

The First Ascent of Mt. Rainier by Way of Liberty Ridge on Willis Wall

(September 28 - October 1, 1935)

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FOR years the north face of Mt. Rainier (Willis Wall and surrounding territory) has stood unconquered. The mere sight of it was enough for most men, although a number had had a secret ambition to sometime attempt it.

The great cirque forming the wall is bounded on the east by Curtis Ridge and, nearly a mile and a half to the west, by Ptarmigan Ridge. Liberty Ridge, rising up at nearly the center of the cirque, is even steeper than Ptarmigan or Curtis Ridges.

Nearly six years ago I had my first close view of this rugged and thrilling, avalanche-infested north face of Rainier. I wanted to climb it. Seeing it at various times afterward, I was intrigued still more. During the summer of 1933, I decided that I would try it.

In May, 1934, Bradford Washburn was making a flight around the mountain and so I asked him to take a picture of the Willis Wall region. Later, studying the big enlargement which he gave to me of the original, I picked out what I thought to be a possible route up Liberty Ridge.

It was not until September of this year that I was able to definitely plan this climb. Major O. A. Tomlinson, superintendent of the park, cooperated in every way possible. September was about the best time of the year we could have chosen, because avalanches are not nearly so numerous as during the summer season.

My two companions, Will H. Borrow, Jr., and Arnold Campbell, both of Seattle, were seasoned climbers. Our equipment was complete; ice-axes, crampons, 100 feet of climbing rope and 50 feet of $\frac{3}{16}$ -inch line, primus stove, $1\frac{1}{2}$ quarts of gasoline, blizzard tent, lights, compass, willow wands ($\frac{1}{4}$ -inch dowel trail markers, 3 feet long with the upper half painted black), goggles, warm but light clothing, and food for four days (enough for a week, if necessary).

¹ The writer was a member of Mr. Bradford Washburn's Yukon expedition of 1935.—*Ed.*

We were out to climb this north face, if it could be accomplished within a reasonable margin of safety.

Saturday afternoon, September 28th, we left Cataract Creek. Three hours later we stopped at 6500 ft. on Curtis Ridge, had our dinner, and prepared for the night with two sleeping bags for three men—a tight fit with little sleep for anyone.

Next morning, we climbed to 8500 ft. but had to lose about 800 ft. of elevation before we could get off the ridge onto the Carbon Glacier, which we finally gained at 8.30 A.M. From there on, we began to lay our willow-wand trail, the markers being set out every 100 ft. This trail was to be used in the event of our being overtaken by a storm.

The closer we came to Willis Wall, the more we were thrilled by its ruggedness and the roaring avalanches!

Travelling was good until about 11 o'clock, when we entered a badly crevassed and seraced area. Twice it was necessary to lose considerable elevation just when Liberty Ridge was all but within our grasp. Many times it was necessary to jump yawning crevasses, one of which was just made by the "skin of our teeth."

Finally, about 3 o'clock in the afternoon, we found ourselves 75 yards from our ridge. To get to it, however, it was necessary to pass down through a large crevasse, the floor of which was a mass of tumbled seracs. Beyond this, we had to cut a staircase up a 30-ft. wall of glare ice and then pass very painstakingly through the bottom of a narrow crevasse which widened out into another seraced area. On the further side was our ridge which we finally made after seven hours from Curtis.

Circling around to the right side of the ridge, we started our real ascent. The sides were very fortunately covered with hard-crusted snow. Without it, the route would have been almost impossible. Up and up we went; elevation was gained rapidly because of the steepness of the slope, which averaged from 40 to 50 degrees to about 70 degrees. At times, our course led up over almost vertical volcanic rock which was dangerous, being rotten and crumbly.

At 5.30 P.M. we had reached 11,000 ft. and decided that we had gone as far as we could for that day. With our ice-axes, we dug out and levelled off a spot in the ridge where we could spend the night. After supper of corn meal and beef stew, dates and tea, we crawled into our blizzard tent. We had no sleeping bags, having left them at our first night's camp, so we proceeded to put on all

of the extra clothes we could find. The night was a long one. The stars overhead were bright and the atmosphere was cold. At different times throughout the night, we became so chilled that we had to light the primus stove to help keep us warm. All night long the avalanches tumbled, cracked and roared. The next morning after breaking camp, we started up again.

