

MOUNT SANFORD : AN ALASKAN SKI CLIMB

BY TERRIS MOORE

‘**T**HAT distant country Alaska, of which we had already heard more than a little, assumed . . . new and terrifying aspects,’ writes Tilman, describing an immortal evening in camp. ‘The already long glaciers of that frozen land increased in length, the trees which seemingly burgeon on these glaciers grew branches of ice, the thermometer dropped to depths unrecorded by science, the grizzlies were as large as elephants and many times as dangerous, and the mosquitoes were not a whit behind the grizzlies in size or fierceness, but of course many times more numerous. And amid all these manifold horrors our intrepid travellers climbed mountains, living the while on toasted marshmallows and desiccated eggs, . . . and packing loads which to think of made our backs ache.’¹

Seven years having passed since my last visit to this fabulous land, the visions roused by Tilman grew and grew in my brain till nothing would do but I must return to climb another Alaskan peak—but preferably one where it would be possible to dine delicately upon desiccated eggs and toasted marshmallows without having to pack loads that would make our backs ache. The most promising opportunity for this purpose now appeared to be Mt. Sanford (16,200 ft. and one of the highest summits of the Wrangell Range), which undoubtedly had remained unclimbed for so long a time because of being generally regarded as too easy. More than once I had previously been present at the discussion of some proposed trip to this mountain. Each time the opinion, expressed after studying the available photographs, that ‘you could probably drive a dog-team to the summit,’ seemed rather to damp the ardour of other prospective climbers. But what a capital mountain for toasted marshmallows and comfortable back! Moreover, a skier looking at the photographs saw one glorious possibility—an unbroken downhill run of 10,000 ft. straight from the summit to the ice snout of a glacier flowing N.W. from the peak. The prospect became so attractive that when Bradford Washburn proposed that my wife and I

¹ H. W. Tilman, *The Ascent of Nanda Devi*, p. 131.



Photo, B. Washburn.]

MT. SANFORD FROM N. Ascent made by broad snowfields to right.

[To face p. 222



Photo, B. Washburn.]

CAMP AT 10,000 FT. ON MT. SANFORD, LOOKING N.

