

American Skiers in China's Wild West

NED GILLETTE

DICK DORWORTH AMBLES slowly through the ancient streets. He is unescorted except for the usual ragtag army of street urchins. A young Moslem who is not Chinese stops him. Pointing at this black-bearded American, he asks, "Pakistan?"

"No," Dick answers, "American."

"American?"

"American," Dick reiterates.

Our inquisitive Uygur friend shakes his head in disbelief or non-comprehension, so Dick assures him again, "American."

The lad drops down in the dust of the street and draws a circle. On one side of the circle he draws a rough sketch of China and on the left outside edge he makes a dot and says, "Kashi." He makes a second dot on the opposite side of the circle and asks, "America?" Dick nods. Eyes grow wide with wonder.

The far west of China's Xinjiang (Sinkiang) Province, inhabited primarily by people closely related in race, language and Islamic faith to the Soviet Central Asians, is still officially closed to foreign tourists. Oil technicians from western countries have made brief stops in Kashi (Kashgar) previously on their way to the developing oil fields in southern Xinjiang. A Japanese film crew and Chris Bonington's British team reconnoitering for their climb of Kongur next year also have stopped here. But we are the first Westerners since "liberation" in 1949 to spend a significant amount of time in the streets of Kashi. Wherever we go during our ten-day stay we are followed by curious crowds of hundreds, feeling like Linda Ronstadt or Mick Jagger.

Flying from the United States to Beijing (Peking), then on through Urumqi (Xinjiang's capital) to Kashi has been a week-long journey back through time to innermost Asia. Permitted by the Chinese Mountaineering Association to be the first Americans to climb in China in 48 years (Terris Moore's 1932 ascent of Minya Konka was the last), we have

PLATE 28

Photo by Galen A. Rowell

**Kirghiz horseman and MUSTAGH
ATA, Western China.**



christened our *National Geographic* sponsored four-man, two-woman group the American Friendship Expedition. Our goal is to make the first ski descent of 24,757-foot Mustagh Ata located in the Chinese Pamirs.

Hirsute Dick Dorworth, former world speed skiing record holder, now writer and raconteur, is here as our super skier. When told that Dick's 1963 record was 171.428 kilometers per hour, our Chinese hosts, after brief computation, exclaimed, "That's faster than a train!" Galen Rowell adds important depth to our expedition. Jo Sanders coordinates our travel arrangements, a valuable member here where each small departure from a planned itinerary seems to take an act of the People's Congress. Cameron Bangs is our doctor. Refreshingly unsophisticated, Cam never did locate the elusive fortune cookie in all of China. Jan Reynolds teaches skiing back in her home state of Vermont. She accompanied me on a cross-country ski-coaching exchange to Heilongjiang Province in northeast China in February. It was on the basis of this success that we were able to secure permission to return to China for six weeks in June, July and August on our present expedition. My specialty is skiing in exotic places, adventure skiing.

Chu Yin Hua is our liaison officer assigned by the C.M.A. He has the appearance of a fighter who has taken one too many punches, but is shrewd and vibrant with an explosive, earthy laugh. He became a mountaineer in order to prove to himself stories heard from fellow lumbermen of ice 100 meters deep. Gone are all ten toes, lost to Mount Everest (Qomolangma) on the 1960 Chinese Expedition. One of three climbers reported to have made it to the top, he traded his toes for the honor of his country. "It was my duty to climb Qomolangma as given by Premier Zhou Enlai," he says. "I would have died rather than fail. Near the summit we could not climb the 'second step,' although we tried for five hours. It was too steep for our clumsy boots. I finally took them off so I could get closer to the rock."

We have worked hard raising in only two months the necessary money to come here. The Chinese are straightforward in saying that expeditions in their country will cost a lot—the government needs the foreign exchange. Our individual daily cost (90 yuan—about \$65) is far more than a Chinese worker earns in a month. We are in no hurry to rush directly to the mountain as our hosts would prefer. Through logical persistence we finally obtain permission to spend time in the streets of Kashi. Our entourage of government, sports federation and mountaineering association mucky muks usually outnumbers us two to one. Trying to give them the slip and escape officialdom becomes a good-natured game.

