

The 1923 Climb of the Grand Teton

As told to ORRIN H. BONNEY by DAVID DELAP*

In my researches on the history of the Grand Teton, I recently obtained the story of the "three college boys from Missoula, Montana" who, on August 23, 1923, broke the spell of fear which had kept everyone off the mountain for twenty-five years after Bishop Franklin Spalding had led the 1898 party to the summit. This story had never been told to the public, and this is the first time it has appeared in print.

These three pioneers of the mountain are all living: Quin Blackburn, who in the '30s went with Admiral Byrd on two Antarctic expeditions, now lives in Boise, Idaho, where he works for the Bureau of Land Management; David DeLap, retired as a professor of mathematics at Montana State University, is now in the real estate business at Bozeman, Montana; Italian born Amedius (Andy) DePirro who received his college education at Montana University under the World War I GI Bill, has spent his mining engineer career in Peru where he still lives.

Interestingly enough, although this group has always been called the "college boys," DeLap had received his first college degree nine years before, and was 33 years old in 1923. As a high school principal he was taking a summer education course at Missoula. DePirro was 28, Blackburn was 25. The group had no previous experience on a climb of this rating, and never made a climb equal to it afterwards. They had no mountaineering equipment, not even a rope. Only their foot-gear met the best available resources of that day: Blackburn, with lumberjack experience, had adapted the calks of that industry, DeLap had converted his old football shoes with $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch calks, and DePirro had calks on his everyday work shoes.

They had been unable to obtain an account of either Langford's climb or the Spalding-Owen one; Blackburn had guessed the route from the now obsolete topo map.

They did a three-man courte-échelle stand on the overhanging boulder above the Crawl and on the Spalding Chimney and hauled the last man up by lowering the second man by his ankles, and he in turn lowering a pair of trousers, twisted tightly, to the man below.

By odd coincident, the final route from the Upper Saddle was located almost as it had been on the 1872 and 1898 climbs. While Blackburn and DePirro were assailing in vain the steep walls to the right or east of the

* Copyright 1968 by Orrin H. Bonney. This article is an advance publication of part of Mr. Bonney's book *Beginnings of Teton Climbing*, now in preparation. He will appreciate receiving all materials, photographs, anecdotes, personal stories concerning the early day Tetons.

Upper Saddle, DeLap (just as Stevenson and Spalding had done on their respective climbs) went around to investigate the ledge to the north and left, following it until he came to the overhanging boulder at the end of the Crawl; then he went back for the others.

Blackburn sent us a tape-recorded account of the climb; we tape-recorded our interview with DeLap, who also furnished us with a long-ago prepared written account, which follows:

Climbing the Grand Teton

THE AUGUST sun arose, bringing a clear, bright morning. No more beautiful scene did man ever behold. Jackson Hole was in its glory. Andy, Blackie and I were seated before a campfire breakfasting on bacon, hot cakes and coffee. About six miles to the west of us stood that great overtowering mountain, The Grand Teton. Its magnificent, sturdy appearance made us think of it as a protector to everything.

Twenty paces to our rear, Cottonwood Creek was running wild. Suddenly, a rapid succession of abrupt, sharp noises resembling the sounds made by stones when swiftly thrown into water drew our attention. We bounded through the brush to the bank. A full-grown deer sped by us up the creek like a flash. The sounds of the hoofs striking the water surface quickly grew fainter thus indicating the swiftness with which the nimble animal escaped up the meandering stream. We felt just as full of life, although there throbbed within us a feeling of anxiety for what was to follow. We had not driven 800 miles just to look at the great mountain, but with express determination to climb it.

Blackie (Quin A. Blackburn) was a graduate in Geology at the University of Montana. He had spent several summers cruising for a big lumber company in the Northwest and had had a rather wide experience in mountain climbing although but twenty-five years of age. Andy (Amedius DePirro) had done some climbing in his native country, Italy, ten years before. His agility, strength, endurance and dependability made him an ideal companion on an expedition of this kind. I (David F. DeLap) had been Principal of Schools during the previous school year at Broadus, Montana and was planning on entering Montana State College at Bozeman as a student in civil engineering in the fall. Blackie and I had climbed three or four of the highest peaks in the Mission Range of western Montana during that summer and were hardened for this biggest

effort. All three had been students at the University of Montana during the summer of 1923 and thus we had become acquainted.

