

ACCIDENTS IN NORTH AMERICAN MOUNTAINEERING

Forty-Sixth Annual Report of the Safety Committees of The American Alpine Club and The Alpine Club of Canada

This is the forty-sixth issue of Accidents in North American Mountaineering and the fifteenth that has been done jointly by the American Alpine Club and The Alpine Club of Canada.

Canada: Again, happily, we have fewer mountaineering accidents to report this year than last, though a greater number than usual happened when hikers got into trouble after wandering into mountaineering terrain. Usually we do not include these, but as we have mentioned in the past, the difference is sometimes unclear, and our following reports include two borderline cases. In both, the people involved were referred to as hikers in the information we received; also, they were not equipped as typical mountaineers, so some elitists among us would dismiss them as non-mountaineers. However, labels are easy to attach and often a matter of opinion, just as the equipment required for any mountaineering project is a matter of personal choice and opinion. In view of the modern trend toward lightweight, minimal equipment and fast ascents, it seems only fair to consider the objective being undertaken in each case when deciding whether to call it a mountaineering endeavor. This includes deciding whether the individuals involved are to be called climbers.

As for the accidents reported, the causes continue to be much as they have been in the past. But we are seeing a new development in the summoning of help. The use of portable radios and cellular phones is becoming more common place. In some cases, this technology was important, if not critical, to the survival of the victims. The question has been raised, as it was when avalanche transceivers became standard equipment, as to whether the availability of such technology will result in people having a false sense of confidence and security to the extent that they go on terrain that is beyond their capability. The spectre that is raised is whether or not carrying such communication devices will ultimately be required by the custodians of our public lands, and at what cost both in terms of dollars and personal freedom.

A number of people deserve our gratitude for collecting information, and for submitting and preparing reports this year. They include Terry Damm, Burke Duncan, George Field, G. Fortin, Denis Gravel, D. Humphrey, Terry Willis, Percy Woods, plus some who declined mention and any we have regrettably missed.

United States: This year the reader will find for the first time a full length narrative on an accident in Mexico. The volcanoes are not far from a transportation center, and Pico de Orizaba is the third highest mountain in North America. They are understandable popular destinations, especially for commercially guided trips. We know that AMS and HAPE incidents happen there with regularity, but rarely with dire results, as the routes

are straight forward and evacuations do not have the technical requirements found in similar high mountain regions of Alaska and Canada. The report herein of a major avalanche seems to have been an aberration for the regular climbing season on the regular route. It is appropriate and of interest for this journal, of course. In the future, we expect more reports from Mexico, including places like the Barranca de Cobre and Baja. For the time being, we are not printing a data base in the Tables section.

There were a number of reports from the mid-Atlantic and New England regions that were difficult to draw conclusions from. For instance, we don't know what caused a rock climbing instructor to fall to his death from a cliff in Maryland, other than that he was about to teach rappelling to a group of Explorer Scouts. We don't know what caused a young Massachusetts climber to fall to his death from Rose Ledges, a popular climbing cliff near Northfield; and the same in a similar incident at Ragged Mountain in Connecticut. We don't know what kind of "failed" knots were involved in two serious falls—one resulting in a flail chest and the other a fatality—at Seneca Rocks and Tohican Valley Park. The information comes in either as a short newspaper clip or a Case Incident Report (common to public land custodians) that focuses on how the rescue or recovery was handled. Therefore, and as usual, we only know that the activity of climbing was engaged in, but not the profile of the victim or the cause of the fall or failure. This is why we continue to solicit help in report gathering, and why we want our accident reporting format more widely used.

We must again emphasize that many accidents in the mountains are not related to the sport of climbing, but are characterized as such. The high density climbing areas, such as Joshua Tree National Monument (estimated 300,000 climber days—but don't know how many climbers, though it is reported that as many as 4,000 a day are there on big week-ends), Boulder Canyon (no estimates), and the Shawangunks (about 11,000 climbers—but don't know how many climber days), have accidents that happen to climbers and non-climbers on and around the cliffs. These have to be reported as climbing accidents, and the custodians have to count them this way, even though the individuals may not be climbers, because the occurrence was on a well-defined climbing route. This is quite different from the individuals who fall from an overlook in Delaware Water Gap or wander from a trail in Yosemite or Rocky Mountain National Park and fall. Yet the latter are being counted as "mountaineering" or "mountain-related" accidents, and hikers as well as people who just step out of the car and into the mountain environment continue to be characterized as climbers. This is a tide difficult to stem.

In addition to the Safety Committee, we are grateful to the following individuals for collecting data and helping with the report: Peter Armington, Dennis Burge, Micki Canfield, Joseph Evans, George Hurley, Renny Jackson, Roger Robinson, Jeff Scheetz, Thomas Sheuer, and, of course, George Sainsbury.

John E. (Jed) Williamson
Editor, USA
7 River Ridge
Hanover, NH 03755

Orvel Miskiw
Editor, Canada
8631 - 34th Ave NW
Calgary, Alberta