

difficulties. The final section, although rather more tricky than it looked, was soon overcome, and at 4.30pm, on 4 August we arrived at what appeared to be the summit.

The cloud had now virtually closed in on us, but in a momentary clearing we saw the corniced NW ridge, which dipped and then rose to another summit, perhaps a quarter of a mile away. Opinions were divided as to whether it looked higher or lower, but there was clearly no way of judging unless the cloud cleared properly, which it showed no sign of doing. Determined to resolve the matter, we brushed aside our awareness of the growing seriousness of our position and pushed on. An hour and a half was spent traversing to the second summit which, according to our altimeter, was a few m lower, as far as could be judged. Although probably not the true top summit formalities were completed here, but cut to a minimum due to the weather and time of day. After that, our only concern was to return to our rucksacks, which contained a minimum of bivouac gear, before nightfall. This objective was fortunately achieved.

The descent took a further 3 days and we arrived back at Base physically and mentally exhausted, but delighted to have achieved our objective. Sadly for Dave, whose ankle was now much better, none of us was able to contemplate any more climbing for some time.

Camp 1 was stripped by Dave and Captain Inam in one backbreaking carry, a sterling effort much appreciated by the other 3 of us, still nursing our swollen and numb feet.

On 11 August we packed our tents, and with our 9 return porters, set out for home.

Shining mountains, nameless valleys: Alaska and the Yukon—Pt III

Kenneth Andrasko and Terris Moore

We could not find the landing strip from the air. From even a few hundred feet up, the wild valley was a smooth crop of cobbles, furrowed only by meltwater streams from the placid Gillam glacier a few miles N. Willows and alder annually fought widespread skirmishes over the river's capricious banks and gravel bars. In Alaska, the only certainty is change.

Mark, our pilot, had never supported an expedition before. We had met him through an acquaintance 3 days earlier, and retained him for the cost of the gas and a case of beer, so he could gain support experience, and we could share the spirit of our 2 man alpine style attempt on Mount Deborah's 2250m N face with a comrade, not a commercial pilot. Chris had gone in first, blithely throwing our gear onto the glacier through the hole created by Mark's removal of the plane's door, and landed on the tiny, heavily vegetated 'strip' some hundred miles S of Fairbanks and the nearest road. As Mark brought me in with our two 40 kilo packs, he remarked that it might be a rough landing, once we actually found the strip. The Maule hit hard, bounced twice soaring slightly each time, and flew off the end of the strip into the willow banks. Mark unnecessarily yelled to hang on as the prop parted a way into



30 Mt Hubbard (This and next photo: B. Washburn)

the thickets. A deep ditch lay just ahead, and swallowed the plane with an abrupt jolt, a touch of finality that left no doubt as to the outcome.

We looked at each other for a moment, and erupted into laughter. 'Yeah, I figured we'd never clear that ditch, soon as it appeared. Well,' Mark added with a grin the size of a watermelon rind, 'guess we ought to see if the wheels and wings are still there . . .'

* * * * *

Alaska is a land where space is lord, where vastness goes unbroken. It is a special land because of its sweep of solitude severed only by irascible, uncouth mountains. Alaska is so fresh and new, its splendour so overwhelming, its history so recent—mostly dating but from the turn-of-the-century Gold Rush—that one is reluctant to describe myths with dates and place-names, for fear of lessening the Great Land's mysteries and power.

The saga of modern mountaineering in Alaska is the story of the full exploration

and eventual rejection of the 'myth of uniqueness' of climbing there. Negligible alpine style climbing had been accomplished before the Second World War, and it was thought that the storms, high latitude, excessive vertical rise of the peaks, and logistics demanded the well-developed bush transportation tactics of the early Sourdough miners and explorers, the local equivalent of the 'Himalayan ethic' of expeditioning in South Asia. It was a stubborn myth of uniqueness that became a subtle truism until its tenets began to be tested after the War.

In *AJ* 81 19 we summarized Alaskan expeditionary mountaineering, largely first ascents of the loftiest snow peaks, to 1954. Alpine style climbing began in earnest with the 1946 season, an important watershed year portending a shift from exploratory mountaineering in the old Sourdough style, to the introduction of alpine tactics and aesthetics devoted to the pursuit of *grand alpinisme* of the sort practiced in the Alps. In 1947 the *AAJ* reported the ascents of Kate's Needle and the Devil's Thumb. The latter was probably the first ascent of a route largely on Alaskan granite, hitherto adroitly avoided by prudent route finding. Both climbs were in the alpine tradition of bold final dashes up highly technical terrain in extended circumstances. That same 1947 issue carried an account of the Harvard Mountaineering Club's second ascent of St Elias by a new route, unbelievably the first new route to be done on any previously reached major Alaskan summit. And thirdly, Bradford Washburn contributed an innovative piece of alpine journalism, detailing projected route possibilities on Denali (McKinley) based on his aerial photographs. His personal success on one of these routes, the W Buttress in 1951, started a new era of deliberate efforts to locate and climb increasingly difficult lines with the aid of aerial reconnaissance and support.