We left Missoula at noon, August 18th in an old Model "T" Ford¹ and at six P.M. of the 24th arrived at Jenny Lake, a mile or two east of the foot of Mount Teewinot. At that time I did not know that Teewinot obstructed the view of the Grand Teton from Jenny Lake. The lake was lined with campers. Being now almost without bread, we inquired at one tent if we could buy a loaf. The lady kindly sold us two. The Grand Teton appeared to be but a mile or so away. Our continuous gazing at that wonderful view caused the lady to remark, "Oh, lots of people try to climb that mountain every summer, but its top has never been reached but once and that was a long time ago."

Before ever reaching the Jackson Hole country, we had decided to attempt the ascent by way of Bradley Canyon². Blackie had made a close study of a U. S. Geological Survey topographical map of the Tetons and from the lay of the contours he selected this route as the most feasible. For this reason we hurried four miles farther down the valley from Jenny Lake and camped near Cottonwood Creek at a point where we judged Bradley Creek emptied into it. Our plans were to be on our way up the mountain by five A.M. determined to make the ascent and return in one day. Our map showed our elevation at that point to be about 6600 feet and the top of the Grand Teton 13,747, a difference of but little over 7100 feet. We had climbed nearly 7000 feet in the Missions and returned in one day. We believed we could do it here.

While we were eating supper, a car stopped in the road nearby and a voice called out, "Don't you want some nice fresh bread and doughnuts?" Of course, we did. A Mr. Kent and wife, who were operating a "Home Bakery" a mile farther down the valley, drove into our camp³. As a result of this meeting we decided to park our car in his neighbor's corral and to prepare for a two-day journey instead of one.

At 6:30 A.M. of the 25th we drove up to the home of James H. Mangus and told him our business. He gladly showed us a place to leave our car and directed us to a cow trail which led to Bradley Creek. He looked at our shoes to see if they were properly caulked and questioned us about preparations. He said "Don't feel it a disgrace, boys, if you fail, for it never has been climbed but once and many have tried it."

1. Blackburn and DePirro bought it just for the trip and paid \$75 for it

2. Now known as Garnet Canyon.

3. Karl Kent, who had his "Home Bakery" at the outlet of Jenny Lake, near today's guiding concession.

At seven we started. Each one carried a light pack which contained an extra garment or two in preparation for sleeping out at night. In addition, the grub consisting of a dozen 10-cent bars of chocolate, half as many pound-packages of raisins, a dozen bacon sandwiches and two loaves of bread was distributed among the three of us. In our group, also, was an Eastman 2A Brownie Kodak, three rolls of film, a geologist's hammer and a canteen.

The trail penetrated a dense forest, followed Taggart Creek to Taggart Lake where it bore to the right over a sharp divide to Bradley Lake. On the divide we came suddenly upon a huge bull-moose. He faced us and stood motionless for nearly a minute within forty feet of us. His antlers looked to be a foot wide. I believe he would have weighed over 1200 pounds. The cow trail ended at the lake. A steady rain had fallen for two hours. We were now soaked to the skin but at ten o'clock the sun came out very hot and dried our clothes considerably.

Above Bradley Lake no trail was to be seen. The elevation of the canyon increased two thousand feet per mile by a series of bluffs so close together that they reminded one of a huge stairway with steps varying in height from a few hundred to a thousand feet.

We passed timber line at about 9000 feet. At 9500 feet the canyon branched into a north and a south fork. Between the two forks stood the Middle Teton with its long, black, vertical dike showing strikingly in its side nearest to us. We took the north fork. There we encountered a high bluff imbedded with thousands of garnets, over which snow water from the glaciers above was pouring. Blackie examined the garnets carefully and found they were of no value as they would crumble as we attempted to remove them from the surrounding mass of rock. Upon climbing over the bluff, we saw before us a glacier, perhaps a half mile long and half as wide⁴. Its surface was corrugated due to the rapid flow of snow water. Near the mountain walls and lying parallel to them we found long and deep crevasses in the ice sheet which signified that the great mass of ice and snow was gradually sliding downward. At the foot of the glacier untold numbers of massive, broken rocks were piled high in a long moraine.

