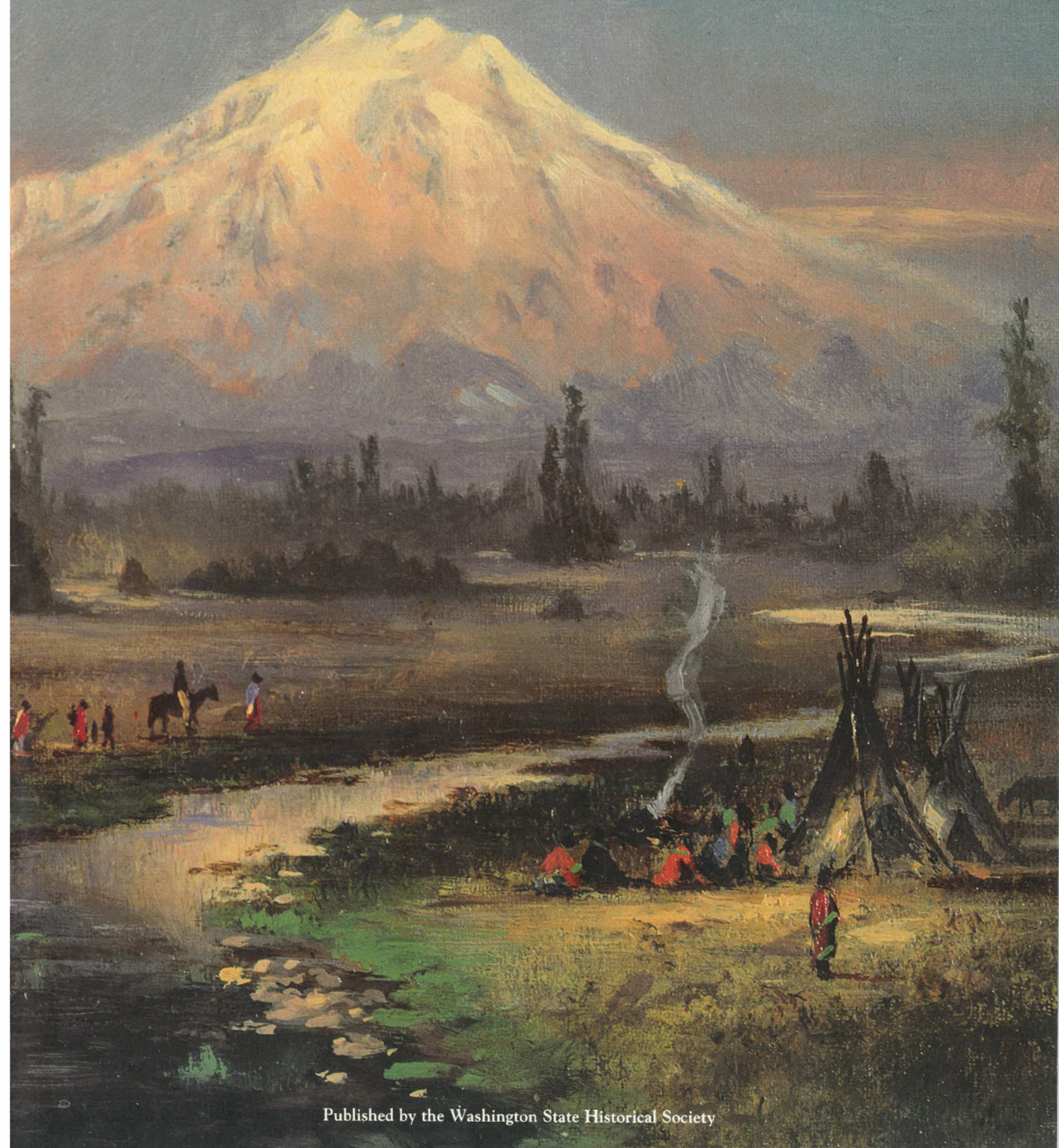


COLUMBIA

THE MAGAZINE OF NORTHWEST HISTORY ■ WINTER 1996-97 ■ \$6.00



Published by the Washington State Historical Society



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STRAUS
JULY 1960

Her thick, ankle-length bloomers flapping wildly in the wind, a Tacoma schoolteacher stood atop Mount Rainier. Until now, no woman had scanned the “miles of mountains forming one great circle round the horizon” from the 14,410-foot summit. In late afternoon on August 10, 1890, 19-year-old Edwina Fay Fuller took pride in achieving the goal she had “always dreamed of and feared impossible.”

