Chilliwacks of British Columbia, rises the most impressive granite wall in the Northwest: the north to east upthrust of Mount Slesse (8100 feet). The eastern portion is comprised of a system of giant overhanging arches while the northern sections are vertical and bulging. Between the two parts lies the most classic route and perhaps the only climbable line, which sweeps up sharply at 70° for 3000 feet. The upper two thirds of the wall can be seen from distant towns as well as from the Trans-Canada Highway.

In the past the approach to Slesse was long and difficult, necessitating a gamble with the area's traditionally unpredictable weather. Recently a logging road pushed up Middle Creek has cut it to a two-hour hike. Last July, Fred Beckey and Steve Marts took advantage of this and set out for the great wall. Once beneath the face, they roped and worked their way for five pitches over steep, polished, glaciated slabs, using aid in places. After 500 feet more over easier ground, a tricky layback brought them to a belay stance beneath a rotten overhang. Beyond followed four interesting leads, which took them to a vertical headwall. Part way up this step Steve and Fred bivouacked and awoke the following morning to a sudden onslaught of Northwest weather. Dense fog misled them into several false starts and made their retreat slow and difficult.

In late August, I joined Fred and Steve on their return trip, eager to tackle this much-talked-about wall. On our approach, Fred and Steve's fixed lines took us beneath a small hanging glacier just east of the route. We scurried along, later to see several yards of our path covered with ice debris! By the end of our first day we were just over the rotten overhang, a little beneath Fred and Steve's bivouac.

The following morning dawned cold and clear. We moved out, anxious for the unknown above. Steve tackled the upper portion of the vertical headwall. The lead proved difficult. Above the headwall we reached a

great arc, replenished our three empty water bottles from a snow bowl and climbed six easier pitches, which were followed by a medium fifth-class one. Now nearly two-thirds of the way, we were getting into very exposed climbing. Four consecutive difficult leads followed. Most of Slesse's north face is well fractured, but this section required the only bolt used on the climb. Thus far we had climbed in a direct line, always up. The end of our second day found me belaying Fred from stirrups as he first traversed 50 feet right over delicate face holds with little protection, then climbed 80 feet partly on aid to a belay ledge. I then brought up Steve and set off on the traverse myself. Darkness made it impossible to find holds and I finished the pitch in prusik slings. To belay Steve on the traverse was virtually impossible and so he bivouacked in slings while Fred and I fought off snafflehounds most of the night. At our second bivouac we amused ourselves by dropping rocks for a 2000-foot free fall to the glacial cirque beneath the east face.

Our third day was again cold and clear. We had been lucky; the preceding week it had rained every day and it was to rain again when we returned to Seattle. From our second bivouac an easy lead took us above the overhanging east face on a 50-foot traverse and then to the summit. We enjoyed the spectacular view of Shuksan, Baker, and the Pickets before beginning the many long rappels down Beckey's northwest route and the many miles around and then back beneath the north face to Steve's pick-up truck. It had been a beautiful climb. We returned to Seattle very tired, very happy.

#### *Summary of Statistics*

AREA: Chilliwack Range, British Columbia, Canada.

ASCENT: First ascent of the north face of Mount Slesse, 8100 feet, August 26 to 28, 1963.

PERSONNEL: Fred Beckey, Steve Marts, Eric Bjornstad.

EQUIPMENT: 28 pitons, 30 carabiners, 2 150-foot climbing ropes, 1 300-foot haul line. Placed 63 pitons, 1 expansion bolt.