We scaled another wall several hundred feet in height and, at last, stood on top of a saddle, the low ridge between the Middle Teton and the Grand Teton, at 11,500 feet elevation. A strong, raw wind struck us and

4. The Middle Teton Glacier, then much larger. As I recall this glacier thirty years ago, it must have been 100 to 150 feet thicker than today.—O.H.B.

immediately we removed our surplus clothing from our packs and put it on. It was now 1:30. We ate lunch consisting of a chocolate bar each, a package of raisins and bread.

Thus far we had moved almost due west after having reached Bradley Canyon but now we turned due north for an additional elevation of 1500 feet over slide rock and vertical walls. We did start up that dangerous climb in file but soon changed to the skirmish line formation. Not for one second was a climber's life secure for he never knew when the moving of a small stone would start a huge rock slide which might sweep himself and perhaps his companions over a precipice for hundreds of feet⁵. Each one kept a vigilant eye for a stone that might be started from its resting place. We made piles of stones to use as markers to guide us in returning over the slide rock.

By 3:30 we had reached a narrow saddle at 13,000 feet elevation. Here we faced a vertical wall 200 feet high. At its base we noticed a dozen steel pins, probably an inch in diameter. We imagined that some unfortunate climber intended to bore holes into this wall in which to insert the pins with the view of making a substitute for a ladder; however, we noticed no further evidence to substantiate our idea.

This vertical wall was broken in one place by a natural vent or opening resembling a chimney. Its three walls were covered with sheets of ice and from the top hung icicles in great numbers. Blackie and Andy examined the chimney closely and used every effort to climb it. While they were busily engaged at that I followed a ledge around toward the northwest side. Less than 200 feet away it came to an end. Here an overhanging wall stood above me. I dared not look downward, but I threw a large rock over the edge of the cliff and timed its falling. The report returned in just nine seconds. The law of falling bodies told me that it fell more than 1000 feet.

For a space of two or three feet no ledge existed but from that point a cleft in the wall extended forward, apparently the beginning of another ledge. I decided to find out, leaned forward, grasped the thin slab of rock which was separated a few inches from the vertical wall by the cleft, and scrambled forward and slightly upward over the side of the slab for seven or eight feet. Sure enough a ledge wide enough to walk upon commenced here and continued for about sixty feet. Abruptly, it ended except for a narrow, projecting shelf about forty feet long, so narrow that

5. Climbers today will not experience this fragile condition between the Lower Saddle and Upper Saddle. It still existed when I first climbed the mountain, but most of this slide rock has now tumbled down and come to rest.—O.H.B.

half my body overhung the wall below as I slid myself forward on my stomach. My back scraped the overhanging wall above. This shelf led onto a ledge about four feet wide which sloped away from the vertical wall at an angle of about 20° or 30°. Forty feet ahead it came to an abrupt end. From this point a break in the wall extended vertically upward. A huge rectangular-shaped rock of dimensions about 10 x 8 x 6 feet was lodged in the chimney in such a way its upper edge nearest me stood about eight feet directly overhead and its front projected outward about two or three feet beyond the vertical wall. A sheet of ice covered the floor of the opening below the rock. Two ways for further advancement seemed feasible but I dared not attempt them alone; one was to crawl beneath the lodged rock up a steep icy surface; the other was to climb over the top. I returned to report my findings.

Blackie and Andy were still attempting to climb the icy wall but gave it up when I reported what I had found. Blackie came down, his hands numb from contact with ice and snow. Andy and I had on some cheap, cotton gloves which kept our hands warm even though they were wet. Everything was made even more disagreeable by a strong northwest wind which was blowing from the tops of the mountain peaks accompanied with a flurry of snow.

