

VIA LIBERTY RIDGE

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ONE evening early in September after the adjournment of a meeting of the Mountaineers' Club in Seattle, Ome Daiber and I stood in the lobby admiring an unusual photograph of Mount Adams. It was soon after our conversation there in which we had commented upon the great similarity of the north faces of Mount Adams and Mount Rainier that my friend related to me his seemingly fantastic scheme of climbing to the summit of Rainier by the incredible and surely impractical route up Willis Wall (Liberty Ridge). At first I thought he was joking and so passed his suggestion by with a remark expressing my satisfaction with this earthly life and my good health which I earnestly expected to continue. But in a moment seeing that he was entirely serious I eagerly agreed to make the try with him, although I had never closely studied the mountain from the north.

Within the week we had completed our plans, made a preliminary inspection of the wall from Moraine Park, and had selected the third member of our party, a very capable climber of much experience, in the person of Arnold Campbell.

At 2:45 in the afternoon of September 28th, after leaving the car at the end of the Carbon River Road, we hoisted our packs of provisions and equipment to our backs, crossed the foot bridge at Cataract Creek, and in excellent spirits turned into the trail leading past Moraine Park and on up Curtis Ridge, which borders the wall to the east.

In the evening we made camp on Curtis Ridge at an elevation of 6000 feet. The sky was like indigo in which myriads of stars appeared and with the mountain clearly silhouetted against the dark curtain of sky, the ice and snow added a ghostlike appearance to the wall.

After the evening meal we retired to our sleeping bags inside the blizzard tent, a covering made of two tarpaulins sewn together with one edge left open much after the fashion of an envelope, a very effective arrangement. Ome, in order to eliminate unnecessary weight had left his bag in the car so he and I bunked together in mine. There was so little room that it seemed as if we must alternate our breathing so that one inhaled while the other exhaled. After a while, there being no generous gesture from my bedfellow offering to vacate in my favor, I removed myself from confinement into the more spacious quarters provided by the hard and rocky ground thinking at the time that a fellow might just as well martyr himself to the cause, but after a short time the martyr business suffered complications through rising winds and lowering temperatures and in a regretful state of mind over my too hasty action I dozed off with teeth chattering to the accompaniment of my companions' peaceful snoring.

Following an early morning breakfast we cached the bags and were on our way up the ridge by 7:30. The air was clear and crisp, the sky cloudless, and the breeze of the night before had disappeared. We had planned to go as high as possible on Curtis Ridge in order to avoid the many crevasses apparent on the lower glacier but after ascending some distance it became obvious that we must partly retrace our steps so that we might find a way onto the glacier. Once on the ice we lost no time in adjusting our crampons and then "tied in" on the rope, Ome leading.

Our route led us diagonally across the Carbon and upwards to the base of Liberty Ridge. This razor-like accumulation of crumbly volcanic rock and ice rises directly from the head of the glacier at the base of the wall and figuratively forces its way up the entire face and embeds itself into the icy cone of Liberty Cap. The uppermost tip of the ridge is a rock mass resembling somewhat the prow of a boat as it cleaves into the sea of ice and impels the falling avalanches over the eastern and western walls. Slightly removed from the base of the ridge on either side is a comparatively flat area. To the north, looking down the glacier from this section, is an enormous pile of broken and seracked ice pushed high by the pressure of the ice from above. Through this we hoped to thread our way to the snout of the ridge.

In attempting to gain the flat we found our route pierced by a jumble of towering seracs. We were at an elevation of 8000 feet at this time—high enough to determine a probable route to the west and closer to the ridge. To avoid losing elevation we retraced our steps to a small glacial lake which we had observed earlier. Here we ate a hasty lunch. It developed that the gasoline stove had saturated Ome's sandwiches, but we swallowed them even though the flavor was rather powerful, then hastened on so as to climb as high as the lateness of the afternoon would permit.

As we neared our objective, our route led up in many wide traverses. There Ome proved his ability by skillfully cutting steps up fifty feet of almost vertical ice. The way now led through seracs of extraordinary size and onto the rock ridge which we reached at 4:30. The elevation at this point was 8500 feet. After slowly climbing to 11,000 feet we bivouaced for the night on the rounded shoulder of the ridge just a few yards below a massive pinnacle of crumbly volcanic debris. Here we were relatively safe from rock avalanches falling from the pinnacle above due to the character of the ridge which lay at an angle of about 50 degrees. The western edge of the shoulder which was covered thinly with powdered snow slipped away steeply, while the eastern edge fell vertically 2500 feet to the Carbon Glacier. Three steps to the west of us the slope was of sufficient pitch to demand the use of crampons when filling our bucket with snow. Our packs exhibited a deliberate tendency to slide and roll away.