The most salient and stunning event—after the aeroplane—that introduced the new alpinism to Alaska was the first ascent of Mount Deborah (3761m/12,339ft) in 1954 by Heinrich Harrer (of Eiger Nordwand and Tibet fame), Beckey, and H. Meybohm. The indefatigable Beckey was fresh from the impressive first ascent of the NW face of Denali, along with the visiting German Meybohm, and audaciously decided to attempt first ascents of Deborah and Hunter (4442m/14,573ft) in the Alaska Range. In a scant 3 days after landing at 1650m on the Yanert glacier W of the peak, the trio, climbing continually without stocking camps, pushed along a high summit ridge with;

'a razor-like edge, almost scallop-like in its profusion of humps and pinnacles . . . As we stepped on to the summit at 9.45pm, it was our unanimous conclusion that Deborah was the most sensational ice climb any one of us had ever undertaken. But with the equally difficult return imminent there was no feeling of either sophistry or great elation, for as Lunn has written, "self conquest rather than mountain conquest is the secret of our strivings."'

Despite innumerable annual attempts on the same route, Deborah was climbed for the second time in 1975 only after a siege of 45 days, further amplifying the legend of the peak and its first ascent, which has raised Deborah to a position of symbol and siren in Alaskan climbing circles: Deborah, the most desirable and least attainable, clearly visible from Fairbanks, as if only to intensify the intrigue.

Mount Hunter—although 100 miles to the W, easily reached after famed pilot Don Sheldon flew the trio back to Talkeetna—yielded in 7 days to the trio's tempest of alpine technique, despite pitches of arduous rock and glare ice work on the steep ridge. Beckey concluded in the 1955 *AJ* that the 2 ascents

'involve some alpine problems not generally encountered on most other difficult Alaskan summits. These warrant a few precautionary words as to the risks involved and the responsibilities of the climbers' . . . 'the requirement that a climbing party be competent to climb safely and belay for long stretches on ice which approaches 70° and is vertical for short distances . . .'

The foreigners' period

At last men, or rather technique, had arrived to match the most demanding of Alaska's mountains. The ascent of Deborah was a significant event. Post-war alpinism in Europe featured a generation of disciplined, war-weary climbers who penetrated the Alps with a vengeance in the early fifties:

'Let us go back in time to 1955: the conquest of the sixth class is finished, and new doors are opening with the advent of VI Sup. All the great classical routes have been repeated, with the exception of one or two highly dangerous and desperate climbs. The younger generation are clambering up the routes of the past, over and over again, often failing to find in them the adventure anticipated. It is time for a new form of alpinism to emerge.'¹

In 1955, W. Bonatti made his epic solo climb of the SW Pillar of the Dru, furthering the concept of climbing the most difficult walls solo. While it may be seen as a natural extension of the alpine climbing ethic of a post-war Europe finally expanding once again, it is also indicative of some crisis in the state of the climbing game there, when other projects and other places were needed. Alaska became one of those places, and Deborah one of those projects. There would be other peaks sought soon.

Foreign attention to unclimbed prizes of extreme difficulty in Alaska gained impetus with the Harrer climbs, which began a decade of standard setting by foreign alpinists. With so many unclimbed peaks and ones with few ascents and only one route, there continued in Alaska a local tradition of attempting primarily snow-peaks that yielded to classic expedition tactics nurtured by life in the unforgiving Arctic. While Europe underwent a renaissance in mountaineering, Alaska in 1957 was still a territory of the USA with only 228,000 people (and but a handful of climbers), in a land that crosses 4 time zones. Certainly, large numbers of Alaskans were foreign-born, but few were involved with mountain-related activities: the Norwegians and Lapps worked the fishing boats in SE Alaska and the reindeer herds around the Seward Peninsula, respectively. The development of mountaineering in the Canadian Rockies was to a considerable extent the product of the public relations sector of the Canadian Pacific Railroad and its decision to import and encourage foreign guides, to appeal to the fraternity of East coast and Alpine Club climbers, mimicking the Alpine guiding and hut system scenario. In Alaska, not the railroad but the aeroplane opened up vast areas to mountaineers from afar with limited time but abundant technical talent. The result was what might be termed a Foreigner Period, lasting from the Deborah climb in 1954 until the Japanese Direct Cassin effort on McKinley in 1965. This trend coincided with the rise of an indigenous Alaskan climbing movement after World War II, which made important but not standard-setting climbs; and heralded the commencement of what might be called the 'Quest for Granite', a period beginning in the mid-sixties and continuing up to the present.

The S face of Denali rises some 3000m directly to the summit at 6194m/20,320ft, a brilliantly sculptured granite face. Another enticing photoessay by Washburn, the

¹ André Contamine, 'Mont Blanc: the Massif and its climbs', *Mountain* 43.

energetic author/science entrepreneur/aerial photographer/climber never without another crop of meticulously planned ventures, nurtured the fantasies of a crew of Teton guides safely lodged in a bar in Wyoming. June of 1959 found J. Breitenbach, B. Buckingham, B. Corbet, and P. Sinclair (the first 3 were later on the '63 Everest trip) 650m above the Kahiltna glacier at what was lovingly called Concentration Camp, atop a buttress reached by a demanding ice-couloir that had claimed all of their scanty 510m of fixed line. By pulling up the ropes and only fixing occasional pitches, they gained another 600m of difficult ice in a single day, and moved into the profusion of rock ribs and couloirs of the upper face. A storm concealed the proper descent route from the summit to their essential cached gear as they suffered from altitude, but eventually the correct ridge was located. A generation's decade-long romance with the S face, scene of continuous precedent up to the recent Haston/Scott ascent, had begun.