Dust blown by desert winds and stirred by hundreds of passing feet, hooves and wheels veils the setting sun, leaving the land bathed in soft mauve hues. Market day is drawing to a close in this Central Asian city pressed against China's sensitive far western frontier with the Soviet Union. Two boys sit in the road playing native chess with red and black

stones. Commuter traffic spanning the ages passes by in a chaos of color so different from the uniformity of Beijing: brightly dressed Uygur women on foot; long lines of camels tied together padding sedately to the clang of bells; two-wheeled wooden carts hitched to sturdy chop-stepping donkeys; well-used red tractors and an occasional olive-drab state-owned jeep or truck plowing forward, its driver leaning on the horn as if mere volume were enough to part the masses clogging the street.

During the past 2,000 years Chinese dynasties occasionally have extended their rule to the distant West, pushing back warring Huns, Mongols, Turks. Chinese influence in Kashi began in the second century B.C. when the great Han Emperor Wu Ti sent to Fergana in what is now the Soviet Union to procure "horses (that) sweat blood and originate from heavenly horses." Trade caravans followed. Commerce flourished in times of peace, which were frequently interrupted by civil strife and invasions. Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan and Tamerlane all fought for control of the strategic trade routes of Xinjiang. Emissaries and monks as well as merchants travelled the Silk Road between Cathay in the East and Persia and Rome in the West. Kashi's oasis, situated between the formidable wastes of the Taklimakan Desert and the icy peaks of the Pamirs and the Tian Shan, became a bustling emporium of diverse cultures and goods. Silk was the universal lodestone which drew the caravans between two worlds. Risk was high; many never completed the eight-year journey. But rewards were equally high; imperial silk exchanged in Rome for its weight in gold.

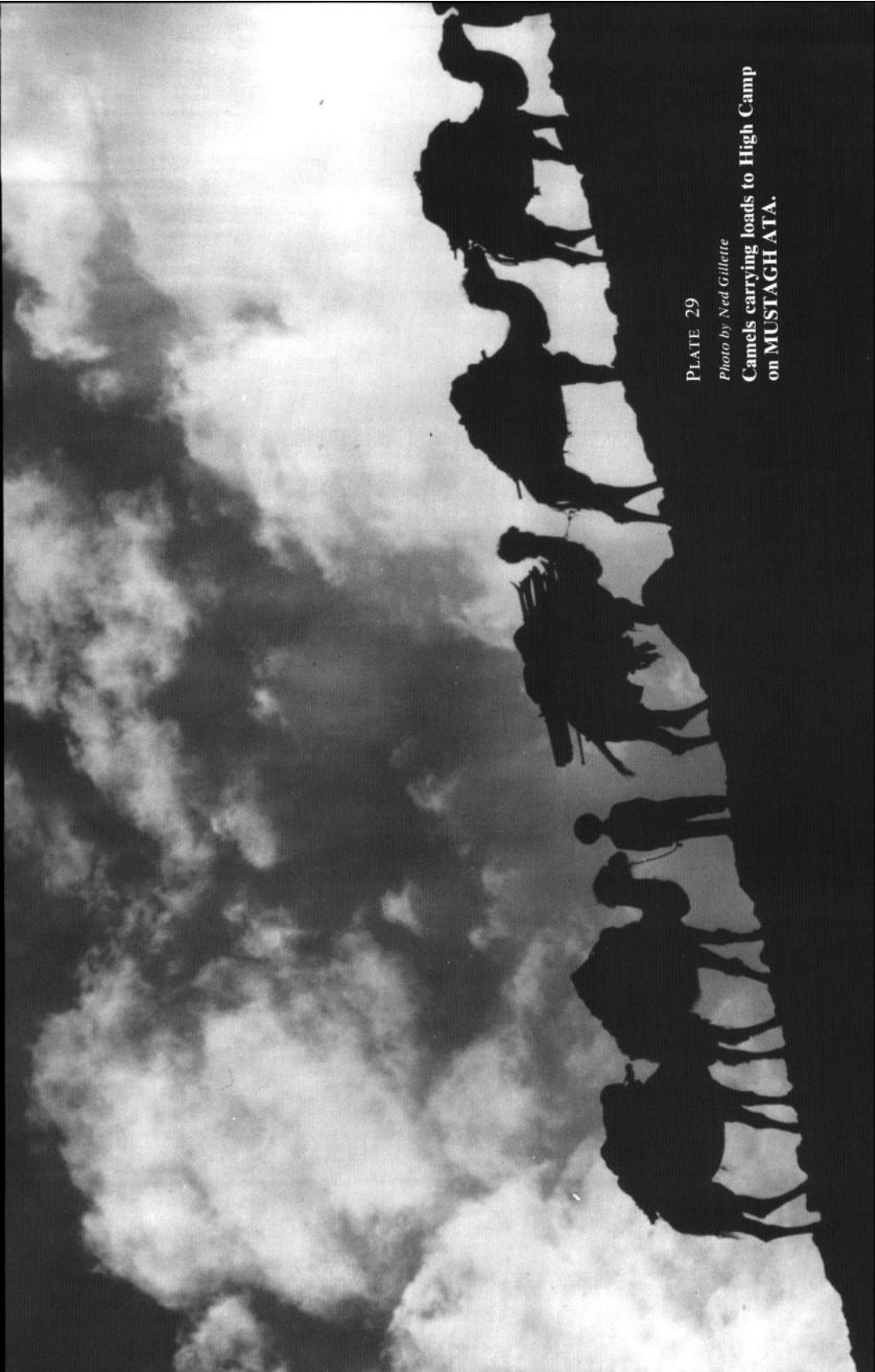
Today Kashi is still a melting pot of time and culture insulated from modern western influence. Thirty years ago its population numbered only 40,000; now it is 175,000, mostly Uygur. But the economy is still largely agricultural and the Uygurs still people of pleasant lethargy. In this moderate climate with plentiful water for irrigation, an easy living can be garnered from the fertile soil even without mechanization. For many the standard of living has been raised, and literacy has increased. The Chinese are proud of what they have accomplished on their frontier. The Chinese have put a substantial amount of effort into the city. Torn down is the fifty-foot wall once surrounding the center. Big, unimaginative edifices built in the 1950's house department stores, factories and administrative offices. Our hotel, the Welcome Guest House, is surprisingly comfortable, richly carpeted with bright, exquisite eastern rugs. Cameron and Dick share their bathroom with a resident frog. We consume endless bottles of "Xinjiang Pijou" brand beer in the 100° heat.

