

Mount Rainier on Skis

SIGURD HALL

WHEN SPRING is near with its longer days and more dependable weather, a skier gets that hankering to see what is beyond the ridge. Ski trips, both cross country and climbing, have proved most interesting. Outstanding among a number of these were ascents of several of the major peaks of Washington. With this urge of the spring, it was almost inevitable that an attempt should be made on Mount Rainier.

The only routes worth considering for a ski ascent were the Tahoma Glacier on the west side, probably too steep to be practical, the Ingraham on the east, also probably too steep and hard to reach, and the Emmons on the northeast. The latter had been the scene of the previous attempts and it was only logical that this route should be attempted again. The failure of the previous parties had been due to bad weather and poor snow conditions.

We also had our troubles with the weather man. On several weekends in the fore part of the summer we had had a party ready for the assault, but Saturday would come with dark clouds and rain, calling off the trip. Finally, Saturday, July 1, 1939, dawned with a clear sky, but our party of skiers had dwindled to two, Andy Hennig and myself, so we joined forces with a crampon party led by Larry Penberthy. When we checked in at White River Ranger Station at 10:30 Saturday morning, the ranger looked with some distrust at our skis. However, as we also had crampons and ice axes, he checked us through.

Inter Glacier was reached in two hours. After giving our skis a good coat of Asthve Klister, we made our way up Inter Glacier in easy traverses, reaching Camp Curtis about six in the evening.

Anticipating hard crust in the morning, we changed our wax to Ostbye Skare and after eating went to bed. A gale was blowing off the mountain and some high thin clouds did not look too promising for the morning. However, the weather was unchanged when we broke camp at 3 A.M., two hours after

Penberthy with his party had left. Scrambling down the ridge, skis on our backs, we were on the Emmons Glacier where our real ascent was to start.

The glacier from Steamboat Prow to about 11,500 was just a series of rain troughs with a crevasse cutting through occasionally. Climbing was slow but not especially tiresome. Andy had trouble with his binding and finally took off his skis, putting on crampons. Thus, I was the only skier. We crossed the ice fall in the middle of the Emmons at about 12,000 feet. Here Penberthy and his party were having lunch. We stopped also, had lunch, and watched a very beautiful sunrise. However, it was becoming more apparent that a change in weather was near. After giving our skis another coat of Skare, we pushed on. From this point we made a gradual uphill traverse toward the Winthrop Glacier and, zig-zagging, hit the saddle where the Emmons and Winthrop glaciers flow together.

The last two thousand feet were the most difficult. The slope was too steep and the snow too hard to use the climbing surface of the ski. I had to jab in the steel edge two or three times, take a step and do it all over again. However, the edges proved their usability. Not once did they slip. Upon reaching the saddle it seemed we might still miss our goal. A large crevasse virtually cut the glacier from the summit snow field. We finally found a narrow bridge and entered the summit field. From there to Columbia Crest we climbed on verglass with a trace of new snow on top. Progress was very slow the last three hundred feet, but finally we arrived at the rim and looked over the crater. The mountain had been conquered on skis!

Upon signing the register we found our party to be the first of the year on Columbia Crest. While resting and eating lunch at a hot spot inside the crater we saw the cloud cap forming high above us. Heeding this warning, we donned our crampons (skiing was impossible) and hurried down to get over the crevassed area while visibility was good. As we went down over the saddle the cloud cap settled on the mountain, bringing snow driven by an icy wind. Andy and I had counted on the snow to soften below the saddle, but the thin clouds had taken the intensity out of the sun and the snow condition was unchanged from the morning, so we continued down on crampons to about 12,000 feet, where we put on our skis. By now visibility was practically zero. In slow traverses we ran down to base camp at Camp Curtis. As it was now raining hard, our packs were made ready in record time. In spite of the weather we had a fine run down Inter Glacier to Starbo. There we waited for the rest of the party and reached the cars at White River Camp at 7:45—tired but happy.
