

Climbing Rainier with Curtis in 1909

Seventy-Nine Persons, with the Women in Long Skirts, Started the Three-Week Trek; Most of Them Made It.

Text and photographs by Asahel Curtis

Mt. Rainier, dominating the horizon in Western Washington, has always fascinated those who came into the area, beginning with Captain George Vancouver, who named it. The peak became a challenge to the many who gazed at its looming bulk and wondered how one might climb to the snowy top.

The Indians had never climbed it—for one thing, they lacked the footgear for ascending steep slopes—and since it was something beyond their reach, it assumed some of the mystical qualities they attributed to celestial bodies. The “Mountain that Was God” was one description.

To be the first person to climb what was then believed to be the tallest mountain in the country was an ambition that moved men to action as early as 1857, when Lt. (later General) A.V. Kautz, accompanied by several soldiers, attempted the first ascent. He and one of the soldiers made it nearly to the top across unexplored snowfields and glaciers, but had to give up at nightfall. They had no equipment for camping.

Thirteen years later the first successful climb was made by Hazard Stevens, son of the first territorial governor, Isaac I. Stevens, and P.B. Van Trump. They were guided in the foothills by the noted pioneer James Longmire and higher up by Shuiskin, an Indian, although Shuiskin, fearful of angering the gods on top the mountain, left them during the ascent.

That was 1870. In the years that followed, an



increasing number of people explored the mountain's slopes, located new routes, found the steam caves, and charted trails that made each succeeding climb less hazardous. In 1890 a Miss Fay Fuller of Tacoma became the first woman to climb Rainier.

By the turn of the century so many had become enthralled with the wonders of the Cascade and Olympic ranges that an organization was formed—the Mountaineers. It published a journal, the *Mountaineer*, and each year held what it called an “outing.” The third out-

ing, in 1909, was a mass climb of Mt. Rainier. One of the leaders of this ambitious three-week undertaking, for which 79 persons signed up, was Asahel Curtis, a noted photographer and brother of the more eminent photographer, Edward S. Curtis. He took along one of his bulky cameras and brought back dozens of photographs.

Curtis, an able writer, described the trip in great detail in the November 1909 issue of the *Mountaineer*. Here, slightly edited, is his account.—Ed.

The third annual outing of the Mountaineers, with all its pleasures, its temporary discomforts and its final triumph in the ascent of the highest mountain in the United States, has passed into history. Time only leaves a memory of the happy days spent in the flower-strewn parks or on the higher ice-clad slopes; of the equally happy nights around the great campfires; of the well-



Before the steep climb began, some of the party had the energy to engage in footraces and tugs-of-war.

earned, well-enjoyed rest, and of the lifelong friendships that here found birth.

The discomforts of the long marches are forgotten; the days when, stormbound, we lay inactive; even the bugle boy, who always sounded reveille long before we thought he should, is forgiven. Almost we might forgive those who insisted upon that fearful line, which one from the far Atlantic Coast in sport called the human centipede, but which we in our own rebellious spirit derided as the "chain gang"....

As any trip to the mountain, to be considered a success, must include the ascent, it was necessary to find a route to the summit from some point on the north side. This could not be from Spray Park; therefore camp must be made in Moraine Park or some park farther to the east. Prof. J.B. Flett had twice made the ascent over much the same route by which Prof. I.C. Russell climbed, and we determined to attempt the ascent with the party.

The Moraine Park trail had been destroyed by the Carbon Glacier, and it was pronounced

a hopeless task to put it in condition for horses. The park rangers advised building a trail through the Sluisin Mountains, but this would require a summer's work and would cost \$1,500.... To settle this problem the Outing Committee ... determined to build a trail over the shifting moraine of the Carbon. This work was ... finished in a week....

The party left Seattle on the morning of July 11, reached Fairfax at 11 a.m., and marched to the first camp 11 miles out on the Carbon River Trail. In a drizzling rain camp was made, and tents erected to protect everyone, and in spite of the discomforts of our garments it was a happy party that gathered around the first campfire.