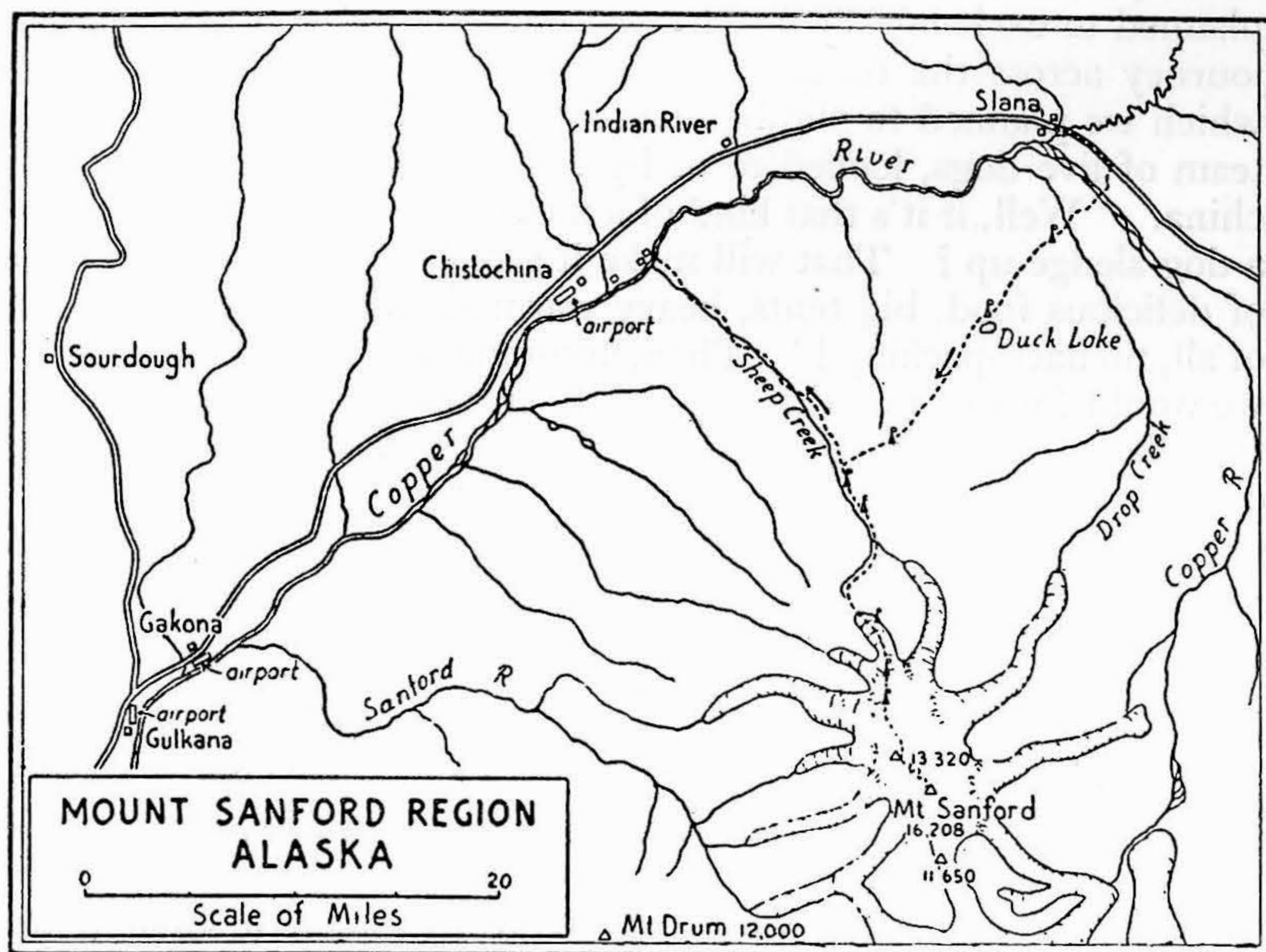


Photo, B. Washburn.]

MUSHING DOGS ACROSS COPPER RIVER.

should join forces with him on Mt. Sanford in the summer of 1938, there was nothing to do but pack up our skis at once.

The mountain is remarkable for its unique shape. Precipitous cliffs plunge straight from the edge of its summit on the S. and E. where it faces the rest of the Wrangell Range, but on the N. side a gently rounded cone slopes from the summit to the 10,000 ft. level. Below this level the mountain falls away, even on this N. side, in impossible cliffs, where only the surface of a single



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glacier and a few knife ridges offer access to the gentle upper reaches of the mountain. Many glaciers, originating in cirques at the base of the cliffs on the N. side, send long tongues of ice into the foothills and out toward the Copper River valley beyond. These glacier tongues terminate near the 4500-ft. level; below this they send their terminal streams flowing for some twenty miles northward and westward through tundra wilderness to the Copper River itself, which here swings in a great arc round Mt. Sanford, the western outpost of the range.

July 2, 1938, found us at Chistochina, looking across the windings of the Copper River to the great white dome of the mountain rising some 14,000 ft. above us but still nearly 30 miles away to

the S.E. Up to this point the approach to the mountain had been positively luxurious, since the village of Chistochina (consisting of one house) can be reached by automobile over the Richardson Highway, the only considerable motor road in Alaska, running from Valdez on the coast 400 miles northward to Fairbanks. All the expedition's boxes, portmanteaus and bags had been crammed somehow into Washburn's station-wagon ; and we had accomplished the 150 miles to our jumping-off place in one delightful day of driving along a road bordered refreshingly with wild roses and lupines instead of gasoline pumps and billboards. Now we planned to exchange the car for a pack-train of ten horses for the journey across the tundra country to the base of the glacier by which we planned to climb. Here also we intended to meet our team of five dogs, loaned to us by Mr. W. Ackerman of Chistochina. ' Well, if it's that kind of a mountain, why not try driving a dog-sledge up ? That will make it a really luxurious trip—lots of delicious food, big tents, heavy warm sleeping-bags, and, best of all, no back-packing ! ' Then, accompanied by this menagerie, we would ford or raft the Copper River, and proceed directly up the Sheep Creek ² streambed, which would take us in a straight course to the terminus of the most promising glacier. Had we done this, three days might have sufficed to make our way to the Sanford glacier system, instead of the eight days of bushwhacking which actually followed.

But it developed that Bill W——, the horse-wrangler, lacked faith in the ability of our Inflatex rubber boat to ferry the boxes, portmanteaus and bags across the river ; or perhaps doubted that his horses could swim the stream. At any rate, he insisted that we should drive 20 miles further up the Nabesna side-road and join him at Slana, where the river was shallow enough to ford.