As Mount Rainier National Park approaches its centennial in 1999, Fay Fuller deserves more than passing recognition as the first woman to reach the summit. Her life in Tacoma exemplifies a heady spirit in the rapidly growing young city between the late 1880s and the early 1890s. Taking on the wilderness visibly dominated by Mount Rainier became a popular pastime for the region’s adventurous men. By joining four of them for a successful two-day ascent, Fay bucked the social customs of her time. Her published account drew fresh attention to the mountain and to mountaineering, particularly for women. More importantly, her enthusiasm led her to gather and publish all the earlier written accounts she could locate in a series of feature articles. Both Fay Fuller’s feat and her commitment to collect those accounts contribute to Mount Rainier’s rich human history.

In the summer of 1890 Seattle was furiously rebuilding following a devastating fire the previous year. Thirty-five miles to the south, the city of Tacoma enjoyed a bustling economy. The terminus of the Northern Pacific Railroad in Tacoma proved a boon to both business and early tourism. When climbing parties embarked for Mount Rainier from points north or south, they frequently boarded the train for Yelm and Yelm Trail. Twenty years earlier, in 1870, the first two climbers had reached the summit. By 1890 about two dozen men had succeeded. A woman had yet to demon-

strate that she possessed sufficient strength and endurance to make it all the way.

A climbing party invited Fay to accompany them in 1887, insisting that she turn back at 8,500 feet. Only age 17 when she accepted this condition, she believed she could climb higher. And she longed for a second chance.

Piecing together what is known about Fay Fuller, the spread of the infectious “mountain fever” close to her backyard, and her friendship with Philemon Van Trump—one of the first to conquer the summit—helps to explain why she set her sights on Rainier.



Fay was 12 years old when in 1882 she moved with her family from Chicago to Tacoma in what was then Washington Territory. Her father, Edward N. Fuller, who would dedicate his later years to the Washington State Historical Society, became editor of the *Evening News*. The family moved into a house on St. Helens Avenue, and Fay enrolled at the new high school. In 1885 she became one of its first nine graduates. The 15-year-old soon began teaching locally at Longfellow School. In an interview in 1950 Fay claimed that she also taught at Rosedale on Henderson Bay on the Kitsap Peninsula, a day’s trip by steamer from Tacoma’s downtown dock.

On the threshold of womanhood in the Victorian era, yet inclined toward physical challenges considered off-limits for her gender, Fay found herself among the many Tacomans sharing a great enthusiasm for climbing. Ascents and near ascents of Mount Rainier whetted the appetites of adventurous souls. Those who engaged in or discussed the growing pastime spoke increasingly of the contagious mountain fever. Philemon Van Trump, had already visited the top twice when asked in 1888 to accompany the popular naturalist John Muir. Van Trump wrote: “Though my business and my wife being without help really made it a dereliction of duty for me to leave home, they soon



First Woman to the

Fuller

By
Betsy Potts

Special Collections, Washington State Historical Society

talked me into the mountain fever.”

Fay's decision to teach conformed to the conventional career choice for young women; her free-time activities did not. Leonard Longmire of Yelm was a member of the party in Fay's 1890 ascent. A teenager when he first climbed the mountain, he reminisced in 1933 about his early days as a guide and provided firsthand insight about Fay's character. He recalled her as a pioneering woman ahead of her time in the Pacific Northwest. She and a small group of young Tacoma women organized for "healthful exercise," calling themselves the Women's Guard; their calisthenics and rifle drills undoubtedly stirred gossip among local residents. Longmire also remembered Fay raising eyebrows by riding horseback like a man, rather than sidesaddle, and by sporting bloomers instead of a woman's proper riding habit. And, according to Longmire, she became the world's first woman "harbor master" in Seattle.

