

# WALKING THE FENCE

*The Southern Picket enchainment, Washington*

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WAYNE WALLACE



The South Picket Group from the north. *Wayne Wallace*

Let's face it: we don't live in the Himalaya or Antarctica. So, I wondered: is it possible to find a world-class climbing adventure here in the lower 48—specifically, in my own backyard, the North Cascades? I decided the trick was to be creative, pursuing link-ups, traverses, and other variations on the enchainment theme. It's a wonderful trend that's happening across the country and indeed the world, enabling grand tours along summits all day—or all week. There is no limit to what can be accomplished by approaching the heights this way, especially with the new light gear and a strong set of legs.

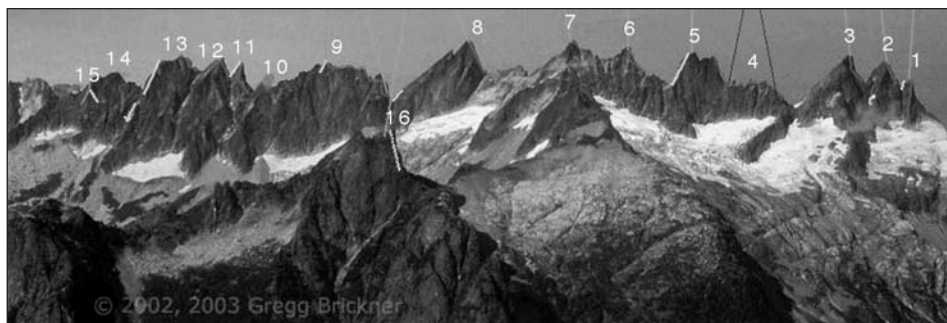
Traversing the entire Southern Picket Range in a single push might seem an unlikely goal. These peaks are steeper and more jagged than any other ridge around. Glaciers cling to both sides of the east-west wedge of gneiss and granite. It rises out of deep valleys 7,000 vertical feet and spans more than four miles. To many climbers, just one of its elusive summits is a prize on a long weekend trip. Let us now quote from the Book of Beckey: "In the Southern Picket Group, the steep escarpment of the N. faces, with several extremely steep and badly crevassed glaciers that divide individual peaks, competes as one of the grandest scenes in the North Cascades. Because of the rugged terrain, the Picket Range has remained the wildest and most unexplored region in the North Cascades." This range arouses our deepest fires of adventure. Just ask aspiring Northwest mountaineers about the Pickets and observe the look in their eyes.



Wayne Wallace on the summit of East Twin Needle.  
*Colin Haley*

The idea for the traverse began with a trip I carried out with two teams climbing Mt. Challenger from opposite directions. Each team met at the summit of this North Cascades wilderness classic, swapped car keys, then descended via the other teams' route. This enabled all involved to traverse this amazing peak and see new ground the whole way. After five long days of travel and climbing, we met in Seattle to party and swap cars.

With all the great fun we had, I began thinking about other possibilities. Sometime in the year 2000, the Southern Pickets came to mind. But had Peter Croft already bagged every summit along this ridge? Apparently not.



The complete traverse of the South Picket Group goes from right to left across the skyline. (1) Little McMillan Spire, (2) East McMillan Spire, (3) West McMillan Spire, (4) East Towers traverse, (5) Inspiration Peak, (6) Pyramid Peak, (7) Mt. Degenhardt, (8) Mt. Terror, (9) The Rake, (10) The Blip, (11) East Twin Needle, (12) West Twin Needle, (13) The Himmelhorn, (14) The Ottohorn, (15) The Frenzelspitz, (16) The Chopping Block.  
*Gregg Brickner*



Colin Haley on the SE face of West MacMillan Spire. *Wayne Wallace*

The traverse seemed preposterous, but I began setting out to recruit partners anyway. I found one person who was so enthusiastic that he tried it without me! In July of 2002 Colin Haley (only 17 at the time) and Mark Bunker made their way across seven of the summits before being turned away by typical Pickets weather. As they talked of returning for another go, my obsessive dream turned to a raging and all-consuming passion.

Never having been in the range, I then did my own reconnaissance with Lane Brown. We managed to climb West McMillan and traverse over to the east ridge of Inspiration. It now seemed doable—but it would be a very long and unknown trek.

In June of 2003 I tried it with Jens Klubberud, only to get rained off after only four peaks. We left a cache that later turned out to be quite helpful on the trip I was to organize later. As a rare high pressure system set in during July, I discovered I had no partner. In desperation I approached Colin only to be told that he felt loyal to his first partner. Eventually he agreed to go. Mark, at risk of losing his employment, wanted to join in as well, and so our team was set.

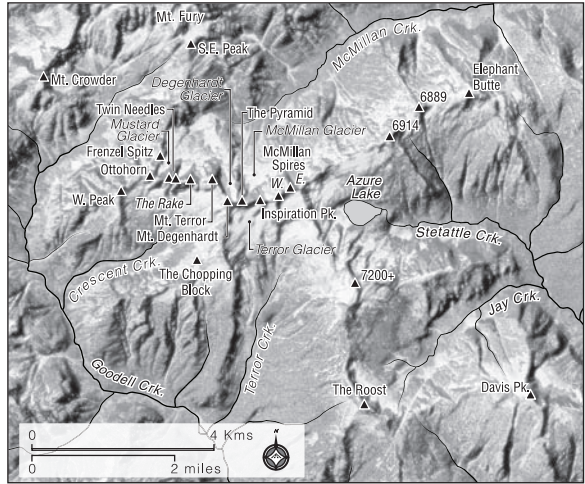
Under blue skies we slogged in—my third time in a year. We thought going as far as possible, as soon as possible, was the way to go, so we hiked in and traversed over the three McMillan Spires on the first day. We were working well together as a team, even though Mark and I had never climbed together. All three routes go at about 5.6 to 5.8 and, individually, are wonderful climbs on their own.