The protective hand of Mao Zedung sweeps over Kashi's Peoples' Park from his 100-foot-high concrete stance, the most prominent digit on the low skyline. Although they comprise little more than 5% of the population, the Han Chinese are in firm control of top positions in government, agriculture and industry. But the sense of the place is no way Chinese. We are on the eastern fringe of Islam. Seven of Xinjiang's

PLATE 29

Photo by Ned Gillette

Camels carrying loads to High Camp
on MUSTAGH ATA.



twelve ethnic groups are Moslem, including the Uygurs. But they carry their religion easily with little fanaticism. Although the Beijing government allows religion within central mosques, it discourages, sometimes strongly, worship in small mosques built by neighborhood religious leaders called *akhuns*. We saw several of these being constructed with great care. Many had been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960's. "Given the choice, we would prefer to have a country with our own flag—Eastern Turkestan," states one Uygur leader. "But that may be unrealistic."

Later at dinner we sit on well-worn carpets in worker-peasant Aziz Aysa's five-room house. Seven years old, it is flat-roofed and made of sun-dried mud bricks reinforced with straw—adequate, since only about three inches of rain fall a year. Aziz works at a large commune that grows more than 50 kinds of fruit. He owns his house. His bicycle, which costs 179 yuan (\$112), stands outside. He wears a watch. His family has lived here for many generations. He has six children: Minorities are not subject to the strict birth-control regulations that limit a Han family to one child. "*Aomin, Allah o Akbar*—Amen, God is Great. He has granted us this good meal." We have no hope of finishing the heaping bowls of noodles, vegetables and mutton. Peering village faces vie for position at the one window.

Our host is saying that, "Before Liberation, each family lived from a small plot. Four landlords owned most of the land surrounding our village of 1800 people. After Liberation, the people were gathered together and provided more free land to grow crops together."

En route to Mustagh Ata, our heavily-laden rented bus inches up the tortuous grade of the deeply notched Gez Defile. We are following the unpaved Karakoram Highway, today's version of the old Silk Road, 200 kilometers south into the high Pamirs. Marco Polo had travelled this same road over what the Persians called "The Roof of the World" 700 years before. The Pamirs, which include Mustagh Ata, are an intricate knot of icy peaks situated at the axis of the borders of China, the Soviet Union and Afghanistan. From this hub issue the greatest mountain ranges of the world: The Himalaya, Karakoram, Hindu Kush, Kun Lun and Tian Shan.