Slana then was the starting-point for our caravan, which aroused a good deal of polite amusement in the Road Commission crew who watched our departure. The dog-sledge proving too bulky to ride safely on top of a horse's load, we tried the experiment of harnessing the astonished dogs to their sledge, and driving them without a load across the damp mossy tundra in the wake of the horses. We discovered that the empty sledge slid over the tundra vegetation with no more difficulty than a loaded sledge over a firm snow surface. Moreover, to our surprise and delight, the dogs were entirely responsive and well behaved for

² Marked on the U.S. Geological Survey maps as Boulder Creek, but known locally as Sheep Creek, probably because of the numerous mountain sheep inhabiting the foothills bounding the valley.

us, despite the fact that Washburn and I had made their acquaintance only the day before. One learns the dog-driving vocabulary quickly, particularly the more sulphurous parts. Not the least of the marvels of this dog team was the manner in which the animals unconcernedly forded the shallower branches of the Copper River, dragging the sledge behind them. When the water rose beyond their depth, the team was unhitched from the sledge and swam, still harnessed, supported through the current by a rope tied to the lead dog's collar and pulled from the pommel of one of the saddle-horses.

The evening after this unconventional crossing of the Copper River, it developed that Bill W——, the chief horse-wrangler, was suffering from a fever³ with a temperature of 103. Washburn volunteered to ride with him to Slana, and subsequently returned with the Indian Adam Sanford as helper to Jack Kennedy, who now became our chief and only horse-wrangler. Let it be said here that Kennedy proved to be a most agreeable companion and in every way an unusually competent Master of Horse.

At last across the Copper River and reorganized, we located ourselves on the U.S. Geological Survey map at a point due N. from the summit of Sanford, and a little over 30 miles distant from it. From here we now proceeded in a generally S.E. direction across the irregularly wooded and pond-spotted tundra. The old Millard Trail (marked on the map) has disappeared completely, and we steered by certain obvious features on the skyline formed by the Mt. Sanford foothills, intending to strike Sheep Creek some five or six miles below its emergence from the glacier system, and then follow it up through its valley among the foothills. Because of the détours required by occasional swampy ground, ponds, and dense stands of spruce, and by such misadventures as horses mired in bog-holes, four day marches were necessary to reach Sheep Creek. In Sheep Creek valley at last, we made our fourth camp in a beautiful mossy patch among spruce trees, within a day's march of the glacier snouts.

Although clouds had hidden the mountain continuously for these four days, and we were now camped in the valley out of sight of it, the important choice of a climbing route had already been clearly indicated. A study of an excellent series of aerial photographs which had been made the year before, confirmed by a flight which Washburn made only a few days before we came into the country on foot, proved that the only unbroken approach to the upper slopes was offered by the westernmost glacier (named by us Sunset Glacier) which flowed into Sheep

³ Later diagnosed at Fairbanks as pneumonia.

Creek.⁴ On the following day Jack Kennedy was able to get the horses with our mountaineering gear up to an altitude of 6000 ft. in the narrowing trough between the valley wall and the E. lateral moraine of this Sunset Glacier, thus avoiding the rocky, moraine-covered snout, and saving us the necessity of back-packing and sledging up an extra 1500 ft. of glacier. He and Adam then took the horses back to the valley camp (the last camp site which could provide wood, and feed for the horses) to wait for us during the days of climbing.

Though the dogs had buckled down nobly to their unaccustomed labours in the tundra and among the boulders of the moraine, we were concerned to discover at this point that all five were in distinctly poor condition. Next day the reason for this was only too plain : we found that the dried salmon, which with cornmeal mush formed the staple of the dogs' diet, had been imperfectly cured and were crawling with worms. The Indians from whom we had bought the fish had advised us to spread them out whenever we could for further drying, but steady travelling and continuous rain and cloudy weather had made this impossible. This loss was a serious matter, as we had counted upon the fish and reduced the heavy cornmeal to a minimum to save weight. Washburn generously volunteered to go back to the woods camp and bring up a load of our reserve cornmeal, and set off at once. During the two days of his absence, my wife and I made two trips up to the next camp site at about 8000 ft. to relay supplies, both times in thick cloud and driving snow. Between times we nursed the dogs, who had a complete rest and as much cornmeal mush as we dared feed them. On July 14 Washburn returned, carrying not only cornmeal but also about 40 pounds of fresh bear meat.

