

The Bugaboo-Howser Watershed, Purcell Range

J. MONROE THORINGTON

ACROSS the Columbia River at Spillimacheen, above a line of slender, waving poplars, rises the range of mountains within the forks of the Salmon, all powdered with fresh snow, Mt. Ethelbert towering above the rest. Kingfishers dart in and out among the reeds at the river's bank, and a giant hawk circles lazily in the azure sky.

It is the morning of June 22nd, 1933, on which my wife and I, with Conrad Kain and his nephew, Isidor, are leaving for the Bugaboo Group. The river being in flood, transportation on the Kootenay Central Railroad has come to complete standstill because of washouts, and the air is torn by recurrent concussions as log-jams are dynamited.

Opposite, on the western bank of the Columbia, a canyon of brownish rock forms the mouth of Spillimacheen River, coming from its faraway northern sources in the Purcells, and meeting the main river in an acute upstream angle. Across a shoulder of jackpines, a depression marks the valley of Bugaboo Creek, almost at the place where it is joined by the Rockypoint stream.

Following the old road, gradually rising, we eat lunch by the bridge at Driftwood Creek, whose swift, dark waters suggest lurking trout, and camp that night fourteen miles out on the Bugaboo stream. Gophers squeak as we pitch our tents, and appetizing odors from the fire give promise of an alluring grub-pile. A dome-like hillock of ancient, tree-covered moraine upstream would have been a perfect site for a Rhine castle; but here is only wilderness, with battlements of snow-clad ridges spread across the sunset.

Next morning we walk ahead of the packtrain, passing an old cabin from which scuttles a surprised and indignant porcupine. The trail is bordered by forget-me-nots and columbine. On a rise, grass-snakes are sunning themselves on flat plates of rock and slither off in the underbrush. A young black-tail buck with velvety horns stands as if petrified in the burned timber. Further on, in a glade of emerald leaves, a brown mother-bear with her coal-black cub play in the dappled patches of sunlight, rushing