We are paying seven dollars a mile to eat dust. Bandanas tied over our faces make breathing a bit easier. Our unwieldy vehicle hangs on the outside edge of the roadbed which has been cut into steep rock walls, squeezing past recent landslides. At some stream crossings we toss rocks into the rushing water to avoid high centering, and push with locally recruited manpower to escape mud pits. Further on, a camel-powered road-grader levels the surface. As we lumber along, gaining altitude, the landscape is bleak and forbidding, largely empty of human habitation. In vain we have been scanning the mountainsides for wildlife: the elusive snow leopard, bear, wolf, ibex and Marco Polo sheep (*Ovis Poli*).

PLATE 30

Photo by Ned Gillette

**Driving Camels to Camp on
MUSTAGH ATA.**

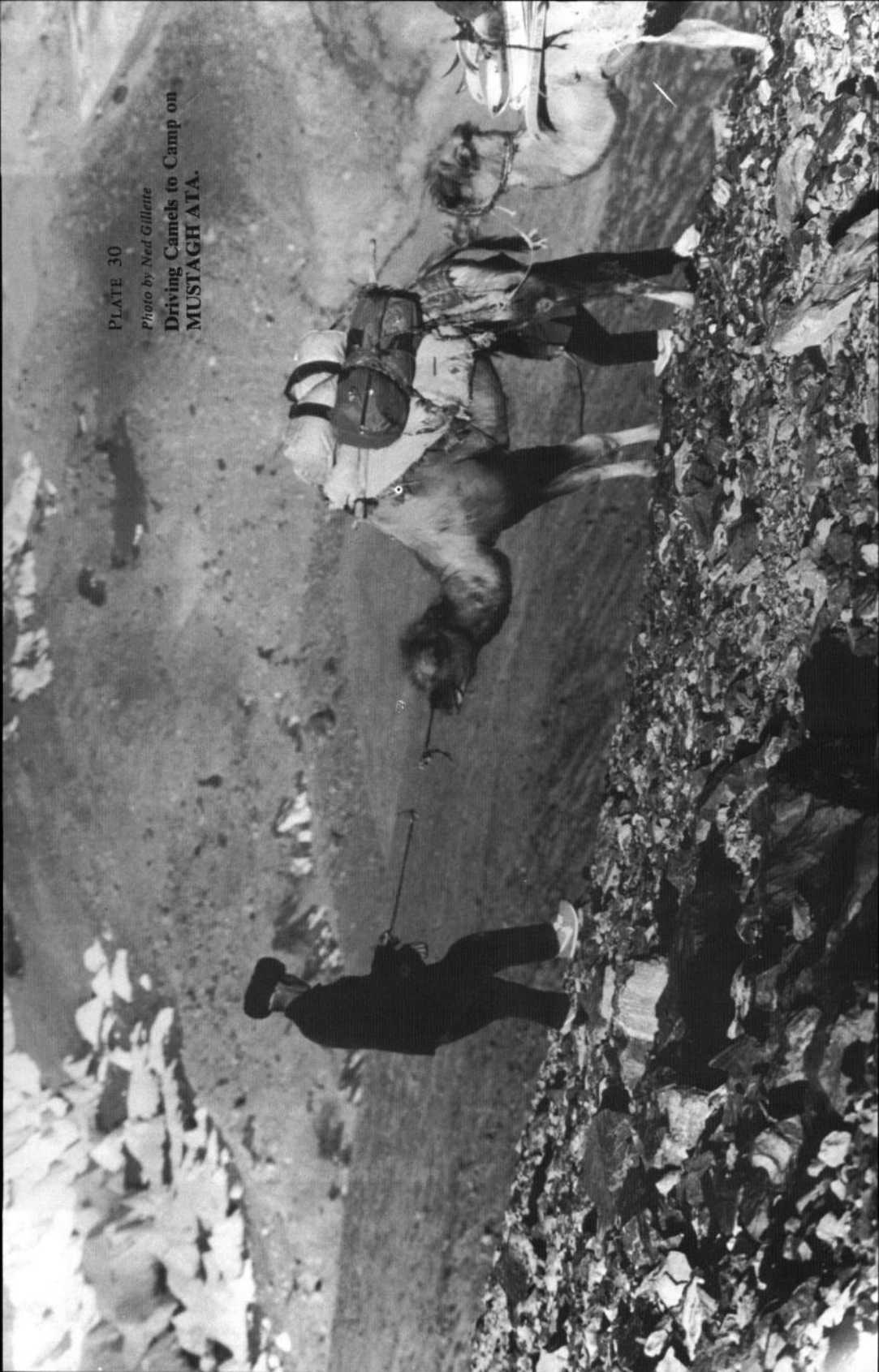


PLATE 31

Photo by Ned Gillatte

MUSTAGHATA.



