

The DENVER WESTERNERS

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TRAGEDY ON LONGS PEAK

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East Face of Longs Peak in late spring

TRAGEDY ON LONGS PEAK

by

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One of the saddest events in my life was climbing to the upper stretches of Longs Peak to help bring down the body of a very dear friend. Miss Agnes Vaille, a strong sturdy woman, active and experienced climber of the Colorado Mountain Club, had lost her life three days earlier in a winter climb of the East Face of Longs Peak. She and Walter Kiener, an experienced Swiss alpinist in this country only a year and a half, started for the East Face from Enos Mills' Timberline Cabin about 9:00 o'clock on Sunday morning, January 11, 1925. The day was mild and pleasant when they started, but as they were well up toward the summit, a strong wind came up and the temperature dropped far below zero. They climbed all day and night, reaching the summit about 4:00 A. M. Monday. On the descent down the north face Agnes slipped, fell and rolled more than 150 feet down a steep stretch of that face and landed in a snow bank near the eastern tip of the snowfield known in the summer time as "The Dove" from its resemblance to a flying bird.

Here, after traveling a short distance farther, she was completely exhausted, her fingers were frozen, and she was unable to continue on. Kiener got her beside a large rock, sheltered somewhat from the strong wind, then went on alone to meet a rescue party which he felt sure would have come up to Timberline Cabin. Twenty four hours had elapsed since they started the climb and he also was badly frost-bitten and near exhaustion, but made it to the cabin where rescuers had arrived not long before.

Perhaps not long after Kiener left her, Agnes started on but went only a short distance, fell forward on her face, arms stretched forward, and probably quickly became unconscious and perished. This is how we of the rescue group found her. Briefly this is the story of their fourth and tragic attempt to climb the East Face. But now I want to go into the whole story, the drama and experiences of preceding attempts before the successful but fatal climb, attempts with which I am thoroughly familiar and in one instance had a small part.

One day in October 1924 Agnes and Walter started their first attempt at climbing the East Face. They did not have an ice axe with them and soon realized the hard snow and ice would be difficult and dangerous to proceed on without one. Therefore they gave up the attempt and retreated.

A few weeks later near the middle of November, Agnes phoned me and asked to borrow my ice axe. Now for a first person account.

"Agnes," I said, "You're not going to try to climb again, surely?" Agnes, "Yes we are." Carl, "Don't do it Agnes, you know how quickly storms can come up in winter and temperatures drop precipitously." A., "I think we can do it." C., "You probably can but I don't think it wise to try in winter. If you wait until late spring or early summer you will still have as much snow and ice to contend with, but much less chance of bad storms."

My entreaty did not dissuade her and I then contacted Walter Kiener. My efforts and arguments were no more effective with Kiener than with Agnes. He insisted they would go ahead with their plans. After this rebuff by Walter, I called up Agnes again. I knew that she was aware that I had climbed the Face two years previously and was familiar with the route.

C., "Agnes, I know you and Walter are adamant about going, but would you object if I went along? I think the three of us have a better chance of success than just two." A., "I'd be delighted if you would come along."



Miss Agnes Vaile

So the die was cast. On Sunday morning November 16 the three of us started our climb. The day was sunny, mild, with practically no wind. When we reached the long steep snowbank extending down from near the upper slopes of Mt. Meeker to the foot of the cliffs of Longs' East Face (usually called Mills Glacier) we decided to ascend this to where it intersects Broadway, rather than to chop ice all the way up Alexanders Chimney. Broadway is the name by which the horizontal ledge about half way up and cutting across the east and north faces of Longs is known. It varies in width from a few inches to four or five feet and is a good ledge from which to attempt various routes on the upper slopes of that part of the peak.

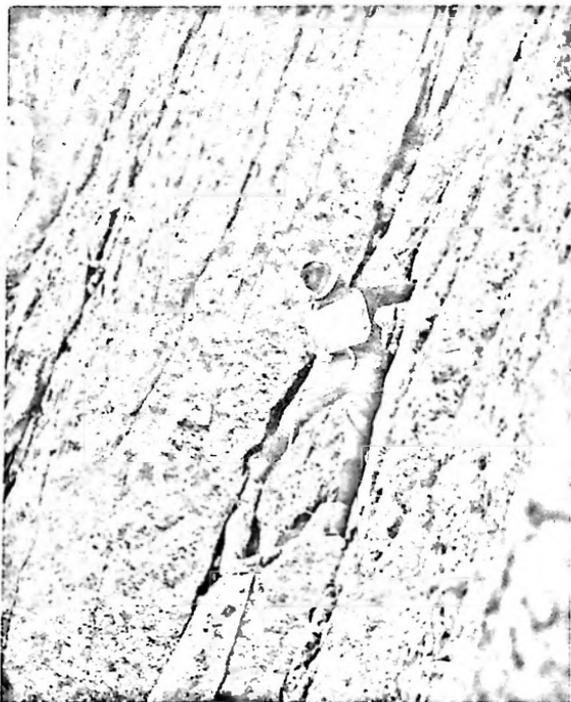
We proceeded uneventfully along this ledge until we reached the long snowbank that reaches down to Broadway from the "Sharks Mouth," a gash visible from Estes Park. We found this snowbank was covered with several inches of powder snow lying on top of crusted packed snow underneath. This seemed to indicate potential avalanche danger to us, so rather than crossing this to reach the cliffs on the other side, which is the usual route, we decided to go directly up the cliffs on the east side of the Notch.