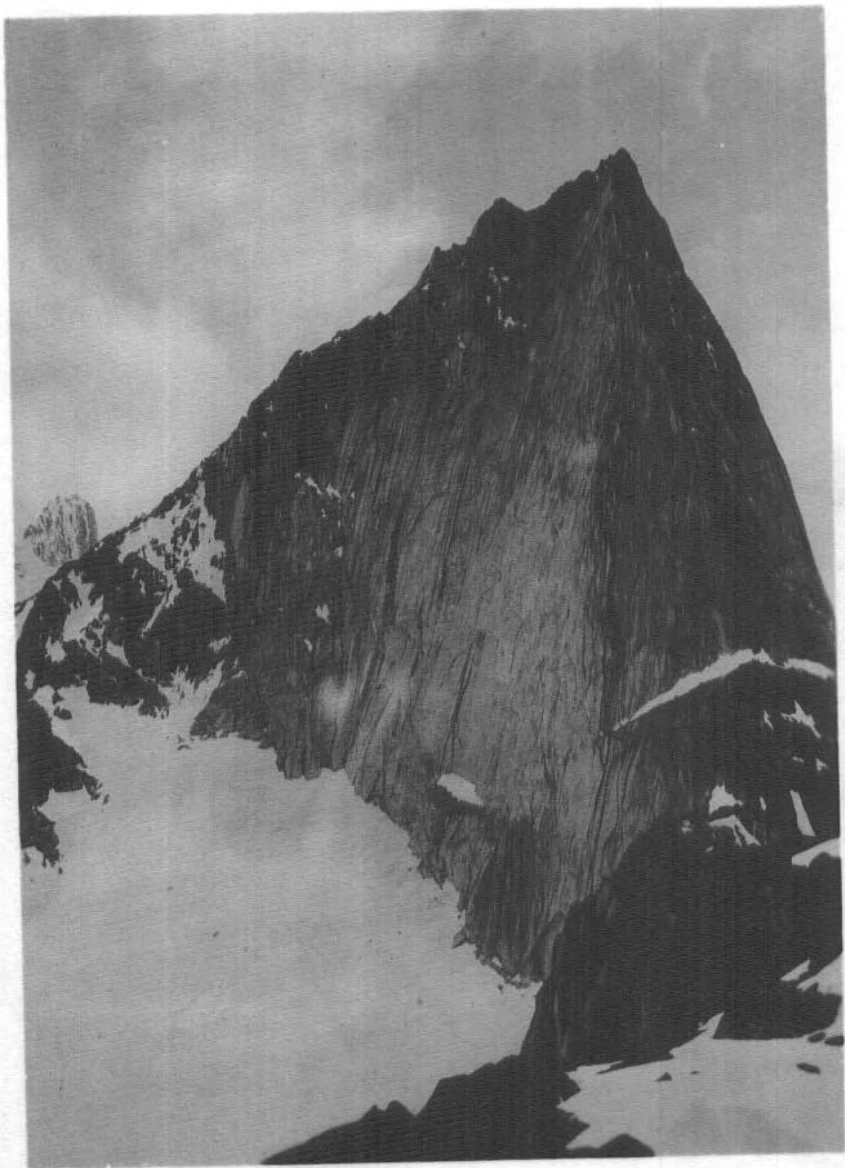


Photo J. M. Thorington

BUGABOO SPIRE FROM THE NORTHEAST

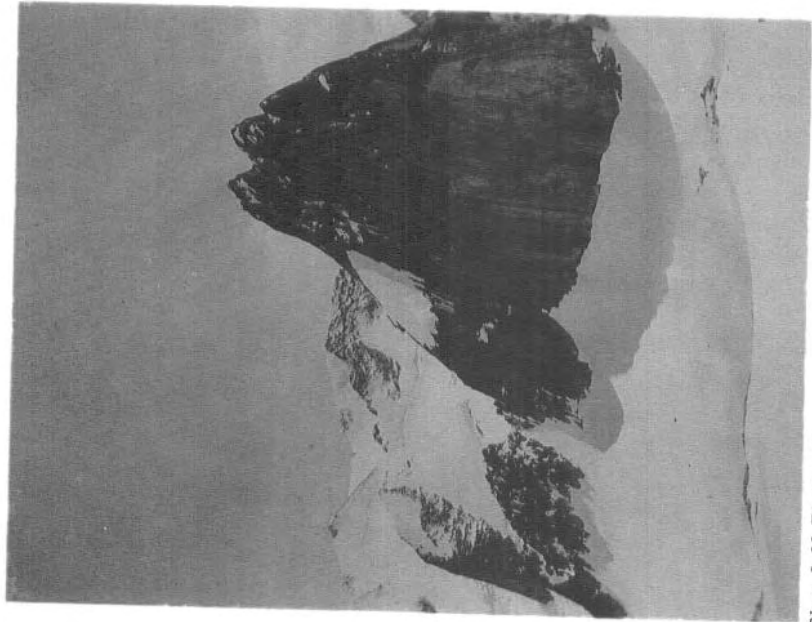


Photo J. M. Thorington

HOWSER PEAK, MARMOLATA AND SNOWPATCH SPIRE
FROM CRESCENT SPIRE

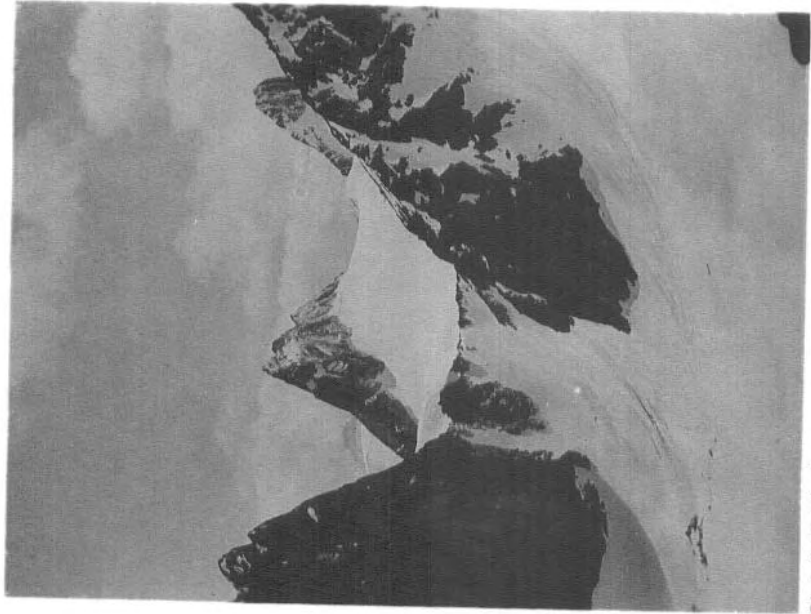


Photo J. M. Thorington

PIGEON SPIRE AND SOUTH TOWER OF HOWSER SPIRE
SEEN THROUGH THE SNOWPATCH. BUGABOO, COL.

into the thicket on catching sight of us, their pads leaving broad depressions in the mud.