⁴ It might be pointed out that Sheep Creek flows directly from two different glaciers. The more conspicuous of these, which we named Sheep Creek Glacier, projects a few degrees W. of N. from the general glacier system, direction being taken from the summit of Mt. Sanford. It fills what would be judged to be the main Sheep Creek valley by a traveller moving up this valley. The lesser glacier and the next one to the W., which we named Sunset Glacier, projects 10-15° W. of N. from the general glacier system, direction being taken from the summit of Mt. Sanford. A traveller up Sheep Creek valley would not notice the Sunset Glacier, even when he was approaching the snout of the main Sheep Creek Glacier, because the valley of the Sunset Glacier makes an exceedingly abrupt turn at the snout of its own glacier, and proceeds in an almost easterly direction to join the main valley just below the snout of the Sheep Creek Glacier. The traveller therefore sees only the narrow blind valley coming in from the right, when he has nearly reached the terminal moraine of the conspicuous Sheep Creek Glacier. The distinction between these two valleys and glaciers would be of the utmost importance, however, particularly to a future ski party, since the obvious Sheep Creek Glacier leads to nothing but impossible icefalls in its upper reaches, whereas the hidden Sunset Glacier offers an excellent route (and probably the only practical one for skiers) to the upper slopes of the mountain.

Adam had only the day before shot a mother bear and cub which had been annoying the horses. The fresh meat completed the recovery of the dogs, who were in fine form from then on.

The following day dawned cloudless, and in our first taste of decent weather we established Camp II (about 8000 ft.). Here we had a splendid view of the jagged gendarmes of Capital Mountain, now below us to the east, and of the purple-blue expanse of the Copper River valley with the peaks of the Hayes and Kimball ranges beyond.

July 18 saw the last of the loads up at our third glacier camp, at about 10,000 ft. The dogs had been working well, pulling about 150 to 200 lb. on the sledge, even in the deep soft powder snow which we had encountered all the way. Of course in fresh snow a trail had to be broken out for them by at least two of us on 'bear-paw' type snowshoes, while the third guided and pushed the sledge from behind on the steep rises. From this camp we made a short reconnaissance on skis up over the edge of the gentle ridge under which the camp was pitched. A clear route now lay open straight toward the summit, some 6,000 ft. above us and five and a half miles away across an immense snow plateau which sloped very gradually up to the final cone, where the slope steepened sharply above 13,000 ft. Obviously weather was going to be a decisive factor in any attempt on the summit, and since it now seemed to be clearing, we agreed that we ought to make a try for it that night. After cooking dog food and our own supper, we lay down for a few hours' rest. I quote from diaries :

' July 19 : About 3 A.M. we were ready to leave the high camp. The air was windless, the temperature about 18° F. Brilliantly coloured sunrise clouds provided light as we lashed the Fairchild aerial camera and theodolite to the sledge and began breaking a dog trail upward on snowshoes. The first three hours were inspiring. The sun slowly emerged from intermediate cloud-strata like a fire opal. Mt. Drum sprang into flame while the shoulder of Sanford still lay in shadow. The gendarmes of Capital Mountain were clearly visible far below. In the north the Hayes range was tipped with light ; Mt. McKinley projected as a little tooth upon the western horizon. After the first steep rise we emerged upon the smooth snow plateau several miles long, with the summit cone gleaming at the end. The air was exhilarating. The dogs mushed along with their light load easily, all three of us breaking trail for them.

' About 5 A.M. the first really ominous weather signs began to appear : a "sun-dog," clouds building up and piling in from the S.E., and above us a wispy cloud cap forming over the summit. A little wind sprang up ; a high overcast began to develop and thicken downward.

There still seemed to be some chance of reaching the summit before diminishing visibility made it hopeless to continue. Presently the slope steepened, and the snow became still deeper and softer, so that the sledge held us back seriously in what was now a race with the rising storm. At about 12,500 ft. we unhitched the sledge and left it in the trail. The dogs now walked lightly, sticking close to our heels and still teamed together in their harness.