The following morning a number of the men were detailed to go in advance and complete the trail across the Carbon Glacier. This was accomplished in time to permit the advance part of the pack train to go on into Moraine Park without delay. Here camp was established, quarters assigned to the men and



Among the crevasses on Carbon Glacier.



Early morning at "Camp Curtis" with several climbers still asleep in their bedrolls laid on rocky ground.



Lunch stop on a glacier. Women climbers wore calf-length skirts and broad-brimmed hats.

women, commissary housed in its own tents and plans made for the tryout trips. These served a double purpose, to see the surrounding country with the greatest possible dispatch and to drill members of the party and try their mettle. . . .

In the meantime L.A. Nelson, Grant W. Humes and myself had made a trip to the head of Inter Glacier and selected a site for temporary camp on Ruth Mountain. This camp spot had been suggested by Prof. J.B. Flett, who had previously climbed from here.

When making this preliminary trip we had hoped to make the ascent, but were unable to because of a storm. On July 28 Nelson and Humes went on to temporary camp, and on July 29 made the ascent, going up the ice field that forms the head of the White and Winthrop glaciers. They were forced to cut steps considerable of the way because the snow slopes were steep and frozen. I was prevented from joining them in this ascent by a broken shoulder. This ascent, made over untried country by two men who had to break trail or

cut steps so much of the way, ranks as the most difficult one made by members of the club.

While they were climbing, the main party of 77 came up to temporary camp and met them on their return from the summit. Their strenuous climb discouraged a number from the ascent, and on the following morning 17 turned back, leaving a party of 62. . . .

July 30 broke clear and beautiful, and the party in seven companies moved out from camp, dropping to the White Glacier and winding upward among large crevasses. The only object by which elevation could be judged or distance measured was Little Tahoma. As we slowly toiled upward we seemed to gain so little on the elevation of this peak that the effect was disheartening. At last it could be seen that we had topped its highest point of red basalt, and we knew we were nearing the 12,000-foot level. Only 2,500 feet above us was the summit, and in unbroken line the party was climbing easily. The tryout days in line had been irksome to many, but



Asahel Curtis, cooking on an oil stove at a high-altitude camp.

their value was proven here. But few could have stood alone on the slopes that now measured 45 degrees and ended in broken crevasses. Fewer still could have endured the strain of breaking steps in the hard snow, always with the white blur running upward to the blue sky, and downward until the eye grew dizzy following where miles away the ice and forest mingled. The only safety lay in watching the steps ahead and moving forward as the signal was given. At 12,500 feet I passed along the line to see how everyone was taking it, and reached Doctor Van Horn at the head of Company D. As he recognized me he said: "Curtis, this is no place for the father of eight children."

I could not help wondering how many more had reached the same conclusion. It had been impossible to rest for more than a moment, because there was no protection from the fierce wind that swept down into our faces. At 13,000 feet a half-closed crevasse, large enough to shelter the entire party, gave a much-needed chance for rest and lunch. . . . Above the crevasse we crossed over the head

of the Winthrop, planning to enter the saddle between Crater Peak and Liberty Cap. Here the wind increased to a gale, still in our faces, and continued throughout the day.

Once in the saddle between the summits, the ascent was easy, the entire party reaching the crater in eight hours and forty minutes from temporary camp. Here, out of the wind, everyone sought a sheltered spot to warm themselves on the hot rocks and ashes. The A.Y.P. flag [for the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition, being held in Seattle at that time] was fastened to its staff and an effort made to plant it among the rocks, but the wind tore it down each time, and it was carried to the snow dome of Columbia Crest and the staff set deep in the snow. It remained there only 15 minutes, however, when the staff





TOP: A group of climbers at Columbia Crest, on the summit of Mt. Rainier.



BOTTOM: Curtis climbed high to obtain this photo of the group crossing Winthrop Glacier, during the descent.

was broken by the wind. The flag was rescued and placed inside the crater by the Ingraham party, who passed the night on the summit....