Such unconventional activities suggest an independent thinker who endured criticism from townspeople concerning her boldness. Little is known about Fay's mother, Augusta Morrison, whose father was mayor of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, at the time she married Edward Fuller. Any attempt by Augusta to influence her daughter likely failed, for nothing suggests that Fay attempted to curtail her self-reliant ways. The "quiet young girl with demi-blonde hair, a square, firm chin, and pleasing features and manner," and who preferred physically demanding adventures, emerges as a strong-willed individual who might use personality and persistence to further her cause.

When in 1887 Fay accepted an invitation to climb Mount Rainier with the

Complete with cumbersome costume and alpenstock, and standing on fake ice, Fay Fuller posed in Tacoma for I. G. Davidson, a professional photographer from Portland, after she became the first woman to "conquer" Mount Rainier.



constraint that she return to camp at a specified elevation, the experience proved both exhilarating and frustrating for her. It tested her endurance, allowed her to travel with and learn from seasoned hikers, and fueled her ambition to return: "Having climbed the mountain . . . to an altitude of 8,500 feet, [I] knew the pleasure in store. . . . It was a great disappointment, and one that made me resolve that some time I would go as high as possible, but hardly daring to hope what that might mean." She would need the patience to wait three more years.

Accelerated improvements along and near the popular Yelm Trail and wagon road in the late 1880s helped to spread the mountain fever. Clearing, widening and grading the trail and creating switchbacks eased the first leg of travel by horseback toward Rainier. Several simple lodgings promised basic comforts along the way. Discovering mineral springs in 1883 and summering there with his family, James Longmire and his son Len built log dwellings and rough bathhouses after snow crushed the first within a year or two. By 1888 their cabin and those of two others, along with a few barns, provided shelter.

Improvements over the next few summers pushed onward and, literally, upward. In 1890 the Longmires, with assistance from a number of Indians, started the first road to Longmire Springs, which they completed in 1891. Their efforts included a small log hotel at the springs, contributing much to "open and maintain a proper trail into

Top of Mount Rainier

Paradise Valley” for early vacationers. Another key improvement was Longmire’s log bridge, which spanned the Nisqually River at the foot of the switchbacks. Built shortly after John Muir’s ascent, the new crossing assured dry clothes, a safer, swifter journey and a psychological lift to parties setting out from Yelm. Fay described this crossing as hazardous for rider and horse in the days before the bridge, the water carrying “huge boulders, continually roaring and rolling from the glacier.”

Not long after Fay’s 1887 attempt aborted at the snow fields, she must have determined to be alert for another opportunity. To keep in peak physical condition she probably arranged to exercise with the Women’s Guard whenever time permitted.

With her father in the newspaper business and her family living on “D” Street near downtown Tacoma by 1888, Fay had ready access to climbing accounts. She would not have missed Van Trump’s report in the *Daily Ledger* soon after descending Mount Rainier that summer. When he, A. C. Warner (the first to photograph from the summit) and Muir left footprints on the mountain top, they caused excitement to ripple throughout the region, and a camp soon bore the latter’s name.

Fay and Van Trump seem to have become friends, though the origin of their acquaintance is unclear. He and Edward Fuller may have known one another, or Fay may have met Van Trump through his daughter Christine, who was a student at Yelm where Fay briefly taught. The seasoned mountaineer spoke to Fay’s class and invited her to his family camp. Through such outings Fay increased her

knowledge of Mount Rainier, reaffirming her goal to go “as high as possible.”