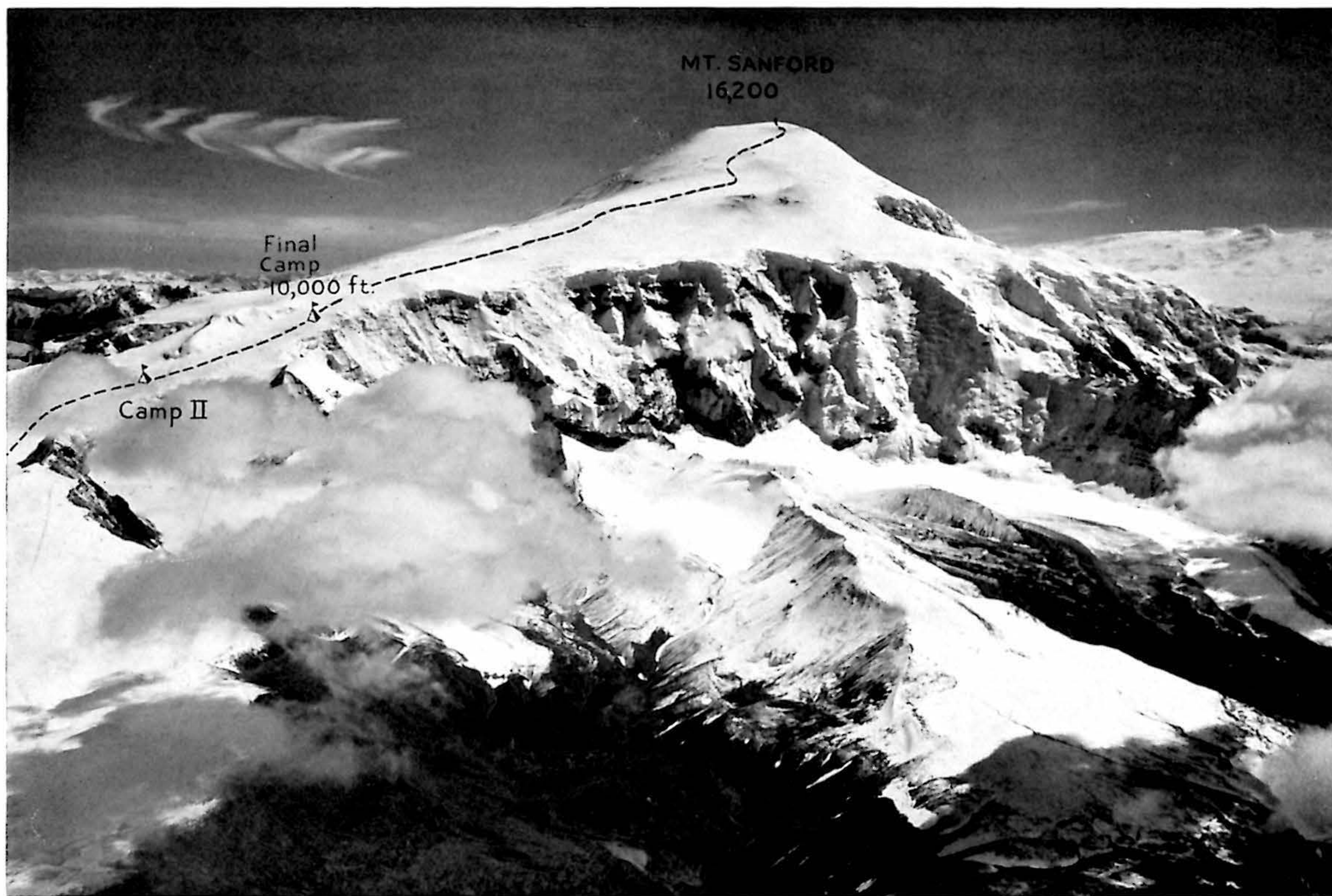
' By 9 A.M., we had reached the base of the summit cone, and the angle of the slope steepened very much more than we had expected, so that the choice of route here became very important. In some places we encountered treacherous wind-slab, and the angle of the slope created serious danger of avalanching., The storm meanwhile had been thickening rapidly, with a rising wind. Finally, at 11 A.M., eight hours out, and at an altitude of 14,500 ft., it was clear that further advance was useless. Jamming our remaining trail marker wands into the snow to serve as a cache for a further attempt, we turned back along our trail toward camp.

' The intensity of the wind and the amount of the falling and drifting snow that it carried were so great that after we had retraced no more than a few hundred yards of the trail, our footprints had become indistinguishable. Clouds now completely enveloped us, and we found ourselves entirely dependent upon our trail marker wands to regain camp. The nearest wand could barely be identified in the white smother in which we were wandering, and the trail was completely obliterated. Never before in my experience has the worth of willow wand trail markers ⁵ spaced at 100-ft. intervals been so thoroughly demonstrated. Entirely by their aid, we regained, first our cached sledge with its instruments, and finally at 3 P.M. the 10,000 ft. camp itself.