After an hour on the summit the descent was made safely to temporary camp, where a second night was spent. Twilight gave way to full splendor of moonlight while clouds formed in the valleys and rolled fragments of mist upward against the bulk of the mountain. The toil of the day and the discomforts of our beds were forgotten in the splendor of the scene. A mile above us the great White Glacier formed and wound its 10 miles of ice downward into the dark chasm. From our eerie crag we could not see where it passed the base of the cliff, but we could look straight down on the seamed surface of ice. More than a mile away across the ice, clear in the moonlight, rose the dark crag of Little Tahoma and from the depths occasionally came the boom of moving ice.

The following morning the clouds lay around the mountain in a vast sea that stretched on all sides to the horizon. A few peaks broke through, but they were insignificant in comparison to the dominating bulk of ice we were on. The impression was of being afloat on a great iceberg. Major Ingraham and his four companies, who had spent the night on the summit, came down as early as they could see to travel, and rejoined the main party at St. Elmo Pass. Returning to camp, we walked down into a mass of clouds and found camp shut in by a dense fog....

As day after day the eye feasted upon the beauties of ice-bound mountain crag or flowery meadow, the mind became satiated, and it required the unusual to attract attention. Yet nowhere else on the mountain had the effect been so strange as here. The park winds in and out among the crags, with small lakes;



Curtis, right, and W. Montelius Price pose on the summit of Mt. Shuksan in 1906.



Professor Edmond Meany, cigar in hand, rests contentedly while a fellow climber washes his face after the long climb.

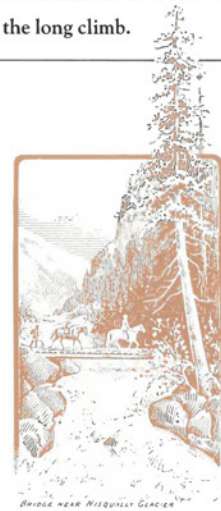
streams that course through meadows or plunge over rocks in beautiful cascades; trees bent and broken by the wind; flowers of every hue, so thickly strewn that it was impossible to step without crushing them. . . .

The park was so beautiful that it seemed unreal, and one regretted that so few could see it. Nature had fashioned this playground much better than man could hope to, and had set it away here between two great glaciers at the base of a mighty mountain. Thousands . . . of acres in extent, it stretched from the dark belt of timber 4,000 feet upward to the ice-clad slopes below Liberty Cap itself. The last trees clung far down to the rocks at an elevation of almost 8,000 feet, while flowers grew nearly a thousand feet higher. But in the lower park the effect of the wind was not so evident, and countless thousands of avalanche lilies, each with a dewdrop on every petal, nodded gently in the mountain breeze. In time, when trails and roads are built, this great park will be open to the public, and thousands will be able to enjoy what has passed so long

unnoticed. Here as elsewhere, it will require the strong hand of the government to prevent wanton destruction.

Those who first visited Paradise Park set fire to the beautiful groves of alpine fir and hemlock "just to see them burn," and today those same groves stand, bleached ghosts of trees, their beauty gone forever.

It must always be the work of the club to assist in every way possible in the work of protecting the beautiful places of our state. A great part of this must be in educating those who, in greatly increasing numbers, go each year into the mountains.



The line engravings are by C.C. Maring from the book *Pacific Forest Reserve and Mt. Rainier* by E.S. Ingraham, Seattle, 1895. Photographs courtesy of the Washington State Historical Society.

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When the earliest nuns went begging.

Front cover: Painted around 1920, Sydney Mortimer Laurence's "On to the Potlatch" is one of a group of early Northwest paintings now on display at Seattle's Museum of History and Industry. Like many in the show, it not only reflects the beauty and grandeur of the region, but also preserves a record of its original inhabitants and early settlers. For more on the exhibit, see page 21. (Courtesy of the Seattle Art Museum.) **Back cover:** This Russian poster, issued in 1937, commemorates the historic transpolar flight of that year from Moscow to Vancouver, Washington. In large letters at right it reads, "Warm welcome to Stalin's adopted children, the daring and courageous fliers of our country." Also on the poster are the text of a message of congratulation signed by, among others, Stalin and Molotov; pictures of the crew; explanations of the flight's route over the pole; and the surprising information that the crew landed in "U.S.A., State of Washington, City of Portland." For more on the flight and its 50th anniversary this year, see page 5. (Poster courtesy of the Soviet Press.)