We started around the northwest side. Everything went well until we came to the narrow ledge overhung by the mountain wall. I slid through with ease as before, and so did Andy, but Blackie being more robust than we had some difficulty. By using his hammer he knocked off a few of the sharp projections and thus opened the way although he did become almost wedged tightly at two or three places as he crawled through the "cooning place" or "crawl," names given to this part of the ledge by some climbers who have written books about the various routes to the summit of the Grand Teton. We stood up to cover the next 40 feet. However, without safe caulks on our shoes we would likely have "spent the rest of our lives sliding down the mountain side" as Ellingwood expressed it in his story about his climb at a later date⁶.

Here we came to the big rock lodged in the chimney as mentioned above. After attempting to crawl through an opening underneath it and failing we made preparations to climb over. At this point Blackburn took charge of plans and operations and ever since I have been grateful that he did. The huge rock in the chimney which jutted out some two or three feet beyond the vertical wall necessitated courage and confidence

6. Albert Ellingwood and Eleanor Davis (Ehrman) climbed the Grand Teton two days later.

on the part of every one of us in one another if it was to be overcome. Blackburn engineered the whole procedure from here on to the summit. Andy and I did exactly as he told us without questioning his decisions, without a word one way or another but promptly and with full confidence. It is my actual belief the success of this venture lay largely to Blackburn's leadership.

As Blackie was the heaviest man, Andy and I boosted him up so that when he stood on our shoulders he could climb into the V-shaped and rather steeply inclined opening between the wall and huge rectangular-shaped rock whose top was some eight feet above where we stood. Fortunately, it was just wide enough so that Blackie could wedge his body into it tightly. He slid himself down so that his legs below his knees hung vertically downward. I boosted Andy up so that he could take hold of Blackie's legs. Andy easily climbed over. A new problem now presented itself. How was I to reach Blackie's legs which were over a foot above my reach? I did not dare to jump to grab them. Andy solved the problem by taking off a pair of his trousers. Blackie held them by the top letting the legs down to me while Andy held him securely by his legs in the V-shaped niche. By twisting the legs of the trousers and pulling myself upward aided by placing my caulked shoes against the face of the rock I had little difficulty in passing that point.

It was now five P.M. The next fifty feet was a sort of terrace of large broken rock and easily surmounted, but another vertical wall faced us. Luckily, its smooth surface was broken in one place by a narrow chimney although the walls were covered with sheets of ice. We commenced to pick footholds into the ice on both opposite walls of the chimney but that was too slow a process since we must reach the top and return over the most hazardous points before dark. In order to expedite matters we organized ourselves into a human ladder. One man placed himself on a good solid footing. The next climbed his body and stood upon his shoulders aiding by pressing his knees and elbows against the opposite walls. The third man climbed the other two. Upon reaching the top he cut footholds and elbow holds in the icy walls. We ascended very quickly two such chimneys of about fifty to sixty feet each. The last 200 or 300 feet was easily surmounted as the top was oval shaped. At 5:55 P.M. we stood on the summit.

A large cairn stood on the highest point. From its top projecting upward although considerably bent we found a bronze rod. By the side of the cairn was a metal, triangular-shaped banner on which was painted, "ROCKY MOUNTAIN CLUB." From all appearances this banner at

one time was welded to the rod. On the rod was a metal cup no longer fastened to the rod and easily slipped off the upper end. Inside it we found written on a thin, small sheet of paper the following names and data:

"GRAND TETON

J. SHIVE

F. SPALDING

F. L. PETERSON

W. O. OWEN

Started from Camp Owen at 5:20 A.M. Reached summit at (_____) P.M. O.K. August 11, 1898."

We wrote our names, addresses, date, time we started from camp and the time we arrived on the summit with the remark, "Colder Than Hell" on the back of a blank check from the Gallatin Trust & Savings Bank of Bozeman, Montana where I did my banking, wrapped it around the small sheet of paper we found inside the canister or cup and replaced the cup on the rod. After taking a few pictures, one of Blackie and Andy, another of Blackie and me and a third of Andy and me we set out on the descent at 6:30. We had to make haste even though we realized that the descent was considerably more hazardous than the ascent. We used the ladder system and made good time in descending through the first two chimneys. The moon was shining intermittently when we were again at the large rock where we must descend some eight feet or more from the top of the rock to the narrow ledge below which we could not see. It seemed to be almost pitch dark as we looked out into space into the deep, dark canyon more than 1000 feet below.