Hastily we worked at levelling off a place to sit to afford ourselves protection from the cold. The work was slow. When completed, our space was not more than three feet square, due to the steepness of the slope and the frozen pumice.

We enjoyed little sleep that night—our space was too limited and it was extremely cold. After eating we sat huddled about the primus stove inside the tent, frequently throwing back the opening to expel the fumes from the stove and to marvel at the beauty of the starry heavens. Far to the north the sky was illuminated by the white glow of the Aurora Borealis while in the dark foreground of the forest clad mountains several airplane beacons, stretching far across the Cascades, blinked throughout the night. Avalanches, too, did not cease their activities with the coming of night but periodically poured more ice onto the glacier below. In spite of our close and confined quarters we were not uncomfortable, although we had to exercise caution not to move too close to the edge. To help pass the time we kept a sharp watch on the progress of Orion for when that constellation reached a point nearly overhead, daylight was near.

After a late breakfast we once again donned our crampons, slipped into

packs and rope, and leaned into the ridge for the final push. Resuming our course to the right of the crest we made our way over hard-crusting snow, glare ice, and through deep drifts, the ridge varying from 50 to 70 degrees and in places almost vertical. Shortly after leaving our bivouac we lost nearly two hours in ascending 400 feet up an icy chute flanked on both sides by perpendicular walls of rotten rock. The ice was covered with a few inches of powdered snow rendering our crampons ineffective. The chute was exposed to small rock avalanches falling from the mealy mass overhead, but we managed to make our way up the edge of the ice bordering the rocks on the western and less difficult side. The formation of the rock bordering the eastern edge of the chute is more or less typical of the larger outcroppings found on the ridge. Generally, at the top of these agglomerations of volcanic spew is found a thick layer of igneous rock formation supported on a foundation of soft, crumbly pumice-like substance, held together with frozen moisture. The texture of the rock found on Gibraltar is quite durable by comparison.

Taking little time for rest, we finally reached the base of the prow itself. Here it was necessary to do a bit of rather difficult rock work by climbing up onto a ledge rather than to take the risk of traversing the steep glare ice which at this point was precariously close to the brink of the icefall near the top of the eastern wall. After a short rest, as we were preparing to resume the climb, hundreds of tons of ice broke from the western ice cap and thundered their way to the glacier below. The very ridge had seemed to shake as we watched, and as the echoes died away the silvery streamers of ice particles drifted slowly down.

We reached the last outcropping of rock and climbed rapidly upward traversing toward a col between Liberty Cap and a high point to the west. On approaching the col we found that a bergschrund had split it from side to side. A close examination revealed a slight overhang in the center of the break which was but a scant six or eight feet above the lower lip. We boosted Ome over the edge and with his assistance soon resumed our interrupted way toward Liberty Cap a bare 200 feet above. Our watches indicated 5:30 as we stopped for a bite to eat by way of celebration. The apples which we had carefully preserved for just such an occasion were a real treat but we were unable to gag down what remained of the "gasoline sandwiches."

As we descended into the snow-choked crater we entered a field of intense, still cold that penetrated through clothing to the bone and as we walked across its floor the crampons creaked as they bit into the hard packed surface.

Bivouacing at Register Rock was more of a wait for daylight than a place for rest, sleepy as we were. The night was spent in hovering over the stove, and watching the Aurora Borealis which had appeared again, while below the lights of Sunrise and Paradise Inns flickered invitingly.

As the eastern horizon grew light we scraped the ice from the inner sides of our boots and pried them on. The descent to Camp Misery was full of interest as we moved around the crevasses and occasionally looked down upon a very greatly broken up Ingraham Glacier. Down the Chutes, past Gibraltar and on to Camp Muir we found our way unobstructed. Pleased with the success of our adventure, but with our thoughts reliving the experiences of Willis Wall, we arrived at Paradise Inn sixty-eight hours after leaving Cataract Creek.