31 S face of Mt McKinley



That same summer, the Austrian Leo Scheiblehner, veteran of the N face of Cima Grande and other notable Alpine routes, with R. Griesmann again brought Continental tactics to Alaska when they ascended the 2100m SE face of La Pérouse, in the Fairweather range. The climbers set off at 3am and with the benefit of the northern summer twilight waltzed up steep ice and verglased rock pitches, finishing the ascent by 5pm, without reconnaissance, bivouac, or fixed ropes, utterly out of the dominant expeditionary tradition.

The next European to enter the scene was no less a figure than the legendary Ricardo Cassin, who, throughout the thirties pioneered a series of relentless routes on Piz Badile, the Grandes Jorasses, Cima Ovest and elsewhere. Again, it was Washburn's crisp images in *Mountain World* and the *AAJ* that inspired the Italian Alpine Club's audacious assault on the S face with classic (and inadequate) alpine equipment. Cassin, with L. Airoldi, L. Alippi, G. Canali, R. Perego, and A. Zucchi, established base camp at 3400m and on 5 July began a week on the most technical rock and ice pitches found anywhere on the mountain, averaging 50° for 3000m. Especially important was the direct confrontation with the steep, frost-shattered granite of the Alaska Range that had traditionally been avoided. With the exception of the late-forties climbs in the Devil's Thumb area, this single week's rock-work exploded the myth that Alaska was unique and not a suitable arena for the granite and black ice climbing that has come to dominate the scene today.

A camp was established on the face, and climbers rotated the lead and retired to base as the route was pushed ahead. After Cassin's Rib Pitch—a 50m granite wall—had been mastered, the third and highest camp on the face was located at 5100m, a scant 3 days after the first one. A 17-hour push up glazed couloirs culminated in the S Summit; it took another 6 excruciating hours to rappel and climb to high camp, reached without loss of any extremities despite the frost-bite that resulted from the casually alpine knickers, boots and socks. In the years that followed, the Japanese Hokkaido Alpine Association (26 May 1967) and the Boyd Everett (2 August 1967) ascents, along with that of a French group led by Berquet (23 July 1971), have refined the route by adding more efficient or more reasonable alternatives to the Cassin pitches, notably the Japanese Couloir, the 11-pitch crux of ice, snow and rock, that leads to 4084m. The Cassin rightly became the gauge for serious Alaskan routes.

Attention shifted to the granite wonders rising S of Denali, as in the following year 2 British newcomers to Alaska, B. Biven and T. Smythe, after struggling up the Alaska Highway in a rapidly collapsing auto, and being forced to raise cash by labour in a Yukon silver mine, blithely assaulted the Moose's Tooth (3150m/10,335ft), a staid granitic molar SE of McKinley. After twin bivouacs they arrived at the lower summit but were stopped by a definite drop in the summit ridge, only to retreat, make the first ascent of Mount Dan Beard (3127m/10,260ft), and thrash for 2 weeks through glaciers, undergrowth and wild rivers to Talkeetna. The Tooth fell to a German party from Munich in 1964, which carried on along the W ridge above Biven and Smythe's high point, after failing in an attempt from the S up steep and crumbling headwalls. The 4 Germans—W. Welsch (leader), K. Bierl, A. Reichegger, A. Hasenkopf—encountered an ambitious party of 3 strong Americans from the NW led by the ubiquitous Beckey, which shared their objective, so the groups collaborated and set off to a high camp. But the superior alpine technical capabilities of the Germans (who had arrived to climb Mount Huntington, only to find the French already high on the route) allowed them to move

faster than the locals. In one 24-hour *blitzkrieg* the Munich team made the summit; they then went on to climb Denali by the W Buttress route.

'After seeing superb photographs by Bradford Washburn in a mountaineering journal, I realized what a magnificent field of action the McKinley Range would be for an enthusiast of *grand alpinisme*. . . . As early as 1955 I got in touch with Washburn, Bob Bates, Fred Beckey and other American climbers . . . I could see that despite its rather modest altitude, Mount Huntington was a beautiful, spectacular and difficult peak, completely worthy of a costly journey across the Atlantic. After the conquest of Jannu in 1962, the Expeditions Committee of the *Fédération Française de la Montagne*, temporarily renouncing any major undertakings, decided to organize a series of expeditions which had as objectives relatively low peaks with great technical difficulties . . . thus the Alaskan expedition became a national undertaking, directly organized by the *F.F.M.* . . . We were, in case we conquered Huntington rapidly, to try a second objective, possibly the S face of McKinley or the Moose's Tooth.'²

Huntington (3730m/12,240ft) had been attempted by Beckey (of course . . .) in 1957, but the French were the first to fully experience its dramatic cold and technical rigour.