Opportunity knocked in the summer of 1890 when the Van Trumps asked

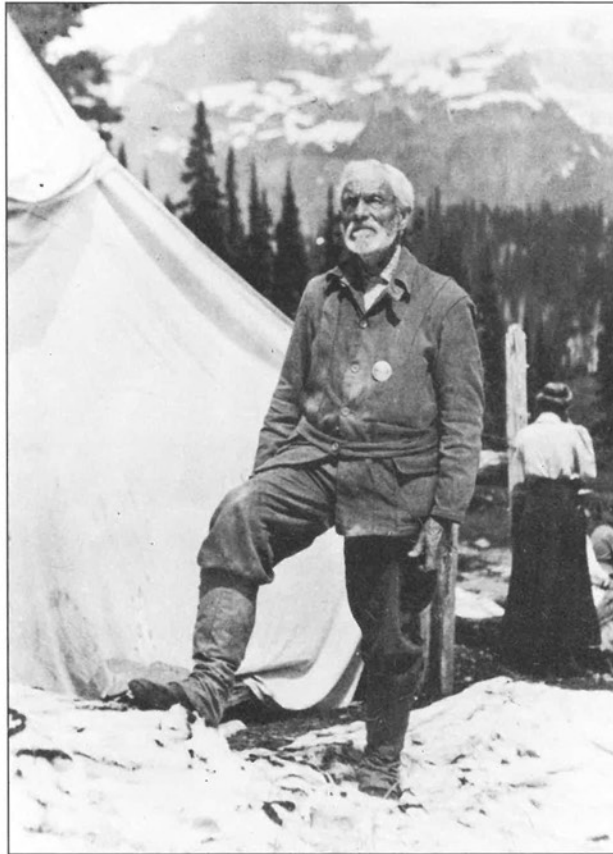
proved both her serious intent and the fact that she had been given advance notice to pack with a purpose. Riding astride a horse as she headed toward the

Nisqually River bridge and through forested Pierce County, Fay wore an outfit unimaginably cumbersome compared with today’s lightweight and layered approach. Her dressmaker had sewn a thick blue flannel, ankle-length bloomer suit covered with a long coatdress. Lined pockets in her blouse held personal items. One Tacoman’s comment about Fay echoed Victorian “shock at the thought that her mother would let her wear such an ‘immodest costume.’” “In order to get the benefit of the sun,” Fay hairpinned a straw hat to her upswept hair. Sturdy footwear for women was nonexistent, so she purchased heavy calfskin boys’ shoes to lace over wool stockings. She carried blankets and an alpenstock (walking stick) crafted from a curved shovel handle by a Yelm blacksmith,

with a spike driven into the end. Goggles plus a charcoal mixture spread on her face as a sunscreen rounded out her equipment.

The highlights of Fay’s climb draw heavily from the article she published in *Every Sunday*, her father’s Tacoma weekly, shortly after her descent. From mid-morning of their Yelm departure on August 4 to their return on the 19th, the trip took over two weeks.

Horses carried the party toward their destination for nearly three days. Fay detailed the relative ease of this portion, appreciating prairie, woods and comfortable sleeping accommodations. They crossed the Nisqually River bridge and headed toward Nisqually Glacier. Fay reported that a “good wagon road has been made over the first twenty miles, which greatly eases the trip.”



A later portrait of Philemon Van Trump, one of the first two men to reach Mount Rainier’s summit (1870). Fay joined the Van Trump family on their 1890 summer outing to Mount Rainier, continuing to the top with another party.

her to accompany them on an excursion to the mountain. Favorable weather had blessed the region with an early climbing season; a number of parties formed to discuss strategy, plan equipment, acquire a guide and establish a starting date.

That Fay was determined to seize this opportunity must have been clear to the Van Trumps and others who gathered in Yelm the evening of August 3rd. Eleven-year-old Christine’s presence signaled a casual climb. A glance at Fay’s equipment and clothing, however,

That first evening, 18 miles from Yelm, they paused at Indian Henry's farm to eat a meal cooked over an open fire. Fay referred to Henry as a "smart old Klickitat who . . . owns a very valuable farm." Two more parties soon arrived, among them the four men Fay would later join in her final ascent.