Here again Blackburn displayed his courage and leadership magnificently. He said to me, "DeLap, take a good hold on the upper edge of this rock and stretch your body out feet downward toward the lower edge." He instructed DePirro to clutch my body and slide downward holding on tightly just above my knees. Then Blackburn slid down the body of DePirro swinging his feet in toward the ledge making contact on the icy surface. Then instructions were given to DePirro to release his hold on my knees but regain another clasp about my legs below the knees. This allowed DePirro to slide a little lower into Blackburn's arms. Then Blackburn said, "DeLap, turn loose above and allow your body to slide slowly into DePirro's arms." I did exactly as I was told without hesitation but, needless to say, it was with deep anxiety. Even today I shudder at

the thoughts of this experience. Blackburn drew the two of us slowly into his arms and set our feet on the ledge where he stood. Actually, I doubt if it could be done again under the same circumstances.

We slid through the "cooning place" with ease and covered the rest of the ledge with little difficulty even though actual darkness was upon us. Blackie took the lead over the slide rock area and down the steep bluff to the upper edge of the glacier. Our last deep concern was to avoid slipping into the deep crevasse at the foot of the bluff. Fortunately, the moon shone brilliantly during that part of our descent much to our gratification.

At eleven p.m. we reached timberline where we heaped up logs, poles and dry brush into a large pile and started a campfire. Each one then made himself a bed of evergreen branches near the fireside and lay down for the night. I asked the question, "How much money would it take to induce you to go back again tomorrow for a second climb of the Grand Teton?" Blackie immediately responded, "I would go back tomorrow for \$100." DePirro was non-committal. I said, "There isn't enough money to get me to take the chances we took today to climb the Grand Teton again." That is the way I felt that night but I am sure had we stayed around in that area a few days longer we likely would have been looking for an easier route to the summit.

At nine the next morning we reached our car. Mr. and Mrs. Mangus were at home. Upon being asked if we had succeeded in the ascent, we had only to read from our notebooks the names and inscriptions found on the summit to substantiate that we had. At the "Home Bakery" we found Mr. and Mrs. Kent. They acted as though they were hearing from old time friends when we read to them the names of "Owen, Spalding, Shive and Peterson." Mr. Kent then spoke of each one of these men by his given name and told us of their whereabouts so far as he could. One had died, another lived in Jackson, Wyoming and another in California. These were the only people in Wyoming we informed about our ascent. In less than a month we all received letters from Mr. Owen of Los Angeles wanting to know the particulars about our ascent and the condition in which we found the records which he left on the summit twenty-five years before.

Inasmuch as we were in a hurry to get Blackie back to Missoula, Montana on time to meet his appointment we did not even try to contact the member of the Owen party who lived in Jackson as we went through. The old Model "T" Ford climbed the cork-screw mountain road west of Jackson without missing a stroke⁷. The brakes were completely gone

7. Teton Pass.

except the emergency and I have wondered many times since how we ever made such a hazardous trip over Mount Washburn in the Yellowstone Park as well as over the Teton range without the slightest mishap. I guess our success was largely due to being headlong rather than over-cautious, both in climbing the Grand Teton as well as on the highway.

As we traveled across the low, irrigated landscape of Idaho we gazed frequently at the Grand Teton which stood up like a sharp tooth protruding higher into the clouds and heavens than its neighboring peaks. We had a feeling of pride in having accomplished something extraordinary but with a reserved feeling like an old soldier who refrains from reciting his battle experiences because he does not enjoy reliving them.

Upon return to Missoula we reported to Dr. Clapp, President of the University, about our success. It was then that we spoke about the vertical wall on the north side of the Grand Teton being 2000 feet according to the contour map, but he told us that even granite would not withstand such enormous weight.

Blackburn left for his job in Washington. DePirro went about his regular duties from which he had taken time for this trip. I went into the harvest fields during the threshing season. Today Blackburn is a geologist living in Boise, Idaho. DePirro is with the Vanadium Corporation of America and located in Peru, South America. I am a retired mathematics teacher and living in Bozeman, Montana.