Twenty miles from the Columbia, a curious dike of rock is severed by the course of the stream, and Rockypoint Creek enters from the north. The line of the valley now swings to a south-westerly direction, and glaciated peaks come into view.

Indians and prospectors were the first to come this way, but the mineral claims proved to be little else than a "Bugaboo." There are many cabins near the sources of the stream, built in the "rush" of 1906; but they are rotting to pieces now and thick moss covers the broken logs. A lumber company built a road through the lower part of the valley some ten years later, but fire rendered much of the timber valueless.

Climbers in the Rockies long ago reported a group of needle-like peaks far off in the west,¹ and a near view of them was obtained by Longstaff and Wheeler while crossing the Purcells in 1910,² their route leading them from the Columbia through Bugaboo and Howser Valleys to Duncan River, revealing the unusual character of the towering spires adjacent to this portion of the watershed.

Conrad Kain, who took part in this expedition, returned with A. H. MacCarthy in 1916, ascending the loftier spires of the group immediately north of Bugaboo Pass.³ O. E. Cromwell, with Peter Kaufmann and Conrad Kain, climbed several of the remaining peaks in 1930.⁴

No detailed map accompanied any of the published descriptions and the topography of the area remained obscure. Wheeler, in 1910, occupying camera stations along Bugaboo Creek, was hampered by bad weather and did not complete the work, owing to the difficulty of connecting with his former stations in the Dogtooths and Selkirks.

About seven miles above Rockypoint Creek, Bugaboo Valley forks, a western branch coming from Bugaboo glacier, some three

¹ From Mt. Victoria they lie to the right of Mt. Huber, between the north tower of Goodsir and Chancellor.

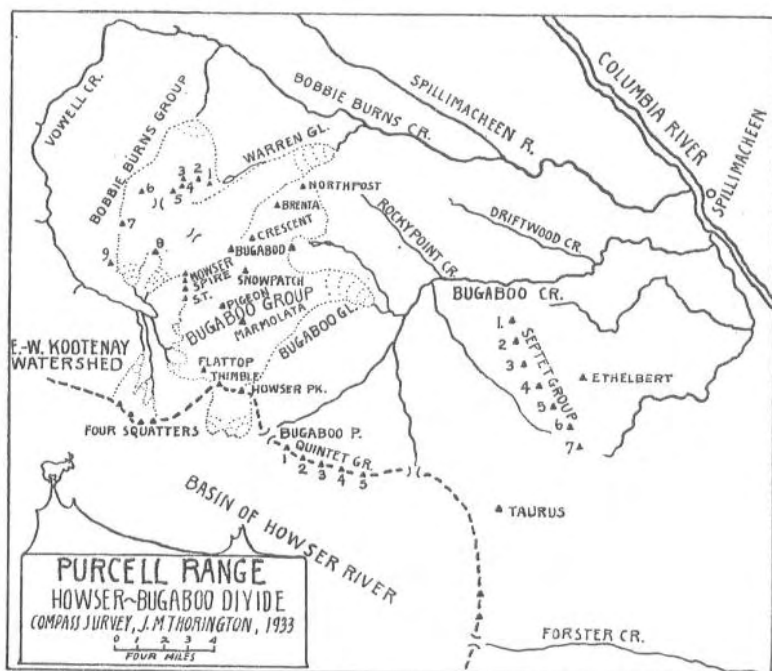
² Longstaff, T. G., "Across the Purcell Range of British Columbia," *G. J.*, xxxvii, 589; *C. A. J.*, iii, p. 26.

Wheeler, A. O., "Expedition to the Spillimacheen Mountains—Phototopographical Surveys," *G. J.*, xxxvii, p. 601.