' July 20 : The storm continued with only a brief respite the entire day. During the afternoon Washburn and I dug a large snow cavern into the side of the glacier near the tent door, and after equipping it with firm snow shelves and benches, moved the entire kitchen within. No more than a few hours' work was necessary to excavate this snow chamber which we found large enough to accommodate all three of us comfortably, regardless of the storm outside. The new kitchenette was proclaimed a great success, and all cooking and feasting were now done here.

' July 21 : Awoke to find snow still falling with undiminished vigour. A careful check of the remaining food supply revealed that while there was sufficient human food to outwait the storm even if it should last a week more, nevertheless the dog supplies could only be stretched for two or three days more. For this circumstance we could thank the dog Woolly, who succeeded in getting loose in the storm last night, and having located the cache of bear meat, either devoured a whole bear haunch at one sitting, or else dragged it off and buried it

⁵ Actually $\frac{1}{4}$ -in. birch dowels, 36 in. long, dipped for half their length in black paint.



Photo, B. Washburn.]

MT. SANFORD FROM N.W.

[To face p. 228.]



Photo, B. Washburn.]

FINAL 10,000-FT. CAMP ON MT. SANFORD.



Photo, B. Washburn.]

MOORE PILOTING DOGS ACROSS COPPER RIVER FLATS.

where we can't find it ! The weather having been so persistently bad, it seemed wise to seize the first clearing spell and make a dash for the summit on skis, rather than run the risk of missing the summit with slower dogs and instruments as before, and then being forced immediately to leave the mountain because of dog food shortage. My wife has very kindly volunteered to stay alone with the dogs at this high camp, should a promising break in the weather occur, while Washburn and I make the attempt for the summit with skis.'

In the early afternoon, shortly after this decision was made, the clouds began to break. Washburn and I immediately started up from camp, getting away at 1.30 P.M., and carrying nothing but two small cameras, the Fairchild aerial camera and a little lunch.

Following almost exactly the route of the previous attempt, we progressed at a much faster rate on skis. Nearly all the trail marker wands still stood erect and in position despite the three-day storm. Shortly after 3 P.M. clouds began to threaten as before, and soon it became clear that we were in for another race to reach the summit before the upper parts of the mountain were again enveloped in storm and cloud. Leaving the aerial camera in the trail, we increased our speed, and by 6.30 P.M. reached the bundle of willow wands at 14,500 ft. which marked the highest point of our previous attempt. We continued on, and at about 9 P.M. came up over the edge of the summit dome. I have never visited the top of a great peak and found such a broad flat summit as that of Mt. Sanford. We wandered about an area at least a hundred feet square, without being able to choose just which spot was actually the highest. There could be no doubt of identification of the summit, for, although the clouds against which we had been racing filled the north-to-east quadrant beneath us, at no point did they as yet actually rise above the horizon, and anything higher in this direction would have been clearly evident. From S.E. around through S. and up to N.W. the atmosphere was crystal clear right to the horizon, and we were rewarded by the magnificent sight of the peaks of the St. Elias Range projecting into the sunset light as tiny rose-coloured flamelets from the S.E. horizon. The nearby peaks of the Wrangell Range dominated the view to the south, and from Mt. Wrangell itself, an active volcano, a substantial pillar of vapour was rising lazily. Mt. Drum, a very impressive peak as seen from the Copper River valley, had practically vanished when viewed from the summit of Mt. Sanford, though it was easily recognisable when we did find it. At this hour the sun was too close to the N.W. horizon to allow a complete 360°

photographic panorama. A temperature of -2° F. and a stiff little breeze encouraged us to leave promptly, and we turned our skis away from the summit at 9.25 P.M. The return run of over 6000 ft. downhill through perfect powder snow to camp has become one of the unforgettable memories of the trip. Lingered from time to time to marvel at the sunset colouring of the several thin and broken cloud layers through which we passed, we reached camp at 10.45 P.M.

The return journey to Chistochina was rapid and uneventful, thanks to our merely following Sheep Creek down to its confluence with the Copper River. This we reached on the afternoon of July 24, where the crossing of this body of water in the *Hesperus* (Washburn's Inflatex rubber boat) proved more hilarious than difficult.