'The site was grandiose, the peaks as impressive and majestic as the most beautiful of the Himalaya. Unfortunately the thermometer hovered stubbornly around -10°F and . . . we installed Base Camp in the heroic surroundings of a polar expedition . . . Suddenly we hear an anguished cry and at the same time the whole centre of the couloir starts to plunge downward. Like lightning I realize that a wind-slab has broken loose . . . the avalanche passes within inches without touching . . . But we all know that if the conquest of a great peak brings moments of exultation and bliss, which in the monotonous, materialistic existence of modern times nothing else can approach, it also presents great dangers. It is not the goal of *grand alpinisme* to face peril, but it is one of the tests one must undergo to deserve the joy of rising for an instant above the state of crawling grubs.'

Classic French humanism and valour had come to Alaska, in the form of no less a practitioner than Terray. He suffered a leader fall on the ninth day of stiff ice-climbing, was caught not by the climbing rope but instead by the fixing line casually stored in his rucksack and only incidentally attached at that very moment to an aluminium picket, and remained injured in camp until the final summit push. The route was fixed to the fourth step, whereupon an initial summit pair, and then the other 6, pushed to the top in 23 hours, Terray using only his left arm throughout.

'But soon we have to start the descent. Suddenly I feel sad and despondent. I am well aware that a mountaineering victory is only a scratch in space, and for me, after the Himalaya and the Andes, Huntington is just another peak. But in spite of this, how sad I feel leaving that crest! On this proud and beautiful mountain we have lived hours of fraternal, warm and exalting nobility. Here for a few days we have ceased to be slaves and have really been men. It is hard to return to servitude.'

The flower of Continental mountaineering—Harrer and Meybohm, Cassin, Terray—had come and conquered in Alaska in one rich decade, 1954–64. There were several nationally supported teams charged with being brilliantly successful in distant ranges, and some outstanding individual performers that easily out-distanced American groups vying for the same climbs. The foreigners were hand-picked elites exploring what were for them vastly exotic ranges; the locals, friends on holiday. One other major development was the arrival on the scene of another

² Lionel Terray, 'Mount Huntington', *AAJ* 1965.

group soon to be prominent in Alaskan climbing, and economics—especially in the timber and fisheries industries.

'We Japanese have found with satisfaction that we can enjoy a big climb in Alaska with only four weeks of vacation, less than 500 kilograms of gear and food, \$1300 of expenses for each person, all of which is a marked contrast to the usual big way of a Himalayan expedition. Along with our party from Osaka, there were several Japanese parties in Alaska, the Yukon and the Canadian Rockies this summer. In the near future the mountains of these regions will provide an excellent playground for Japanese mountaineering.'³

Eight Japanese and one member of the Mountaineering Club of Alaska made the second ascent of several smaller peaks, and the third of St Elias, by a variation of the original Abruzzi route from Russel Col in 1964. Some 3 years later, the Hokkaido Alpine Association pioneered the Direct Cassin, adding the 300m Japanese Couloir, the crux of the climb. These ascents established the Japanese presence in Alaskan mountains that is a commonplace today.

Climbing seemingly in parallel with these Japanese parties was a New York investment analyst named Boyd Everett, who led a highly successful set of Alaskan expeditions to significant objectives, often under the auspices of the Harvard Mountaineering Club. His 1965 first ascent of the difficult NW ridge of St Elias reversed a set-back on that route 2 years earlier. Immediately after the Japanese Direct Cassin success, Everett arrived on the glacier with the intention of pushing 3 routes simultaneously on the S face: the Cassin route, the direct Thayer line on the right shoulder (also a Japanese climb in '65), and a Direct S face route up a barely discernible rib between the two. All 3 parties made their climbs, with the Direct line a show of grim determination in the face of devastating avalanches and storm.

With the S face now known territory, Denali in winter—long talked about but never attempted—became the goal of an eccentric collection of climbers from Alaska, France, Switzerland, Colorado, and Japan. An early crevasse death and the resulting near dissolution of the venture were overcome, and A. Davidson, R. Genet, and D. Johnson made the summit and started down to Denali Pass. Their bivouac there was arrested by 160km/h winds and -40°C temperatures that threatened them, at first wrapped in a parachute, and later out in the open and into a snow hole, for 6 days. A fine book appropriately entitled *Minus 148°* by Davidson details the retreat and rescue. Ray Genet, the recent Swiss emigrant, settled in Talkeetna subsequently, and by operating a guide service up McKinley became a prominent figure in the Alaskan mountain world.

The quest for granite

Alaska is a fecund state, and one that abounds in both shattered schists and perfect granite. Until the '47 Devil's Thumb climb, and largely afterward, the isolated pockets of granite were avoided in favour of the cornices and black ice. But by 1963, new American areas were needed, and rock-climbing had come into its own. Yvon Chouinard's dramatic call to alpinism in the '63 *AAJ* concluded that:

'The future of Yosemite climbing lies not in Yosemite, but in using the new techniques in the great granite ranges of the world . . . the beginning of a totally new school of American climbing, that is to say technical climbing under Alpine conditions. The opportunities here are limitless . . . for a generation of superalpinists who will venture forth to the high mountains of the world to do the most aesthetic and difficult walls on the face of the earth.'

³ Shiro Nishimae, 'All Japan Mount St. Elias Expedition, 1964', *AAJ* 1965.



