Mount Hickman

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LOCALS and natives often think climbing is pointless and perverse. To be "weathered-in" at the Southeastern Alaska coastal town of Wrangell is an experience with frontier mentality, for fishing and drinking are the principal pursuits of the populace. Economic ambitions have figured strongly at Wrangell since the 1830's, when it was known as Fort Dionysius and variously occupied by both the Russians and Hudson Bay Co. Fortunately today's Wrangell is not as lawless as 1874, the climax year of the days of sternwheelers and trade in fur and Cassiar gold up the Stikine River. Prior to the sale of Alaska to the United States a Russian man-o-war sent a boat's crew on an exploration up the Stikine. At the Great Glacier, an immense ice flow which nearly discharges into the river, the officers set out amid the crevasses. Two of the men never returned and were not found despite successive searches, in what may have been North America's first mountaineering accident.

The Stikine was first used by coastal Indians who traded and warred with inland tribes, long before the days of the fortune seekers drawn by the lure of gold. Recorded in Tlingit songs and legends is a tradition that the Great Glacier bridged the Stikine, with the river carving an arch beneath. The region is one of superstitution: according to the coast Indians, an evil spirit dwelt up the Iskut (the great eastern branch of the Stikine), one which destroyed canoes and devoured their occupants.

In 1879 John Muir brought his keen intellect to the Stikine. In addition to making a hike up the lower portions of the Mud and Great Glaciers[1] he climbed Glenora Peak (about 7000 feet), likely the first climb in this portion of the Coast Mountains. He was exalted by "more than 300 miles of closely packed peaks of the great Coast Range, sculptured in the boldest manner imaginable." Muir counted over 200 glaciers. "Alps rise beyond alps as far as the eye can reach . . . needles and pinnacles innumerable like trees in groves. I never before had seen so richly sculptured a range or so many awe-inspiring inaccessible mountains crowded together." [2]

The insularity of the Coast Mountains is understandable in view of the abundance of summits and the short settlement history in much of British Columbia. The igneous complex of granitic rocks is intruded mainly as a great batholith over 1000 miles long. The presence of dominantly intrusive rocks in large areas explains the similarities in topography that extend this great length. North of the Nass River valley the cordillera is now called the Boundary Ranges. These really have no distinct crestline, but are an aggregate of vast spectacular mountain masses

[1] Muir, John, *Travels in Alaska.* Boston, 1915. pp. 97-103.

[2] *Ibid.* pp. 93-95.

separated irregularly by deep valleys. Such rivers as the Stikine, Iskut, Taku, Unuk, and Nass incised the mountains prior to the Pleistocene, then they were overdeepened by ice passage. Like the Skeena, Alsek, and Copper, these rivers flow seaward transverse to the axis of the mountains. The last of the ice sheets covered the region to a depth of 6000 feet. The present mountains stand mainly between 6000 and 10,000 feet, not high in absolute altitude, but they emphasize great local relief because of nearness to the coast and because the streams descend rapidly to the sea. There are great icefields both east and west of the Stikine, north of the Taku, and again south of the Iskut. Spectacular glacier tongues lead from these icefields to the heads of valleys to form a myriad of river sources. Many of the peaks take matterhorn shapes, a result of converging cirque erosion.

Limited explorations were first made by George M. Dawson, the noted Canadian geologist, then by field parties from both the United States and Canada shortly after the turn of the century to determine the international boundary between Portland Canal and Mount St. Elias. Some 600 miles of rugged terrain, mostly mountainous and glacierized, was surveyed to determine the actual demarcation, after the 1903 London Tribunal where the jurist Lord Alverstone "blue-pencilled" what appeared on preliminary maps to be the proper mountains for boundary points. Included among the many harrowing field experiences of these parties were largely unpublished mountaineering adventures on the icefields; several times men were saved by either the rope or alpenstock during crevasse plunges, and one death is recorded due to a cornice collapse.