Above 11,000 feet the highway flattens as we enter the Subashi valley. Of the eight major Pamirs, which mean high wide grassy valleys between mountains, this is the only one that is within China's boundaries. The road runs along within 20 miles of Soviet territory. The border is a hazy line of demarcation still in dispute. Perhaps one reason we are allowed here is to lend credibility and exposure to China's claim of sovereignty over this territory. American mountaineers have also climbed in the Soviet Pamirs close to the border. Marco Polo wrote of high valleys so lush ". . . that a lean beast there will fatten to your heart's content in ten days." Cresting a rise, such a place spreads before us. Meadows carpet the broad valley floor, dotted with purple and yellow flowers. Sheep and goats shepherded by Kirgiz graze by a meandering stream. The mud walls of the village of Subashi grace the far shores of Little Karakul Lake. Circular yurts, which provide summer shelter, sprout like giant mushrooms. Above barren brown hills and gigantic sand dunes hundreds of feet in height rise Mustagh Ata and Kongur Shan: massive, glacial laden, the highest of the Pamirs. Their alluvium fills the valley floors and their waters give life to the distant desert oases.

The splendor and peace of the summer landscape takes us by surprise. We have heard that the ceaseless winter winds are among the cruelest outside of the polar regions. A Kirgiz horseman races our bus. Dressed in black corduroy, high black boots and black wool hat, he gallops with ease. Our mechanical horsepower is no match for his at this altitude.

The Chinese have effectively incorporated the Kirgiz into the collective system. Though it is no longer possible to roam at will across political borders, old traditions persist. The Kirgiz are Mongolian in appearance but speak a Turkic dialect and write in Arabic script. They are now "settled" nomads. Subashi brigade or *Kishlak* (winter village) numbers 700 in 157 families. Seventy villagers still go out to *yeylaus*, or summer grazing grounds. The yurts provide practical portable shelter, two or three camels carry one family's possessions.

We visit the yurt of 55-year-old Turdei Bek, sitting across from the door in the place of honor on brightly colored *aidilis* quilts made by his wife, Tursunhai. Goat milk, yak butter, yogurt and freshly baked flat bread are placed before us.

"When I was a young man only a horse path led to the outside," replies Turdei in answer to my question about changes brought by Liberation to the Kirgiz. "I am old enough to have lived in the old society. It was difficult to exchange wool for flour, salt, wood, and cotton cloth. Few could read, many children died before one year. There was nothing for us, not even our own tent. Now it is much better. Then I could never have dreamed of having so much. All the members of my family would have had to work to earn what I do now."

The women sitting with us have lovely, weathered, proud, patient, ruddy-bronze faces with almond eyes. They dress gaily, like gypsies: long

skirts, blouses with gathered waists and large sleeves, a fitted vest of heavier material and a bright scarf tied about the head. Jewelry is ornate: beaded necklaces in combination with bracelets, broaches and earrings of silver.

"For generations we have regarded Mustagh Ata as the highest mountain in the world. Now we know it is not," Turdei is telling us. "But we still regard it as the best mountain, because it gives water for our animals. My grandfather told me that there is a beautiful fruit garden on top where white-robed saints live in peace and harmony. Please tell me if that is true when you climb the 'Father of the Ice Mountains'."

Camels on a mountain climb? Only in Western China where we have learned to expect the unexpected. Capable of carrying over 150 kilograms each, desert moose, as Galen affectionately refers to them, prove their worth as they move our skis and equipment to snowline at 17,000 feet in traditional Kirgiz fashion. We work our way at a fairly quick pace through a lovely Base Camp at 15,000 feet, Camel Camp at 17,000 feet and Camp I at 18,000 feet.

