

ridge is even today described in the guidebook as “a significant mountaineering objective.” The following year these two teamed with Fryxell and Smith to finally make the first ascent of Mt. Owen. Once on top and ready to rope off, they were astonished to learn that Fryxell and Smith had never even seen or heard of a rappel. The lack of such a key technique illustrates how much a backwater the Tetons then were.

With these climbs the stage was set for a remarkable flowering of talent. The Mt. Owen companions had great climbs yet to come: the north ridge of the Grand and the complete Exum Ridge among them. In 1932 Fryxell would chronicle these climbs in a book, *The Teton Peaks and Their Ascents*. This compact range was to become, and largely remains to this day, the premier mountaineering range of the lower 48 states. It was where climbers from all over the country would go for alpine climbing. Here they would meet others of the nascent climbing fraternity. Here they would hatch plans for Alaska, the Andes, and the Himalaya. Did Underhill and Henderson have any idea what a great climbing ground the Tetons were to become as they roped up on July 22, 1929? With their already extensive knowledge of the Alps, I would like to believe that they did.

1932. MINYA KONKA (GONGGA SHAN)

NICK CLINCH

At 2:40 p.m. on October 28, 1932, Terris Moore and Richard Burdsall stood on the summit of Minya Konka. At 24,891 feet, this was the highest mountain in western China, and the highest mountain to be summited by Americans for the next 26 years. They took pictures of the American and Chinese flags as well as a complete 360-degree panorama of the view from the top before beginning their descent.

The climb was the culmination of a brilliant effort by four young Americans, Richard L. Burdsall, Arthur B. Emmons, Terris Moore, and Jack T. Young. (Young was an American of Chinese ancestry.) The mountain was high, dangerous, little known, and in remote warlord-torn China. The advantage of having American missionaries along the way was offset by violently unsettled conditions. The mountains of western China and eastern Tibet are isolated, rough country, with almost constant bad weather and significant avalanche danger. Like the Alps in the early 19th century, the countryside was well populated and traveled by locals, but the mountains themselves were completely unknown. The American climbers traveled so far back in the boonies of one of the most underrated mountain areas in the world, and were so far ahead of their time in their style, that despite writing a book (*Men Against the Clouds*, 1935), their achievement has long been under-appreciated.

The Americans went by ship to Shanghai, armored boat to Chungking, bus to Chengdu, hired porters escorted by soldiers, and finally used yaks to reach the base of the mountain. They explored and surveyed the peak, selected the most feasible route, the northwest ridge, and climbed it. Unlike previous Himalayan expeditions, they did not use porters. As Burdsall and Moore wrote, “In Alaska, where there are no native porters, American climbers ... have developed a technique



of cutting down to bare essentials, using only the lightest-weight equipment, then carrying these minimum needs on their own backs.”

They had the essential ingredients for success on big mountains: skill, aggressiveness, judgment, and luck. The mountain was technically moderate but it had treacherous obstacles and considerable risk from storms and avalanches. They split the seam on the far edge of the envelope, but remained inside. They reached the summit, sustaining serious frostbite (including a loss of Emmons’ toes), and returned alive. Later climbers would not be so fortunate, dying in falls and avalanches.

The next climb of

Minya Konka was in 1957 by a large Chinese party. The leader questioned the lack of evidence of the American party on the summit, but in his *Alpine Journal* article graciously said the Americans made the first ascent. He must have liked the description in their book of the view from the summit, since he copied it in his article.

The Americans’ lack of fuss, in a region away from the beaten mountaineering track of the Himalaya and Karakoram, in a time of depression and world war, obscured their accomplishment. But as storms and avalanches trap an increasing number of mountaineers in the wilds of the border country between China and Tibet, the reputation of the 1932 climb will grow. Their example will never fail to inspire American mountaineers.