F. A. Kerr, who made extensive field investigations in 1926 and 1929, described the abrupt U-profile valleys of the Coast Mountains and "extremely rugged summits, ornamented with sharp needles and fantastic shapes." [3] He also made an observation of interest: in the summer of 1929 there were 8 clear days, 19 cloudy with drizzle, and 48 with heavy rain (Muir reported a more normal average in 1879 for Wrangell with 39 clear, 43 cloudy with no rain, and 65 with rain). Kerr indicated the vast block of mountains (Spectrum Range) "stands mainly unmapped between the upper reaches of Iskut River on the east and Stikine River on the west." He added "Mount Hickman, 9700 feet high, close to its centre, is shown on maps as its highest peak." [4]

More recent appraisal and nomenclature considers the Hickman block a portion of the Coast Mountains, principally due to topographic and genetic similarity.[5] On the eastern margin of the Hickman Batholith there is extensive copper mineralization within the andesite to basaltic volcanic

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[3] Summary Report, 1929 (Part A). Geological Survey of Canada. See also "Geography and Geology of Alaska," Alfred H. Brooks, U.S.G.S. Prof. Paper 45, pp. 11-308.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Holland, Stuart, S., "Landforms of British Columbia." Annual Report 1966, Minister of Mines and Petroleum Resources, Victoria.

rocks. The colorful Spectrum Range lies to the east of the Coast Mountains (Mess Creek), and nearby Mount Edziza may be the major active volcano in Canada.

Such is the general setting of the Iskut-Scud-Mess Icefield, known only to the aerial photographer, and the helicopter prospector, but almost totally unexplored on foot. There have apparently been only two mountaineering expeditions: one to Ambition and Endeavour Mountains by a 1967 Seattle-based group,[6] and the 1972 Mount Hickman exploit, accounted here.

The concept of access in Alaska and Northern Canada has changed much in the past few decades because of aircraft and the helicopter. Areas that would have taken an entire summer to visit may now be sensibly explored by an expedition of one or two weeks. There is a price for this "progress," of course, in the exploitation of the land.

After a series of delays due to poor weather in early July, and some bizarre events which included my missing the Alaska ferry during a short docking at Ketchikan while en route to Wrangell, John Rupley, Dave Beckstead and I were soon able to make a very exciting and knowledge-gathering charter flight from Ketchikan to an air strip on Schaft Creek, some 36 miles southwest of Telegraph Creek on the Stikine. The flight with Pete Johnson of South Coast Airways allowed us to peruse the mountain mysteries from a vantage the boundary surveyors could never attain. The views of countless glaciated alpine peaks, most of them unnamed and unclimbed, were almost overwhelming. Without question, this is one of the great mountain regions in North America. We cast glimpses at the topographic array west of the Stikine (Kate's Needle, Devil's Thumb, Mount Ratz) but focused on our "unknown," Hickman. Fortunately the perfect day allowed a circling of the impressive peak, one which changed our route plan from the north to the south side. The aerial photos we had so carefully studied in Prince Rupert nearly led us astray. With a serious respect for our climbing objective, we landed at the airstrip adjacent to the Hecla Mining and Atled Operations camp.

Intensive exploration in difficult terrain in the Stikine-Iskut area in the mid 1950's prospecting boom gained the region economic publicity. Copper was discovered near Schaft Creek in 1957, quickly followed by claim development and drilling, and this incidentally provided a new access route to the fabulous adjacent mountains. Luck was with us in the form of an attendant helicopter; we judged it worth a 15-mile flight to the glacier draining to the Scud, south of Hickman's summit, in view of the advisability of getting on with the climb during the current spell of clear weather.

The granite spine of Mount Hickman trends mainly east-west, with an octopus of ridges radiating from the massif. The serrate summit crest

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[6] Wilson, Jim, "First Ascents in the Coast Range of British Columbia," *Mountaineer,* 1969.

spans nearly half a mile, frost-shattered and gashed into towers. The bulky eastern tower and an isolated central wafer are about equal in height. We chose the former during our flight as the summit choice because of a more practical finish and its distinction. Aside from precipitous ridges and even sharper summit crests, the entire region is ice-covered, a magnificent white wilderness of solitude.

Fortunately we were able to place a high camp on the ice divide just west of the summit, and only about 1700 feet below it in height. Using snowshoes we were able to track a route traversing downward through a crevassed area. On an evening reconnaissance we sloshed past the slide-danger area, then zigzagged up a long steepening glacier slope until the snowshoes refused to grab. An hour of kicking took us to the major schrund at a place we expected to find the best crossing and an entry to the very steep couloir bearing to the chosen summit notch.

