

ACCIDENTS IN NORTH AMERICAN MOUNTAINEERING

Fiftieth Annual Report of the Safety Committee of The American Alpine Club

Canada: As of publication date, data and narratives from Canada were not available for this year's report.

United States: This issue marks a half century of the Report of the Safety Committee of the American Alpine Club. The Club constituted a Safety Committee in 1947 by the action of then AAC President, Walter Wood, and it was chaired by William P. House. The other members were M. Beckett Howarth, Maynard M. Miller and David Robertson, Jr. The reason for its formation was due to "the startling increase in the number of mountaineering accidents which occurred" during that summer. The introduction to the 1948 publication *Mountaineering Safety* stated that the purpose of the Safety Committee would be "to investigate climbing accidents and to formulate a program of prevention for the future." They also commented that data was to be gathered "with no intent to criticize persons involved, but rather to learn why these accidents occurred and to emphasize the lessons to be learned from them."

In 1949, the Committee called the 20 page report, printed in the American Alpine Journal, *Safety in the Mountains*. It was compiled and written by Maynard Miller. The committee had added Richard Leonard, Ome Daiber, and Dr. Benjamin G. Ferris, Jr. The next year the report was again printed as a pamphlet and called *Safety and the Climber*. This was followed in 1951 by the title *Alpine Accidents*, in which there was initiated the tabulation of accidents and their statistical information for the previous four years. Hassler Whitney (who took Howarth's place), John Fralick, and Dr. Hans Kraus were added to the committee. There was also an attempt that year to present the number of potential climbers in the U.S. based on membership lists from related organizations. The total of 40,000, which included the Appalachian Mountain Club and the Sierra Club, clearly represented a significant number of hikers. But it was proof enough for the Safety Committee that "more active missionary work by individuals in local clubs" was needed to lure the inexperienced, unprepared, and unjustifiably overconfident into programs of indoctrination.

By 1952, the pamphlet, still at 25 pages, took on its current (almost) name, *Accidents in American Mountaineering*, and tabulations of the 66 mountaineering accidents reported in the United States and Canada for the five year period 1947-1951 were included. Many of the incidents would be considered hiking or scrambling (off trail) situations, not technically to be counted as a mishap in the sport of climbing/mountaineering.

A number of other interesting documentaries and publications came out during this time period. The famous commentator Lowell Thomas narrated a U.S. Forest Service film entitled "Avalanches to Order" in 1949. The Seattle Mountain Rescue Council came out with *Mountain Safety Tips* in the same year. The Colorado Mountain Club published a series of accounts called, "It Can't Happen To Me - But It Did!" A twenty cent booklet by Wolf Bauer of the Seattle Mountain Rescue Council came out in 1952. It was called *You Can Handle an Emergency*.

The report stimulated the development of the Mountain Rescue Association. This group was particularly active in the Western States, and was spearheaded by Peter Shoening and George Sainsbury. They also launched a project to coordinate mountain safety education and rescue, and presented their scheme at the 1958 Annual Meeting of the AAC. Out of this came nine flyers "to provide basic information to climbers throughout North America interested in organizing mountain rescue teams." These were developed by the MRA and published by the AAC.

The format for reporting incidents was established by Dr. Thomas O. Nevison and Dr. Benjamin Ferris, Jr, who in 1952 became the Chairman of the Safety Committee and editor of the report until 1973. He recognized some of the inherent flaws in the Cause and Contributory Cause categories. We know there can be more than one cause for an accident, and that sometimes an "immediate cause," such as falling, is not the underlying cause, such as "exceeding abilities," or "having an off day." Ferris also recognized that it would never be possible to draw statistical conclusions from the data, because not only are they non-parametric, neither can they be looked at linearly. In other words, every accident has at least two or three causes linked with it, but each event is a separate configuration of these. The goal for all the Tables, then, is to illustrate trends. It is useful to know that most fatalities and serious injuries are the result of a fall and/or falling rocks or objects; that they happen only slightly more on ascending than descending; that more often than not it is the inexperienced who get in trouble; and that the young and old are equally afflicted.

A further statistical problem Dr. Ferris tried to overcome was to determine the number of climbers and climber days in any given year. In 1951, outdoor and mountaineering club total membership came to about 40,000, but this number included the Appalachian Mountain Club, Sierra Club, and various similar hiking and trail clubs, totaling 16,000 in all. So the number of people who could be counted strictly as climbers could only be estimated. In 1956, a better tabulation based on two years of figures received from climbing clubs and park registrations was reported. The committee was able to develop risk estimates based on man (sic) mountain days. The mountaineering accident rates were comparable to those in other sports when "standardized" for periods of risk exposure, but the mortalities were higher. However, even these, he recognized, were potentially spurious or misleading. In 1959, more detailed analyses were possible, and the results were presented in graphic form. Additionally, Ferris made an attempt to make some "observations." He noticed that with increasing age the ratio of fatal to non-fatal accidents seems to remain approximately the same. Why? He listed the following possibilities: 1) There is a limit beyond which more experience is of little help in reducing the ratio; 2) with increasing age and more experience more difficult climbs are attempted with more risk involved; and 3) with increasing age physical condition is not maintained, and when an accident occurs even to an experienced climber, he is unable to protect himself adequately.

Dr. Benjamin Ferris, Jr., whose legacy continues in these pages, died in the peaceable kingdom of his home, surrounded by family, in the summer of 1996. This year's edition is dedicated to his memory, with grateful thanks from the current U.S. Managing Editor.

In addition to the Safety Committee, we are grateful to the following individuals for collecting data and helping with the report: Hank Alicandri, Aram Attarian, Micki Canfield, Hal Clifford, Greg Dillman, Ron Cloud, Jim Detterline, Mark Magnuson, Tom McCrumm, Daryl Miller, Russell Peterson, Roger Robinson, Jim Schlinkmann, J. W. Wilder, and, of course, George Sainsbury.

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

Orvel Miskiw
Contributing Editor, Canada
5 Meskanaw Road
RR2 Cochrane
Alberta TOL OWO