32 Brooks Range (Photo: K. Andrasko)

Cassin's S face route in '61 was an early sizing-up of the problems to be encountered on Alaskan granite, and was quickly followed by a series of largely American parties from 'Outside' (the Alaskan term for everywhere out of the state, especially the Lower 48 states) which took their technique to newly rediscovered ranges. C. Loucks and the Bergens had been the first climbers to visit the unique Arrigetch ('outstretched fingers' in Eskimo) group in the western Brooks Range in '64, touching off a series of expeditions to the granite spires there by climber/writer David Roberts:

'As long as we were there, none of us would have questioned the automatic possessiveness we felt towards the Arrigetch: we would have regarded the visitors as gloomy signs that this part of Alaska was becoming too well known . . . Climbers, being, in a sense, explorers in the aftermath of the great ages of exploration, still dream of a kind of Ultima Thule, of which the first ascent is a compromised version. One might distinguish, among exploratory visions, between the goals of a Perfect Place and of an Always Further . . . We could all sense the mystery of an age when unmapped rivers were the only roads into the Always Further, and as we loafed on the grassy bench above the Alutna that was our last camp site, we could forget our civilized ambitions long enough to value an almost Perfect Place.'⁴

Roberts has been an indefatigable and innovative figure in Alaskan mountaineering—and the single most important voice in its literature—since his early Wickersham Wall expedition with the Harvard Mountaineering Club in '63, returning for over a dozen major sorties into remoteness. In '64, beaten to Huntington by the French, Roberts and D. Jensen attempted the frightening E ridge of Deborah, a defeat that was later transformed into a subtle portrait of expedition psychology, *Deborah: A Wilderness Narrative*. The Harvard climb of the W

⁴ 'August in the Arrigetch', *AAJ* 1970.

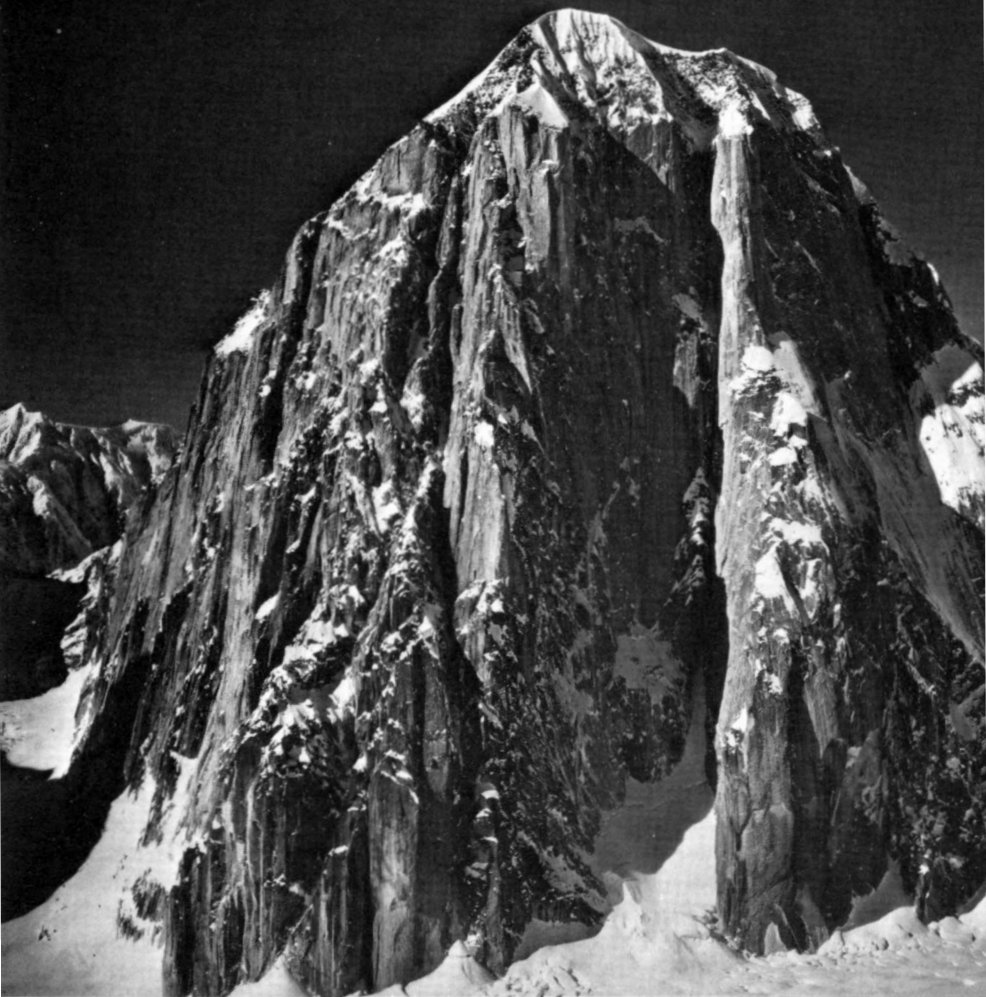


33 Ruth Gorge (This and next photo: B. Washburn)

face of Huntington in '65 was one of the first major face climbs in Alaska, launched directly up an uncertain course through the firm granite, and beautifully presented in Roberts' classic book *Mountain of My Fear*. This success brought parties in Alaska in search of stark walls virtually every summer thereafter. Roberts, for his part, developed the awesome Cathedral Spires in the Kichatna Mountains W of McKinley in '66 and '67, before turning to the lesser, warmer Arrigetch towers in '68 (first ascent of Igikpak (2594m/8510ft) and others) and '69 and '71 (numerous Arrigetch valley first ascents). The 1540m SE face of Mount Dickey in the Ruth Gorge S of Denali fell to Roberts, E. Ward, and Galen Rowell over 3 days of virtually non-stop extreme rock-work, the initial climb in a fantastic granite chasm long speculated about.