Refreshed by a good night's rest in Indian Henry's barn, the party continued 14 hours by horseback along a winding path beneath dense forests of grand old cedars and firs and "across chattering brooks, where the tin cups strapped to our backs came in use." They slept on another fresh bed of hay the second night, this time in the barn of the Kernahan family, which had recently moved to this isolated location from Tacoma. Muir had used these accommodations when he approached Rainier by the same route two years earlier.

Riding more than 11 miles the third day, the group arrived at Longmire Springs. Here in 1883, on their descent

from the mountain, James Longmire, George Bayley and Philemon Van Trump had discovered and explored some mineral springs. Crossing the bridge that Longmire had recently built over the Nisqually River near the foot of its glacier, members of the party readjusted their packs before covering a steep hill on foot. Another hour brought them to a paradise composed "of the greenest grass, prairie firs, and myriads of flowers." They bedded down at nearby Camp of the Clouds and took time the next day to collect and press wildflowers, marvel at the area's beauty, and set up a comfortable camp.

Well aware that she was still not guaranteed a summit attempt, Fay prepared to make her move. When members of a Seattle party passed hers at Paradise Valley and camped at an elevation 500 feet higher, they soon saw a lone young

woman striding toward them. What then transpired is known only through Fay's report—and one's imagination. "Visiting and talking with these parties," said Fay, "I found several anticipated trying the ascent. They made me happy when they kindly invited me to join them." It is safe to speculate that she got herself invited. And if her outfit created a stir in the city below, spending the night in their camp before setting out with the all-male party must have set tongues wagging.

Four fit young climbing partners accompanied Fay Fuller for the final portion of the challenge. At age 24, the Reverend Ernest Smith had recently

The climbing foursome, left to right: W. O. Amsden, Len Longmire, Fay Fuller and E. C. Smith. On their way to the summit in August 1890, Smith's three-foot mercury barometer broke as he prepared to make an observation.



Aubrey L. Haines Collection

arrived in the Pacific Northwest as the new Unitarian minister in Seattle. He was the climbing party's leader. William Amsden, a photographer who had captured the first photographs on top of Mount Baker, also represented Seattle. He carried an 8x10 camera and glass lenses. Len Longmire of Tacoma, who had not yet turned 20, would begin two decades as a summit guide the following summer. Robert R. Parrish had traveled to Yelm from Portland with the sole purpose of conquering Mount Rainier.

The final two-day climb began on August 9, and Smith wrote that the group started out equipped with "goggles and dark veils." They were a "rough-looking set, but prepared to camp out in the snow three days if necessary." Several mishaps occurred that afternoon. Ground glass important for Amsden's photography broke, yet he found he had "glass pieces enough for focusing" and managed to capture the sweeping panorama from Camp Muir in the lingering light. When Smith's three-foot mercury barometer broke, he announced, apparently in good humor, that his mission had shifted from work to pleasure. Finally, when Parrish missed in tossing his pack to safe ground, he could only watch it careen over the edge of a crevasse. But the

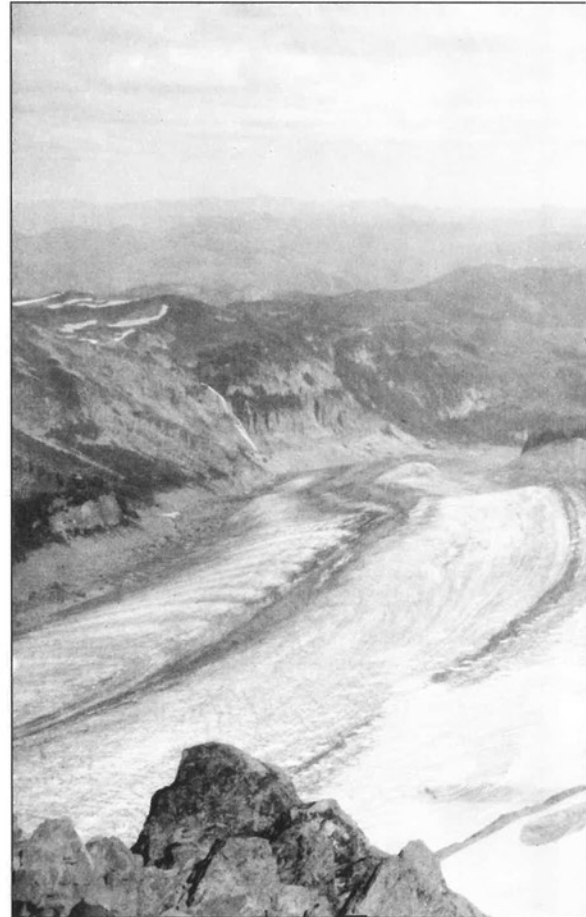
fivesome had safely weathered the day. Now, with evening coming, they stretched tents over their alpenstocks and awaited the dawn.