Sven Hedin failed on Mustagh Ata in 1894. Like Scott's ill-fated horses in Antarctica, Hedin's yak-borne sallies into the lower snowfields fell well short of the summit. Bill Tilman and Eric Shipton attempted the mountain in 1947 during Shipton's second stint as British Consul General of Kashi—one of his many "official" investigative forays with a not-so-subtle bent toward mountain exploration. Tilman writes of their push to their high point. "On we plodded up that vast tilted snowfield. . . . As early as one o'clock we had the impression of arriving somewhere, but two hours later all we could say was that the impression was no weaker. Still we thought the end must be very near. . . . Whenever we dared to look up our eyes met the same unbroken snow horizon, maintaining its unconquerably rigid distance of two or three hundred feet. And now the long hours of cold, fatigue and deferred hope began to tell. To persevere we must have hope, and this, which had been pretty severely tried, had now perished, worn out by too long deferment." (And too deep snow.) The Chinese were successful in 1956 and 1959. Large numbers reached the summit.

Our solution, since we lack armies to trample into submission the deep snow of the upper mountain, is to stay on the surface—to ski. Special Kästle Tur Randonnée alpine skis with Ramer bindings which hinge at the toe for striding uphill give us a lightweight set-up for fast climbing. Skins provide grip. For our overall 8000-vertical-foot downhill run the heels of our plastic Dolomite Balade ski boots are clamped to the ski, providing maximum turning control.

We lose Dick at Camp I to severe mountain sickness and possible cerebral edema. After limited acclimatization, we make a quick two-day dash for the top from Camp I at 18,000 feet. We lose Cameron at Camp II (20,200 feet) to exhaustion. It leaves three for the summit.

PLATE 32

Photo by Galen A. Rowell

**Ned Gillette skiing down
MUSTAGH ATA.**



Our first ski turns as we leave the summit are tentative here at 24,757 feet like the frail steps of a village elder. The wind bites as it sweeps up the last of the moderate angle of the west flank of Mustagh Ata, dropping thunderously down the steep eastern wall. We begin our plunge through great gulps of vertical. For most mountaineers the descent is anticlimactic; for Jan Reynolds, Galen Rowell and me it is the ultimate prize: the highest successful ski ascent and descent of an entire mountain, and a new skiing altitude record for women. Others have skied higher. The man who fell down Everest was higher. The French fellow who skied off the top of Annapurna only to become entangled and strangled in fixed ropes on the descent was higher. Maybe others. "Firsts" today in this world of multitudinous "firsts" are often carefully constructed semantics essential to pinpoint the area of record. But nobody has skied up and down an entire mountain of this height.

Having travelled halfway around the world in search of the perfect big mountain to ski, we find Mustagh Ata's giant contoured whaleback ideal for our mid-summer ski. The hour is late—we are not all off the summit until nine P.M.—and we are exhausted after our ten-hour climb to gain the final 4500 feet from our high camp. Casting its golden glow, the sun sets over the Russian Pamirs. To the south we can see Pakistan's Karakoram Range and Afghanistan's Hindu Kush buttressing China's Far West.

We have escaped the wind and now settle into the instinctive rhythms of survival skiing as we float earthward in sweeping turns through eight inches of new light snow. We had expected the most dreadful conditions for skiing at this altitude—ice, crust and wind-hardened snow. But Mary Poppins and her umbrella descent was no more serene than ours. The upper snowfields are broad and undulating, now bathed in amber light, allowing unroped skiing. Frequent stops dictated by altitude rather than terrain allow us to recover and set up for the next sequence of turns.

I can feel myself getting stronger and more aggressive. My fatigue which seemed near-total during the last portion of the climb toward an endlessly receding horizon and an elusive summit—like the fatigue of a marathon runner at the 25th mile—has been replaced by new excitement, by speed, by the gravity directed drop toward the brown lowlands far below. We descend into the shadow of night rising up Mustagh Ata's flanks, arriving at Camp II in total darkness, satisfied.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Pamir Mountains, Xinjiang Province, Western China.

ASCENT: Mustagh Ata, 7546 meters, 24,757 feet, western side on skis, summit reached on July 21, 1980 (Gillette, Reynolds, Rowell).

PERSONNEL: Ned Gillette, *leader*; Dr. Cameron Bangs, Richard Dorworth, Jan Reynolds, Galen A. Rowell, Jo Sanders.