Daybreak on July 19 brought an overcast and an unhappy mood, but our optimism returned when we detected the air movement was from the northwest. By the time we reached our highest steps the weather pattern showed stability again. The schrund snow nearly collapsed during the crossing, but once above the going was good. Avalanche runnels provided the best movement, for crampons gripped adequately. The couloir became blue ice with thinning snow cover—poor going. A week earlier the entire slope must have been unconsolidated; a week later it would have been badly iced. The omens were good today: our route forged through a steep system dangerous for snow avalanches and both falling ice and rock. Firm conditions were of vital importance. Compared to the Pacific and Cascade Ranges farther south the surface would rate as poor, but for this region of long diurnal insolation and generally moist summer weather our experience was probably optimum.

Three rock pitches in the principal couloir (easy fifth-class) during which we spent as much time casting about for danger as climbing, brought us to an uncompromising choice: the ice sheet of the couloir directly above or a mixture of ice, snow, and a shattered rock spur on the right. A poorly protected advance toward the spur, including the bad belay stances, narrowed the choice to the couloir. The spur would have made the best route if the rock were firm, but a close inspection and a look upward were frightening. Two leads on the ice, during which we placed ice screws as tokens of security, brought us to rock. When we reached the summit notch, which had a truly unstable crest, we encountered a final crown of unpleasantness: two fifth-class pitches, not technically hard, but loose and with no piton protection, even for the key belays. (Fortunately a safe rappel mitigated the descent.)

The summit view was rewarding to the senses; an endless array of jagged rock and ice in all directions, just as preceding explorers had so correctly penned. The magnitude and challenge of the surroundings reinforced the realization that we were indeed fortunate to have climbed such a magnificent wilderness peak. We mused on the centuries of time

it might take to traverse all the glaciers and valleys in view, the labyrinth of peaks and ridges, and on the hope these mountains would never become civilized. For an hour, we were at the center of our world of glitter.

Two hundred feet off the summit ridge we voted to tie-in until the shadow tightened the instabilities. When we awoke from dozing, conditions looked improved. Many successive rappels, usually from rock pitons along the couloir flank, took us to the avalanche runnels of the main ice slope—just at pitch darkness. The rest of the descent was only a shadow of reality—it was hard to see and fatigue did not make the steep slope more hospitable. Well after midnight, we bow-legged the tedious traverse back up to our tent.

On the second morning, after a nearly continual day's feast, we descended the choatic and hazardous 2000-foot icefall to the icefield level. We snowshoed through a pass to the Hickman Creek drainage and by evening reached the broad valley of Schaft Creek with its widely braided stream. Some six hours of gravel bars, light bush, and prospector's trail brought us to the exploration camp.

Later, when we flew down the Stikine with Chuck Traylor of Wrangell, my thoughts grew philosophic: why not legislate this unparalleled mountain river into an "International Wild River"? The opportunity to preserve it is still there, despite the threat of a massive hydro-electric power system (Provincial government orders reserved some 200 miles of the Stikine and Iskut for hydro). There are many magnificent rivers between the Fraser and Susitna, but none can compare in grandeur, completeness, and diversity in western North America. This I can vouch, for I have seen and studied them. From the headwaters of the Liard to Wrangell Sound the Stikine traverses a full spectrum of climate, color, geology, topography, vegetation, and wildlife—and all in the grand wilderness manner, still virtually unspoiled. It is the inland counterpart of the magnificent Tracy and Endicott Arms, Ford's Terror, and Thomas Bay, and long the domain of the Tlingit and Tahltan tribes. It is where Kate's Needle swoops 10,000 full feet from the devil's club jungle and the colossal white flow of Great Glacier edges to the river. It has to be seen to be believed. John Muir worded it so well:

> "The majestic cliffs and mountains forming the cañon-walls . . . adorned and enlivened with glaciers and waterfalls, while throughout almost its whole extent the floor is a flowery landscape garden, like Yosemite. The most striking features are the glaciers, hanging over the cliffs. . . ."

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Southeastern Alaska

FIRST ASCENT: Mount Hickman, 9700 feet, July 19, 1972 (Fred Beckey, David Beckstead, John Rupley.)