After a fitful sleep they arose at half past four in the morning to find streams frozen and their canteens dry. A bit of chocolate plus a few raisins and prunes sufficed for breakfast. Crossing ledges and slippery slopes proved tedious, particularly an icy 50-foot portion. Here Smith chiseled steps with his hatchet. Along the most treacherous ledge at Gibraltar (a high cliff christened by climbers in 1889), Fay permitted herself to be secured by a rope between two men in front and two behind. This narrow shelf had to be navigated before the sun's warmth loosened the rocks.

Len Longmire credited Fay for not wanting to concede anything that might make her appear soft. He recalled that someone offered her a hand at an especially dangerous place. "No thanks," she replied, "I want to get up there under my own power or not at all." Thin air near the top slowed their pace to a few steps, a pause, then a few more steps. Twelve hours after their day began, they reached the icy crown of Mount Rainier.

The five hikers scanned the horizon. The wind howled; the day was already cooling. Clouds prevented a full vista, but a partial view was reward enough.

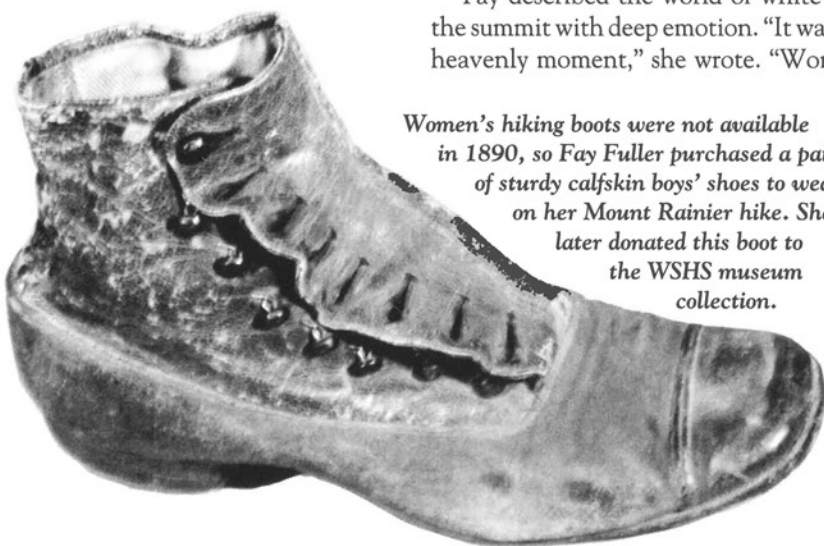
Fay described the world of white at the summit with deep emotion. "It was a heavenly moment," she wrote. "Words



cannot describe scenery and beauty, how they could speak for the soul!" On viewing the night sky through a steam cave roof along the rim of a crater, she could watch the "stars and meteors . . . and hear the awful avalanches roaring down the mountain sides. . . . It is all God's music, the sounds being grander than the sights." A later report in the *San Francisco Chronicle* captured the hostile weather at 12,000 feet: "the wind blew a hurricane over the snow and blue-green glacier."

Before beginning their descent they left a few items in the nearby crater as proof of their adventure: a sardine can containing their names, a brandy flask and a tin cup.

For her first major climbing feat, Fay carefully itemized her equipment, clothing and food supplies. The latter included "dried beef, fried ham, cold boiled eggs, sardines, bread and butter, extract of beef, cheese, chocolate, dried



Women's hiking boots were not available in 1890, so Fay Fuller purchased a pair of sturdy calfskin boys' shoes to wear on her Mount Rainier hike. She later donated this boot to the WSHS museum collection.