Between 11,500 and 12,000 ft., we encountered one of the most difficult parts of the climb. The angle of the slope was about 60 degrees. On both sides were volcanic masses of crumbly rock and frozen mud. Under foot was about 6 inches of powdered snow on top of smooth glare ice. It took us three hours to cover less than 400 yards. Rising up out of this, we followed the rocks on the crest of the ridge for about 500 ft., when we again had to take to the snow. Since leaving 11,000 ft., the snow had gotten deeper until now we were breaking through to our knees and hips at every step. Floundering in deep snow on those steep slopes, made our progress very slow. Whenever it was possible, we tried to take advantage of the rocks. At 13,000 ft. we had gone up the ridge as far as was possible. Ahead of us rose vertical, impassable rock. To go to the right of the ridge would have meant to expose ourselves in the path of the avalanches from the icefall above. Our only course lay to the left, out on the steep glare ice flowing over onto Willis Wall, a drop from this point of over 3500 ft. In order to gain this, it was necessary to make our way up a vertical chimney of treacherous rock. As I left one set of foot and hand holds and went on to another, everything that I had been standing on gave way and went tumbling down the mountain. Borrow and Campbell were safely sheltered off to one side. Once the party had gained the ledge, we proceeded out onto the ice, where, because of the steepness, it was absolutely necessary to cut steps. Higher up, the ice was quite rough and our crampons held well without steps.

At 4.30 we stopped at 13,500 ft. and ate an apple apiece, the first food since breakfast except for a few small pieces of candy. Continuing on towards the draw separating the main icefall of Willis Wall from the one west of Liberty Ridge, our last problem confronted us. Two large crevasses extending from one side to the other, seemed to shut off any possible passage. We were facing success or failure. Coming up to the first crevasse, a crossing seemed impossible except for one point. Here, a snow finger hung down toward the lower lip, which I could just reach with my ice-

axe and cut out a step. My companions picked me up on one leg and threw me across. I grabbed in with my ice-axe and crampons. After levelling out a spot, I anchored and pulled the others over. The next crevasse, while it was larger than the first, did not offer any problem as we could go around the end. Success! All that lay between us and Liberty Cap was less than 800 ft. of unbroken ice and snow.

At 5.30 we stood on top of Liberty Cap, tired but happy. We had accomplished the main part of our objective. Off to the south lay Mt. St. Helens and Mt. Hood. The sun, a great ball of fire, hung low in the west. Looking to the east, we saw a shadow cast by the sun against Rainier. It was certainly a unique sight. It appeared to us as though we were standing on top of that shadow as it stretched its way far over into eastern Washington.

To get to Columbia Crest, we had to lose about 300 ft. of elevation, passing easterly down the ridge toward Russell Peak and into the col, a last climb of 800 ft. and a total distance of over a mile from Liberty Cap. Leaving the crest, we went down into the crater and headed for the east rim. Inside the crater, we encountered a very peculiar situation. Outside of the crater, the temperature was about 20 or 25 degrees above zero. Inside, the air was perfectly still and the temperature at least zero or colder—a pocket of zero-cold air. It was about 7 o'clock when we finally arrived at Register Rock on the east rim, 52½ hours since leaving our car over on the Carbon River—24½ hours actual climbing time.

We planned to make our descent by way of Gibraltar down into Paradise because the route of our ascent was difficult and would require considerably more time. And so we made our last bivouac on the east rim. It was so cold that it was necessary to burn the primus stove nearly all night long. Three times we melted snow and made hot milk, using Klim and a bit of sugar. Inside the blizzard tent, we had to take our shoes off to keep our feet from freezing. Dawn made its very welcome appearance between 5 and 6 o'clock, but it was after 6 before we finally got our frozen shoes on and were ready to go.

The descent was made in rather short order and at 10 o'clock we were making our reports at the Ranger Station. From Paradise, we made long-distance calls to announce our safe arrival and we were soon on our way to Seattle, three tired but happy climbers.