³ MacCarthy, A. H., "The Howser and Bugaboo Spires, Purcell Range," *C. A. J.*, viii, p. 17.

⁴ Cromwell, E., "In the Bugaboo Group," *A. A. J.*, i, p. 296.

miles further on, and a longer southwestern stream swinging down from Bugaboo Pass on the watershed. A large cabin, still kept in good condition by prospectors, is situated at the forks. Trail distance from the Columbia to Bugaboo glacier is said to be thirty miles.



The logging road had now come to an end, and the packtrain caught us up. A faint trail wound through the timber, often crossing the stream, with stagnant pools reddened by iron stain. Marginal willows, until recently bent into the water by the weight of spring snow, flaunted a metallic lustre. The glacier and its icefalls seemed stupendous in the evening light, suddenly in view with spires shooting up from the snow in steeped sheerness. We made camp in a small clearing among the jackpines.

The Bugaboo Group culminates in Howser Spire (10,950 ft.),⁵ a broad jagged peak, with its magnificent detached south tower

⁵ Elevations given are chiefly MacCarthy's aneroid readings and are subject to revision.

nearby. Howser Peak (10,244 ft.) lifts a massive snowy pyramid further south and forms the northern buttress of Bugaboo Pass (7,160 ft.), by which the main watershed is crossed to Howser Creek. Between Howser Peak and Howser Spire are the lower Thimble and Flattop Peaks. Marmolata (Center Peak), Pigeon, Snowpatch and Bugaboo (10,250 ft.) Spires form an almost parallel line a short distance to the east. Northeast of Bugaboo Spire the group continues and terminates in three summits: Crescent, Brenta, and Northpost Spires. A large névé surrounds the peaks, extending fingers eastward between the frontal summits and giving rise to the chief glacial tongue draining to Bugaboo Creek.

Topographical problems immediately presented themselves: What was the relationship of the Bugaboo Group to other Purcell Peaks? Was Howser Spire on the main watershed; or did it follow the arrangement of other great summits, such as Jumbo and Farnham, in being placed on the eastern slope? There were rumors of fine mountains to the north, along Bobbie Burns Creek; we had seen them from the Rockies. Would they prove higher than the Bugaboos, and were there even more northerly Purcell Groups attaining elevations of 10,000 ft.?

On June 24th, Conrad and I ascended Howser Peak, already attained by the parties of MacCarthy and Cromwell, mounting the long snow-covered glacier and crossing the plateau to the peak's northern angle. From the summit certain things at once became clear.

Between Bugaboo Pass and Thimble Peak the westerly drainage is into Howser Creek. Westward from Thimble Peak, a low jagged ridge extends to the snowfield—a miniature ice-cap—embracing the massif of the Four Squatters, first reported by Wheeler. North of this ridge there is a deep basin into which Flattop, Howser Spire and, in fact, the entire northwestern corner of the group drains. We could see that the stream soon makes an acute bend to the north. It could be nothing but Vowell Creek,⁶ a large southern fork of Bobbie Burns Creek, draining to the East Kootenay slope. Thimble Peak is thus the local hydrographic

⁶ MacCarthy thought this basin contained the source of Howser Creek; but the course of the watershed is much more difficult to construct upon such an assumption, which implies gross error in the position of Vowell Creek on government maps.

apex, with slopes to Bugaboo, Howser and Vowell Creeks. Howser and Thimble Peaks are, therefore, the only two summits of the group located on the main watershed, Howser Spire and the remaining peaks lying east of it.

In tracing the Purcell watershed southward from the Dogtooths (as the Purcells within the Columbia-Beaver angle are called), there is a stretch from the Beaver-Duncan Pass and the head of Spillimacheen River to Howser Creek about which little is known, although it is doubtful whether any of its peaks attain an elevation of 10,000 ft.

The known portion of the watershed may, therefore, be said to begin at the Four Squatters, the highest point of which is 9,743 ft. Lying between Vowell and Howser Creeks, this massif sends several sizeable glaciers into the amphitheater of Vowell Creek, the watershed thence taking an easterly course to Thimble Peak. It now makes an abrupt turn to the south, crosses Howser Peak and descends to Bugaboo Pass.