Museum Collections, Washington State Historical Society



#21809, Asahel Curtis Collection, Special Collections, Washington State Historical Society

The sense of awe and wonder that Fay Fuller must have experienced as she ascended Mount Rainier is captured in this 1911 Asahel Curtis photograph of Cowlitz Glacier, on the southeast face just below Camp Muir.

peaches, raisins and prunes,” plus some brandy and a flask of whiskey. Having spent a sheltered but near-sleepless night in an ice cave, Fay told of her companions bathing their feet in the whiskey. Such details would interest future climbers.

Several observations show for the first time a woman mountaineer’s perspective. Steam rising from the crater appeared to boil “like a row of tea kettles.” Of the men’s appearance near the summit she wrote: “The gentlemen’s mustaches were frozen like ice.” Fay recalled great difficulty in mastering the steps carved in the 50-foot “solid wall of ice” by the Reverend Smith with his hatchet. She found that the distance between the steps suited a man more than a woman, especially one wearing a “long full-skirted coat” over a hot and bulky bloomer-suit. Finally, she recounted with amusement Smith’s attempts to cook at that altitude.

Fay’s article described in a straightforward manner the cold, fatigue, hunger, thirst and blistered faces the group experienced. She pronounced the charcoal-and-cream sunblock a failure and acknowledged suffering intense pain: lips, noses, and almost “all our faces swollen out of proportion, eyes sore, wrists peeling.”

A number of historians credit Fay Fuller with an achievement beyond her personal mountaineering conquest. Her decision to find and publish other firsthand accounts of Rainier ascents is her legacy on the eve of Mount Rainier National Park’s centennial. Her keen journalistic sense and eagerness to climb do not fully explain why she penned her adventure and sought similar stories of others. Did she consider these feats history-in-the-making and want to secure

a place for herself? Her newspaper-editor father likely encouraged her and offered access to publication. These newsworthy articles whetted recreational appetites to try the Cascade’s highest peak and increased momentum to include it in a national park.

In reaching Rainier’s summit in 1890 and again in 1897 with the Mazamas Club of Portland, Fay dispelled any doubt that she possessed adequate stamina. She opened a door for others of her gender, especially her students in Yelm. Her words echo that spirit: “I expect to have my example followed by a good many women.”

After becoming social editor for *Every Sunday*, Fay took a position as the first woman newspaper reporter for the *Tacoma Ledger*. This assignment sent her throughout the city. Covering “the waterfront, equity court, the markets,” she told an interviewer upon returning to Tacoma in 1950, “I walked miles from one end of town to the other, holding my skirts out of the dust and mud.” She also worked for newspapers in Pendleton, Oregon. One reporter observed that she had a “nose for news.” Fay claimed herself “one of the boys.” After covering the world’s fairs in Chicago and St. Louis, her journalistic career eventually took her to Washington, D.C. In June 1905 she married Fritz von Briesen in New York City. A few years her junior and an 1895 Harvard graduate, he practiced patent and trademark law. They lived for many years on New York’s West 57th Street. Fay died in 1958 at the age of 88.

Betsy Potts is a Tacoma-based free-lance writer and photographer and a member of the Tacoma Landmarks Preservation Commission.

COLUMBIA

The Magazine of Northwest History

A quarterly publication of the
Washington State Historical Society

VOLUME TEN, NUMBER FOUR

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COVER: This snow-covered giant was the local focus of a "disease" that Tacoma-area outdoor enthusiasts of the late 19th century referred to as "mountain fever." Road and lodging improvements in the late 1880s contributed to the spread of the addiction. Among those who succumbed was Fay Fuller, a young, athletic schoolteacher who in 1890 became the first woman to reach Mount Rainier's summit. See story beginning on page 24. (M. Straus painting, c. 1880, "Mount Rainier and Clover Creek," Museum Collections, Washington State Historical Society)