But perhaps what sets Roberts apart is his artful synthesis of the 2 predominant traditions of Sourdough and Alpine climbing, being no stranger to big snow and ice routes, nor to highly technical rock or mixed climbing on classic alpine lines or stately spires necessitating Yosemite tactics. Moreover, Roberts seems to revel in the Sourdough notion of arduous approaches and unusual transport methods, such as fold-boating down the Alatna after a trip to the Brooks. In a sense, he may best represent the present and future in Alaskan climbing, in the conscious fusion of 2 ways of being in the mountains.

The quest for big-wall climbs continues. Moose's Tooth saw several attempts on the 780m E and S faces of smooth, rotten granite in the early '70s, with the S face succumbing in '74 to a strong party. Storm, verglas, and cold characterized the climb of the austere SE face of the Devil's Thumb (2767m/9077ft) in '73 by C. Jones, G. Lowe, and L. Tejada-Flores, a gifted party on what was certainly the most technically difficult and miserable ascent ever made in the Boundary Range. The list continues unabated. Most notable are M. Graber, D. Black, A. Long, and A.



34 Mt Dickey

Embick's efforts over several seasons in the Cathedral Spires, wherein, in '75, two 2430m peaks were ascended by difficult routes on big walls in genuinely foul weather, marking a remarkable advancement in an area renowned for its continual frustration of the plans of teams of over-achievers. Middle Triple Peak (2693m/8835ft) fell to 2 separate parties in '76 (one of them C. Porter and R. McLean); and the above named foursome produced a continuous grade VI line on the E Buttress of 'The Citadel'.

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Early in Alaska's history, explorers began to distinguish between 2 types of mountains. On the one hand were the alluring, awesome masses of McKinley and the Wrangell and St Elias ranges, floating like continental plates in unbroken seas of cloud and tundra. Most of the early climbing took place there, in terrain that required the tactics and logistics perfected by the Goldrush Sourdoughs around the turn of the century.

The other sort of mountains were the relatively small and often hopelessly inaccessible ones that bewitched alpinists en route to sounder ventures. Without the guides, technique, and transportation network of the Alpine tradition in Europe and the Canadian Rockies, and because the loftiest peaks had yet to be approached, let alone climbed, the Sourdough expedition style came to be highly refined.

Two or 3 mountains stand out from the rest as the most perfect realizations of these two separate aesthetic ideals of Alaskan mountains. Just as uncompromising mass is the basic characteristic of McKinley and Logan (as with, say, Mont Blanc for the Alps), and endurance the hallmark of the Sourdough climbing tradition, so is grace and steep smoothness the trademark of the other visual archetypal mountain, the glacier-carved horn. For Europe, the Matterhorn and the Dru became classic symbols; the ice flutings and stark granite of Mount Huntington, supplemented by the crystalline elegance of Mount Deborah, or the fragile granite Arrigetch towers, best personify the style and aesthetic of mountaineering that began to take hold in Alaska in the aftermath of Harrer's bold ascent of Deborah in 1954. It is the dialectic of these 2 somewhat conflicting mountain aesthetics and schools of climbing that gives Alaskan mountaineering the refreshing vitality and vast spectrum of possibility that it has today.

Perhaps one phenomenon that distinguishes the Alaskan experience historically is the relative ease and speed with which an indigenous tradition of mountaineering developed in a major alpine region of high international mountaineering interest. Not only were local talent, transport means and facilities, and knowledge utilized by the early rather unabashedly nationalistic and scientific exploratory ventures of climbers from Italy, London, and New York, but local climbers were also participating in the efforts often as equal partners with the foreigners (eg Harry Karstens on Denali, Ed Barille with Dr Cook, Andy Taylor with Alan Carpé, etc).

