ACCIDENTS IN NORTH AMERICAN MOUNTAINEERING

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

This is the forty-eighth issue of *Accidents in North American Mountaineering* and the seventeenth that has been done jointly between The American Alpine Club and The Alpine Club of Canada.

Canada: We are pleased to report a slight subsidence of accident occurrence in Canada during 1994, noting a very quiet year in Jasper National Park, Quebec, and the Yukon. Although there was an overall increase in the number of people involved and injured in these fewer accidents, the fatality count dropped by nearly two-thirds, compared with 1993. Again, the most significant contribution to the statistics comes from falls on rock with inadequate protection.

Thanks to our many correspondents for contributing to this work by preparing or submitting reports this year: they include Tim Auger, Denis Blair, John Clarke, Eric Dafoe, George Field, Lloyd Freese, David Jones, Ian Kay, Marc Ledwidge, Amie Nashalik, Robert Stock, Murray Toft, Terry Willis, and especially Clair Israelson, who coordinates reporting for much of western Canada. We apologize to anyone we have missed mentioning.

We take this opportunity to offer our special thanks to Ian Kay as he ends several years of reporting from the west coast, and wish him our best for the future and hope that he continues to enjoy the mountains.

United States: This year saw no increase in the number of incidents and fatalities when averaged over the last ten years. But there were some interesting events that caught both media and mountaineers' attention. And once again, the difference between mountaineering (climbing) accidents versus mishaps that happen in the mountains became a focus for those of us interested in ensuring a good general understanding of the difference between the hazards and risks present in the mountain environment and those of the sport of mountaineering.

A mountain hazard that is present for everyone from drivers on switchback roads to the most avid wall climbers is falling rocks. They can be unloosed by the forces of nature—geology, weather, and gravity—as was the case at Cannon Cliffs in New Hampshire in October, when a spontaneous shower of granite rained down on two climbers approaching The Old Man of the Mountains formation. Sometimes rocks are dislodged by people, for the most part unintentionally, but also because of not taking good care. Upon occasion, dislodging rocks is done purposely. To "clean" the top or part of often

used routes is commonplace, with care being taken to ensure that the landing zone is clear. To "trundle" rocks, usually of the greatest size humanly possible to move, is for the most part a thing of the past, as the wilderness areas in which the current generation of climbers go are so populated that it is nearly impossible to be certain that no humans may inadvertently be in harm's way.

To deliberately displace or throw rocks down a cliff or slope that is known to have hiking and climbing traffic—or the potential thereof—is another matter completely. Unfortunately, there was such a case in September on Granite Peak, Montana's tallest at 12,799 feet. Three young men from Bozeman trundled rocks that resulted in a cannonade of an estimated 50 tons dropping 1000 feet, killing climber Tony Rich. By December, the young men were charged with negligent endangerment. They were found guilty, and their sentences included fines, expenses for rescue and counseling, community service, and a requirement to sell their climbing equipment. There is no great solace in this, either for the widow and her three children or for climbers who know we continue to be at risk when such behavior seems to be predictable these days.

The three winter deaths on Mount Washington (see New Hampshire narratives) raised much controversy and media attention. Each year there seems to be at least one dramatic incident, usually involving neophytes and poor decisions, that results in the non-mountaineering public becoming convinced that climbing is not only dangerous but an ill-advised activity for humans. These winter fatalities, during one of the coldest and windiest times recorded, led an inexperienced newspaper editor to say, "It is not overly romantic to say that the marriage between experienced hikers and Mount Washington is a torrid affair." This same editor was further moved to ask the questions to which anyone who lives a purposeful life knows the answers: "Why do we defy the odds? Why do we challenge nature in a way that limits our chance of survival?" One response that comes to mind is to pose the same questions to those who drive in rush hour traffic or work 100 hours a week. For experienced mountaineers, the odds of survival, if we look at the data carefully, are definitely better than for many other endeavors, especially if we meet the challenges with skill and experience.

In addition to the Safety Committee, we are grateful to the following individuals for collecting data and helping with the report: Hank Alicandri, Micki Canfield, Jim Detterline, Joseph Evans, George Hurley, Mark Magnuson, Daryl Miller, Roger Robinson, Jeff Scheetz, Jim Underwood, Tom Vines, and, of course, George Sainsbury.

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