We could look directly down into this saddle. A little further southeast on the watershed is a low glacial pass (7,100 ft.), from which is derived much of the water in the southwestern terminal fork of Bugaboo Creek. Between the two passes is the Quintet Group—five peaks, none of which rise much above 9,000 ft., although they are glaciated on their eastern slopes. The glacial pass, mentioned above, leads over to another branch of Howser Creek.

Indeed, in the succeeding arc of watershed as one continues south, Howser Creek presents its widest terminal ramifications. The elevations are unimpressive, 8,000-8,500 ft. About twelve miles southeast of Howser Peak is the mountain named Taurus (Wheeler), a black rock tower, just east of the watershed, apparently 10,000 ft. high. Three miles further south are two writing-desk wedges, somewhat above 10,000 ft., both of them on or near the watershed and having snowfields on their eastern slopes. Just south of these is a low pass, connecting branches of Francis and Howser Creeks, situated at the apex of the watershed arc, which now begins to swing to the southwest and contains a low pass between Howser Creek and the north fork of Horsethief Creek.

We looked with interest toward the east. Down Bugaboo glacier one saw the Septet Group (Longstaff)—seven peaks forming a curving range west of Mt. Ethelbert. None of them is on

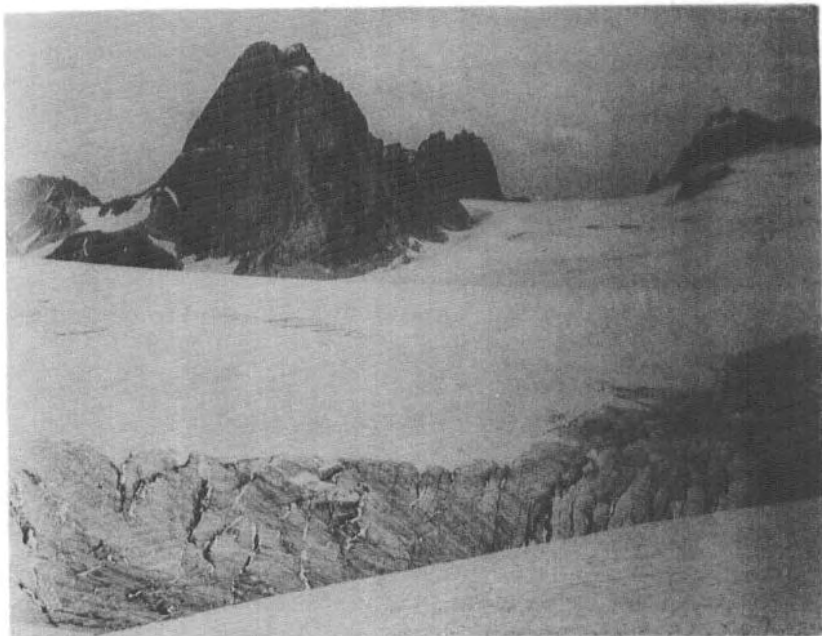


Photo I. A. Richards

BUGABOO, SNOWPATCH AND PIGEON SPIRES FROM NORTH



Photo I. A. Richards

PEAK 7, BOBBIE BURNS GROUP, FROM BASE OF BUGABOO SPIRE

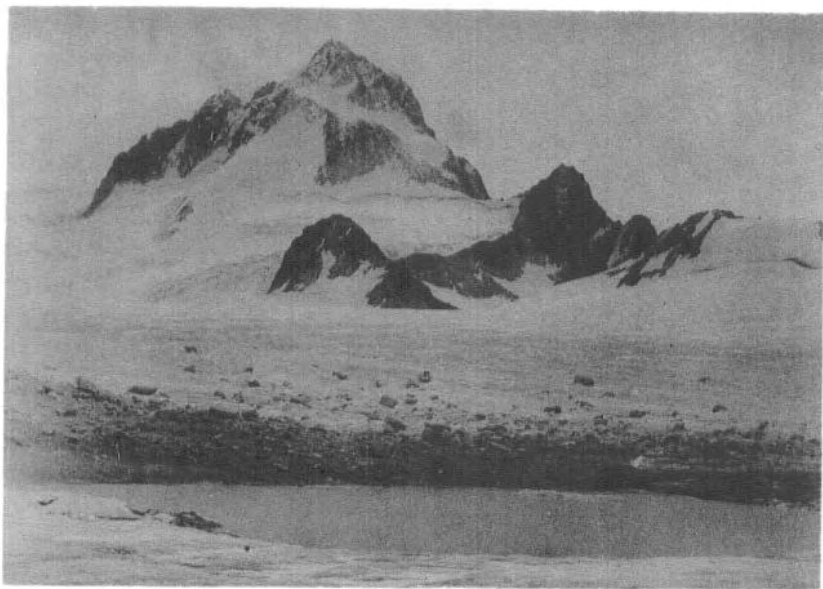


Photo I. A. Richards

HOWSER SPIRE FROM NORTH (WARREN GLACIER)