Aerial view of East Face showing route most often used

Picking most likely looking chimneys, or couloirs as they are called, we ascended these cracks to upper ledges, working our way ever higher toward the summit ridge. Finally when about 50 feet from the top ridge we were stymied by a smooth granite wall on which we could not find footholds or handholds by which to continue. As it then was 5:00 o'clock and beginning to get dark, we decided to give up and climb back off the Peak. After descending one or two ledges lower we found ourselves on a ledge quite a distance above Broadway. As it was now dark we could not discern our footprints on the Broadway snow, nor could we decide which was the chimney we used in climbing up hours before. We wanted to be sure to descend that same one because if we tried an unknown one in the dark we might get down part way and find it impossible to go farther, and perhaps have difficulty climbing back up. Besides, a slight wind had come up which blew snow up the chimneys and into our faces as well as obscuring the character of the chimney.

Knowing that a nearly full moon was due to rise and shine on our location about 9:00 P.M. we decided to wait it out on this ledge and eat what little food we had. We knew that by moonlight we could identify the couloir we had ascended. I have forgotten what we had to eat, probably a sandwich or two and maybe an orange. I do recall that the water in my small canteen was frozen so we had no liquids.



Ascending Alexanders Chimney

After the moon rose we readily identified our chimney and roped down it without incident. Once on Broadway our difficulties were behind us. We had only to follow its snowy ledge to Mills Glacier, slide down that to the base and follow the trail back to Timberline Cabin for more food and a rest.

After a short stop at the cabin we proceeded down to our car and headed for Denver, arriving around daybreak just in time to clean up, change clothes, and go to work. In view of this abortive attempt I told the others I would not make another try in the winter, but if they waited until spring I'd be glad to go again with them.

In December the urge to try came again and once more they headed for the Peak. This time the weather turned bad before they reached Broadway. The attempt was given up and they returned to Denver.

On Saturday January 10, 1925 Agnes and Walter Kiener left Denver, taking Miss Elinor Eppich along, and arrived at Timberline Cabin about 3:00 A. M. This gave them only a few hours rest before daylight under conditions in which they could get no sleep.

At 9:00 A. M. Walter and Agnes left the cabin for Chasm Lake and Elinor left shortly thereafter for Longs Peak Inn to await the climbers return. Thus the fourth, successful but tragic, trip began. As I have already described the climb, I will now relate the subsequent efforts at rescue.



Climbing on the face below Broadway

After twenty-four hours had elapsed with no word from the climbers, Elinor became quite concerned and at 9:00 A. M. phoned Mrs. Enos Mills at Estes Park. Mrs. Mills contacted Herbert Sortland, caretaker of the Inn, Jacob Christian, Hugh Brown and his son Oscar, all of whom worked for the Inn. The four of them soon left for Timberline Cabin for the rescue.

At 1:00 P.M. Elinor phoned her father in Denver, who contacted several Mountain Club members. Edmund Rogers and Roger Toll shortly thereafter left for Estes Park. A little later on Carl Blaurock, William Ervin, and George Barnard also started for the Park in Barnard's car. At dark this party reached Lyons and phoned Longs Peak Inn. We received word that Kiener had arrived at Timberline Cabin and met the rescue party. He informed them that Agnes was alive but exhausted and that he had left her in a sheltered place on the Boulder Field. Immediately Hugh Brown, Christian, Sortland, and Kiener started up the trail for Agnes. Upon receiving the above information from Elinor, our Barnard party returned to Denver as it seemed that all was well on the mountain.



Traversing snow on Broadway

Meanwhile, Edmund Rogers and Roger Toll, having reached Estes Park, started up the road for the Inn. After bucking considerable snow they abandoned the car and walked the final four miles, arriving at the Inn about 11:50 P.M. This was just after Christian and Brown had come down from Timberline Cabin with news of Agnes' death. (More about this farther along.) At 12:45, and carrying food for all those at the cabin, Edmund and Roger started up the trail, arriving at the cabin about 4:30 A.M.

At Timberline Cabin they found Walter Kiener, Tom Allen, Jack Moomaw, and Walter Finn. Allen was Assistant Superintendent of the Park and Moomaw and Finn were Rangers. They had gone up Monday afternoon immediately after Elinor had phoned Allen Monday noon. High winds by now had come up which made traveling above timberline very uncomfortable and difficult.