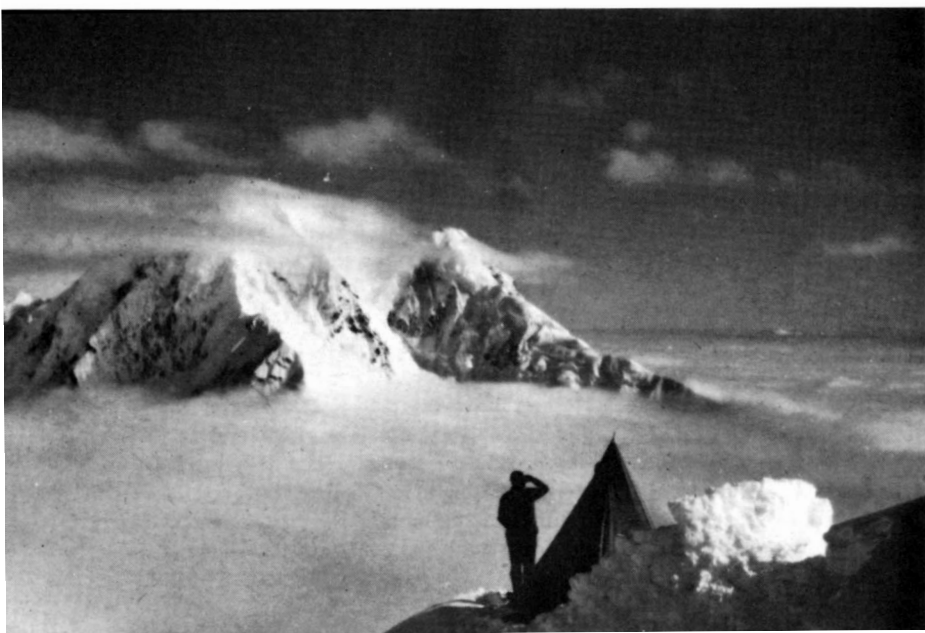
Little recognized and remembered outside of Alaska is the Icelandic saga-like history of climbing by resident Alaskan mountaineers, animated by accounts of heroic reconnaissance missions to vague peaks revered by the Alaskan imagination. After the early McKinley climbs, there was a complete dearth of activity in the McKinley region lasting—incredibly—from 1913 until 1942. Besides the obvious fact that the highest peak in the region had been climbed, there is reason to believe that an unconscious ethical ban on alpinism in the region occurred after the infamous first ascent claim of Dr Frederick Cook. Following World War II, however, and the second ascent of Denali by a US Army Quartermaster Corps team in 1942, local climbers began to frequent the Alaska Range. The year 1947 saw a University of Alaska group success on Denali, the forerunner to 3 attempts on Mount Hess (3667m/12,030ft), visible due S of the Fairbanks campus, in '49 and '50. In '51 Hess fell to a party of 5 University of Alaska climbers including Al Paige and Elton Thayer, 2 stalwarts of the local scene, and the event marked the firm establishment of a cadre of skilled climbers capable of attempting major projects, which formally coalesced into the university-centred Alaska Alpine Club in 1952. Paige and Thayer in '51 had led a U of A team (including B. Atwood and K. Hart) to an impressive first ascent of King Peak (5221m/17,130ft) by the upper W ridge, ending years of speculation about this close neighbour of Mount Logan. The fledgling AAC was active in years ahead, its members participating in an important traverse of Denali in '54, led by Thayer, who was killed on the climb; the first ascent of newly discovered University Peak (4410m/15,030ft) in '57; and innumerable other significant ventures.

The rise of the AAC in Fairbanks was paralleled in Anchorage by the founding of the Mountaineering Club of Alaska at about the same time, whose members were equally active throughout the state. One of the more memorable MCA climbers was Vin Hoeman, who came on to the national scene in part with a major traverse of all the summits of both Hunter and McKinley in 1963. With his physician wife Grace, Hoeman was incessantly active in all corners of the state, seemingly obsessed with first ascents and a first-hand knowledge of Alaskan mountains. He developed a card catalogue on all the climbers who had been expeditioning in Alaska, and would startle those he met by accurately reciting their climbing records and those of their friends. Hoeman's compulsive drive took him to Dhaulagiri in the Nepal Himalaya in 1969, where he met his death with 6 other members of an American expedition in a serac avalanche. Grace Hoeman drove herself relentlessly afterward, and was claimed, too, by an Alaskan avalanche a few years later, in an accident that many thought was clearly inevitable.

The alpinism ahead

Classic examples of Alpine and Sourdough style climbing are registered each season now. Deborah, long a milepost of advances in Alaskan climbing, was mastered in '75 for only the second time despite dozens of expeditions, though only after a 40-off-day extravaganza involving several dog-sleds and a 2-week wait for the weather at high camp. The N face finally yielded to grim determination in '77 by a combination of classic Alaskan and committed alpine strategies. Likewise, the epitome of ice beauty and threat, the N face of Huntington, was climbed in '78 by Jack Roberts and S. McCartney in 5 days alpine style, with 4 more required for the descent. The N face of Devil's Thumb succumbed to the equally extended 2-man alpine style effort of D. Stutzman and B. Plumb continuing the trend toward extreme routes on the great Alaskan ice-faces begun with Deborah in '77. And

35 High camp on Mt Fairweather, June 1931 (Photo: Terris Moore)



alpine style ascents of big peaks are abundant now, following the Wickwire party's exhausting failure on the Cassin route and subsequent success on the Western Rim of McKinley in '72, and his alpine traverse of Quincy Adams and Fairweather in the range of the same name during 12 days in '74. The indefatigable Charlie Porter (of Yosemite fame) soloed the Cassin in '76, and Pete Boardman's 1360m S face of Dan Beard climb in '74 and the Haston/Scott Denali S face ascent in '76 saw British teams busy pressing the standards on big climbs.