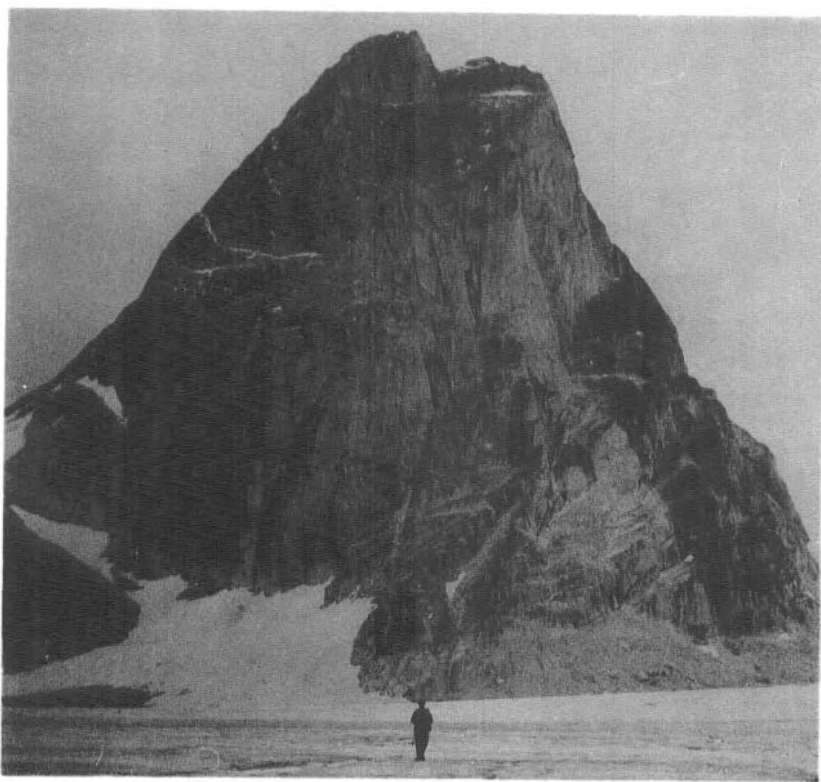


Photo I. A. Richards

BUGABOO SPIRE FROM WARREN GLACIER

the watershed, nor does any rise to 10,000 ft. They block the forks of the Salmon (Templeton and Dunbar Creeks) from reaching the main divide, and a long unnamed creek, winding through flat alpland, drains their western flanks into Bugaboo Creek, joining that stream half a mile above Rockypoint Creek.

Level readings within the Bugaboo Group were as follows: Pigeon $+1^{\circ}$; Bugaboo $+2^{\circ}$; Snowpatch -2° . Howser Spire remained in cloud. Relative elevations, therefore, in descending order, would seem to be: Howser Spire, Bugaboo Spire, Pigeon Spire, Howser Peak, Snowpatch Spire. The remaining peaks are lower than Snowpatch, which is not far from 9,700 ft.

On June 25th, my wife and I occupied ourselves by marking camera stations at the Bugaboo tongue. Camp being but half a mile from the terminal ice, a trail was soon cut. One-quarter mile from the glacier there is a wide arc of ancient terminal moraine, timber-covered and forming a rampart averaging twenty-five feet above the valley-floor. Several lower and less continuous morainal ridges intervene between this and the ice. The lateral moraines are of great size, and the tongue a century or more ago must have been extremely grand. A rectangular block, just on the north side of the stream's emergence, was painted with numerals 1933 in white, and will serve to record the position of terminal ice at that time.