The first rescue party that went to the cabin when alerted by Mrs. Mills arrived there only a short time before Kiener walked in. This party and Kiener immediately started back up for Agnes in the face of severe winds and snow. Oscar Brown was to remain at Timberline Cabin to keep a fire going. In about half a mile at a point just

above the last timber, Hugh Brown found he could not continue so turned back to the cabin. He sent his son down to the Inn to report Kiener's story while he remained at the cabin. It was the son's report to Elinor that she passed on to the Barnard party when we phoned her from Lyons, which resulted in our returning to Denver.



Traversing a ledge on the Face

After proceeding about a mile, Sortland found he could not go on against the severe storm and turned back with the intention of going down to the Inn. He never reached it. Somehow he stumbled into a ravine and died, the windblown snow covering his body which was not found until late spring when the snow had melted away. This left only Christian and Kiener to continue the rescue attempt.

They had a very difficult time proceeding in the wind and severe cold and finally reached Agnes about 4:00 or 4:30 P.M. She had gotten up and apparently tried to go on but in her exhausted state only went about 100 feet or so, fell forward face down and perished. At this discovery Kiener almost collapsed. After all he had been out continuously for more than 30 hours without rest or sleep and was ready to drop from

exhaustion. It was with great difficulty that the strong Christian was able to keep him going and get the two of them back to the cabin.—really a super-human effort.

They arrived at the Cabin about 7:30 P.M. where they found Hugh Brown waiting. The National Park men arrived there about 10:00. Shortly thereafter Brown and Christian departed for the Inn where they carried the story of Agnes' death which was then broadcast over the press wires.



Strolling along on Broadway

Edmund Rogers and Roger Toll, reaching the Cabin about 4:30 A.M., found Kiener and the Park men there. They decided to wait until 9:00 o'clock and then, if the wind did not abate, they would go down as it would be impossible to go on for the body. About 10:00 o'clock they started for the Inn.

Tuesday morning we in Denver awoke and learned the story of the tragedy in a story spread on the front page of the Rocky Mountain News. Later that morning, Blaurock, Ervin, and Barnard returned to Estes Park in one car, and James G. Rogers, Richard Hart, and, I believe, Henry Toll went in another. Mr. Haberl of the Stanley Hotel invited the entire group to stay there at no cost, an invitation that we thankfully accepted.



Scene along Broadway

On Tuesday afternoon and Wednesday a search party of 13 men went to Timberline Cabin and beyond to the point where Sortland turned back, and searched a large area below timberline for clues of him. They searched all possible shelter and some deserted cabins but found no trace.

Late Wednesday afternoon, the Denver contingent plus the Park personnel and some others went to Longs Peak Inn for the night hoping the storm would abate and that we could go up for Agnes on Thursday. Fortunately in the morning the wind did die down and with skis and a toboggan the entire group, except Hart, started up the trail about 5:00 A. M. Timberline Cabin was reached about 3 hours later and we found there was practically no wind even above timberline.

Progress up the trail was slow as each of us was heavily loaded with clothes, food, skis and other rescue paraphernalia. After a short stop at the Cabin we went on, hauling the toboggan, and spreading out over a wide area searching for Sortland as we advanced. Bill Ervin and I were the first to reach Agnes' body at 13,300 ft. elevation about noon. In a short while the rest of the party arrived. The toboggan was left at the edge of the Boulder Field for later use.

Skis were lashed together, with ski poles crosswise for carrying the body which was then lashed to the skis. With 6 persons at a time carrying the outfit we returned to the toboggan where Agnes was lashed to it for transporting down the trail to the Inn. Timberline Cabin was reached about 4:15 P. M. and the Inn two hours later. There we found Edmund Rogers had arrived with Otis Weeks, brother-in-law of Agnes. Most of the party then returned to Estes Park for the night and Weeks accompanied the body to Denver in a car furnished by the Transportation Company.



Climbers viewed from above

Walter Kiener had been sent to a hospital in Denver on Tuesday. He eventually had to have one or more joints of each finger amputated, except for the right index finger which remained whole. In addition all the toes on one foot and half of those on the other foot had to be removed. For quite a while after his recovery he worked in the Park on botanical research and spent many days on Broadway in such work. He, too, passed on many years ago.

What a price to pay for a stubborn and, I think, foolish venture! Two lives lost and a crippled survivor. Tremendous endurance and courage were demonstrated throughout by many persons, and Kiener's efforts alone were almost superhuman. Courage and stubbornness are one thing and can be admirable, but it is regrettable in this instance that they were not tempered by better judgment. Agnes Vaile was a woman of great persistence and will-power and whatever she undertook she usually carried through in spite of all obstacles. At only 35 years of age, her death was a great loss to the community and to her friends.