The essential point is that Alaskan mountaineering has not necessarily followed the logical, expected historical progression from exploration phase to development of climbing areas and crag climbing, but has maintained its original character by virtue of its Sourdough ethos of continuing exploration and adventure instead of optimizing the technical aspects. Perhaps this reflects an essential bond to the land that the mountaineer from Outside has not had the chance to develop or appreciate; perhaps this is simply the difference between the ways of locals who live and work in a mountain environment, and the visitors who journey there for reasons of their own. That there is a vibrant politic inherent in any climbing area is undeniable, as every crag has its local tight-knit cult of enthusiasts who espouse territoriality. The utter isolation of Alaska from the 'lower 48' states, and the pronounced absence of a gathering spot for climbers from other areas, like Camp 4 in Yosemite or Chamonix and Grindelwald in the Alps or Kathmandu in the Nepal Himalaya (the McKinley jump-off point of Talkeetna is the closest Alaskan equivalent), intensifies the separation of the local climbing community from mainstream American mountaineering. This may be both a limitation and a blessing, however.

For the Sourdough style local community, getting there is half the venture, and Alaskans have perfected the art of innovative or long-forgotten (best forgotten?) original approaches to climbs, combining all possible modes of transport, from foot to kayak to helicopter, with an unfailing variety of early explorers' and gold miners' routes through undesirable terrain, and long-winded unlikely new routes done 'just for the hell of it'. Two Fairbanks climbers set out in the winter of '76 to ski the 1000-mile route of the Iditarod dog-sled race under way at the time, after climbing over the volcanic peaks that rim Cook Inlet, loaded down with frozen salmon and pemmican. The Sourdough tradition—consciously emulated by Alaskans—is an easy-going, not terribly achievement-oriented style that is devoted to the *process* of wandering and climbing in the wilds and less to the advancement of technical standards, a primary concern of visiting climbers.

The conflict between local Alaskan and Outside climbing ethics only increases. Indigenous climbers have become considerably more technically oriented and capable in the last 5 years. Not only are significant winter climbs and first ascents of difficult ice (and occasionally rock) routes accomplished, but also Alaskans have begun to climb elsewhere more frequently. Recent expeditions to Nepal and S America have encouraged full Alaskan participation in the international climbing scene.

On the other hand, the Sourdough style is (thank God) alive and well. While 198 people climbed Denali in '78 and left the usual binge of human and material waste, a group of dog team mushers continued their resurrection of dog-sled support for mountaineering ventures. Dennis Kogl and John Cooper formed Denali Dog Tours and Wilderness Freighters about 5 years ago, and haul 10- and 16-foot freight sleds with 10 or 12 Malemutes and huskies. They regularly haul expedition gear (since

the Park Service has restricted airdrops in the parks) some 35 miles from Kantishna over McGonagall Pass and up the heavily crevassed Muldrow Glacier to the 2750 level, a 2375m gain in elevation. Other mushers cross the Brooks Range in spring and sortie into the Wrangells and lesser peaks frequently.

For Outsiders, a mountain trip to Alaska is often the costly culmination of several years' training in other ranges, so a major climb consistent with the *rite de passage* that an Alaskan expedition represents is chosen, some peak or place either well known, revered for its obscurity, or representing a major new demonstration of *grande alpinisme* in the great ranges. The limited geographic information available to Outsiders also tends to constrict their climbing creativity to a few well-known areas now heavily travelled. The result is a crisis of wilderness consciousness, an effort to ply 'trade routes' in a land held sacred precisely because of its condition of uncertainty. It is a demonstration of a curious 'uniqueness paradox' of mountaineering in Alaska: because of its unique frontier social milieu and relatively virgin climbing environment, mountaineers are drawn in large numbers; and, as a consequence of their concentration in limited areas, their presence erodes the very atmosphere that drew them there in the first place. The American character and mountaineering experience is founded on the exploration of wilderness, and the subsequent creation of new frontiers in technique and the spirit to replace those passed by. A dramatic shift in individual attitude about the act of climbing in an area of wilderness is now urgently necessary to preserve the interaction of innocence, uncertainty, and discovery that characterizes the expansive wilderness expedition experience in a place like Alaska.

At present, any number of pressures on the exquisite Alaskan alpine terrain exist, from the population increases encouraged by the most recent 'black-gold rush' surrounding the Alaskan Pipeline and the concomitant environmental threats, to the loss of the traditional wilderness state of Alaskan mountaineering. The tactics being introduced in response are ones that encourage small, self-sufficient parties, that artificially limit the technological and resource assistance available to them, and recognize the essential historical background of Sourdough ease and ardour that has shaped the course and spirit of Alaskan climbing.

Shots from the backwoods

C. Douglas Milner

It is very comfortable in the backwoods, and those of us who have been there for some time . . . in my own case about 50 years . . . are looking for younger entrants. In the main, present recruiting is confined to veteran mountaineers of great distinction, pioneers of the past who have survived with the help of a great deal of skill and a little bit of luck to the point where they can speak, as John Hunt did, in a recent charming paper, of the Age of Non-commitment. Not even the hardest of our hard men, or their eloquent chroniclers, would deny to these splendid relics of the past, an honourable retirement. To suggest that John is a relic not only savours of *lèse majesté*, but is plain silly when I think I am older than he, yet I did say splendid, the last thing we indigenous backwoodsmen could claim to be.

To attract these younger entrants, a case must be made for non-commitment,