While we walked several hundred yards up the tongue, a goat brought her kid to an alkaline lick in the silt and allowed us to approach to within thirty feet. In following days we were not favored with the best of weather for climbs, but enjoyed interesting experiences in stalking these quaint animals with our motion-picture camera. Apropos of shooting, Conrad created the high light of the summer by his remark to me: "Py Gott, Doc, dere is a helluva space around a goat!"

Conrad and I made an ascent into the northeast corner of the group on June 27th, following a goat-trail from the middle of the north lateral moraine into a snow basin where there are two small frozen lakes. Without great difficulty we were the first to stand upon the summit just northeast of Bugaboo Spire; it is about 9,400 ft. high, with two large gendarmes on its south ridge. Its position and shape suggest the name of Crescent Spire and, as a viewpoint, it is magnificent.

The sheer peaks of the group are close at hand, the smooth eastern walls of Bugaboo and Snowpatch Spires being especially impressive. Beyond Marmolata and the snowy shoulder of Howser Peak rose Farnham and Jumbo, across the head of Horse-thief Creek. A little northeast of us the slender Brenta Spire stood almost in line with the Goodsir Towers in the Rockies.

The peak on which we stood, lining up with Bugaboo, Brenta and Northpost Spires, forms a wall between Bugaboo glacier on the south and the larger parallel tongue of Warren glacier on the north, the latter draining through Warren and Bobbie Burns Creeks into the Spillimacheen. Up to the present time it has been almost unknown.

The northern margin of Warren glacier is formed by the Bobbie Burns Group, nine fine peaks,⁷ the highest of which (No. 7) may be above 10,500 ft. Though not as sheer as the Bugaboo towers, several of these will afford excellent climbing with intricate approaches.

A broad snow pass between Bugaboo Spire and Peak 5 leads over from Warren glacier into the basin of Vowell Creek, which drains the western side of Howser Spire. Between Peaks 5 and 6 a lower snow pass leads out of this basin toward the north, apparently to a névé that mantles the Bobbie Burns Group on that side and is conspicuously visible from the Lake Louise Mountains. Peak 7, the highest point, rises as a broad, symmetrical mountain in the center of this glacial system.⁸

Below Peak 1, on the north moraine of Warren glacier, there is a frozen lake. It is quite possible that the eastern peaks of this group are those whose summits are visible as one looks south from Parson station in the Columbia Valley. It is likely that they form the most northerly group of Purcell Peaks attaining elevations above 10,000 ft.

⁷ Mr. Wheeler's excellent photographs, kindly placed at our disposal, have been of service in constructing the southern section of the sketch-map, the remainder being based on our own compass triangulation. The peaks of the Bobbie Burns group are indicated by number from east to west.

⁸ This peak was ascended in Aug., 1933, by Dr. I. A. Richards (A. C.), Mrs. Richards and Conrad Kain, in twelve hours by way of Bugaboo glacier. Dr. Richards writes: "I have certainly the impression that all the slopes of our peak drain—one way or another—into the Spillimacheen River." Descent was made by Warren glacier, the party bivouacking at the base of Peak 1, Bobbie Burns Group, and returning to camp on the following day by crossing alpland east of Northpost Spire. It proved to be Kain's last climb.

On June 28th we took the packtrain through fallen timber and swamps into the southwestern fork, camping at a cabin below the slopes of Bugaboo Pass. Light rain was almost continuous.

Two days later, Conrad and I climbed to the low glacial pass in the watershed south of us. But fog and snow-squalls came down, and we sat on a patch of shale listening to roaring streams in the Howser basin, with all landmarks blotted out—tantalizing, for we shall never be there again.

To say we saw nothing would be a mistake. In the very top of the pass there was a blue, ice-covered lakelet. A bear had come that way, neatly dodging a crevasse, and cautiously patting the ice from the shore outward until it was broken and he could slake his thirst. And, close behind, parallel, were the tracks of a wolverine. Their trails went over the hill, into the mist, soon to be blotted out by falling snow; not a sign of the animals themselves; not a sound save the plaintive chirp of a finch that followed us, and the distant rushing of water.

On July 2nd at Spillimacheen we parted regretfully from Conrad. For, as that teller of tales admits, "Vimmens lof to tell me of their unhappy marriages, and their experiences of true romantic lof!" And he in turn, confiding souls beware, had told us—well, things not quite relevant to the contours of mountains.