The second day we rolled through the 5.9 cracks on Inspiration Peak, of early Beckey fame. To our joy we found my cache intact; it guaranteed us ample food and fuel for the rest of the journey. The Pyramid (II 5.8) looked bad, but we found surprisingly beautiful rock on its cliffs. After Degenhardt (class 4), Mt. Terror (II 5.6) lived up to its name with unsound blocky sections. Linger on the summit, I couldn't help thinking of the pioneering efforts of those who came

before. I could just see Ed Cooper, Mike Swayne, Dave Hiser, and Charles Bell negotiating their way up the last gendarmes to finish the great north buttress of Terror. It is a route that intimidates bold climbers even today. The voices of Fred Beckey and Silas Wilde seemed to echo along these steep, glaciated walls.

At the next col we saw that the Rake (IV 5.9) was not going to give in easily. I climbed on vertical to overhanging rock on pitons to avoid a loose gully below. From there the route was a half-mile of pure ecstasy, classic alpine ridge climbing. On and on it went, and at times we rode the ridge like a horse. We found ourselves pressed to find water and a flat place to sleep near sunset. After rappelling from the Rake's summit, the west peak felt accommodating for our last night on the ridge. But it didn't help our sleep to view the next peak, East Twin Needle, in the fading light.

On the morning of the third day we saw how difficult it would be to stay directly on the

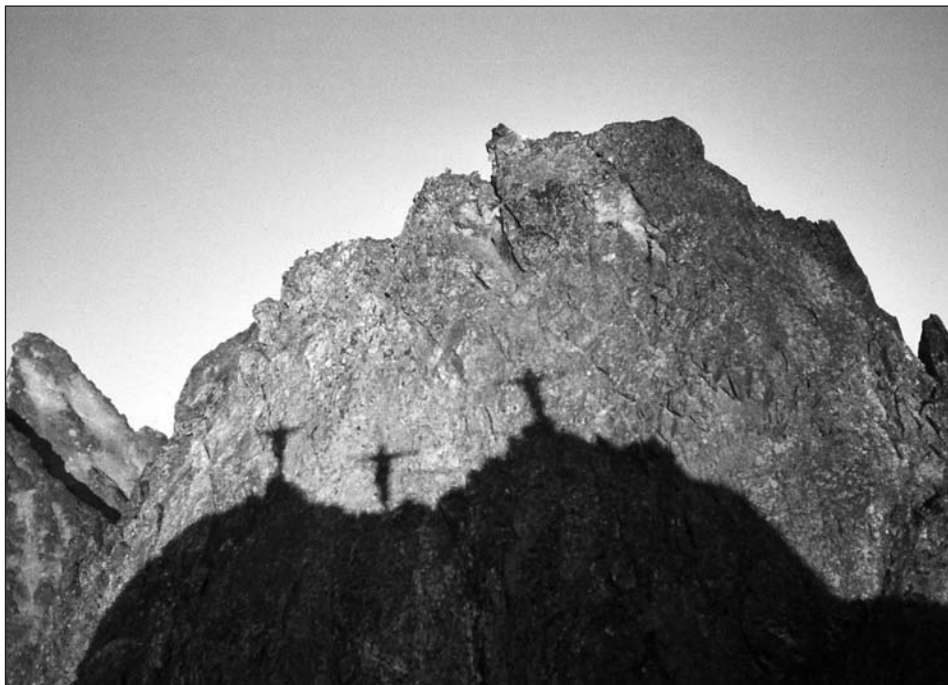


The Southern Picket Range. *Martin Gamache, Alpine Mapping Guild*



Wayne Wallace and Colin Haley on the east ridge of The Rake. *Mark Bunker*





The Three Picketeers on The Rake summit bivy. *Mark Bunker*

ridgecrest. I have never quite understood the argument differentiating a traverse from enchainment, but I believe a pure traverse stays on direct line from summit to summit, whereas an enchainment can vary and wind around. We found it necessary to traverse around a bit on the East Twin Needle (II 5.10a), but it was still very difficult ascending the tremendously exposed east arête.

After dealing with these difficulties, I had hopes of completing this audacious undertaking. However, after wandering over the West Twin (class 3), we found it was not over in the least. We paused to discuss how we should approach and climb the steep, daunting Himmelhorn (III 5.10+). There were two options: traverse across the north face or attack the steep ridge directly. We eventually agreed to let me have a go at the true ridgecrest. It turned out to be one of the hardest new-route leads I have done in the alpine arena. Delicate 5.10+ moves led me up to the amazing ridgecrest, at which point Colin led a razor-sharp edge to the summit. Tottering on this remote mountaintop, we found great joy.

The Otthorn (class 3) was next and proved to be only the third summit that wasn't fifth class. The Frenzlespitz (II 5.6) was a fine ending to this stupendous traverse.

On the way out the next day, not wanting our trip to end, we went up the Chopping Block (III 5.5). It provided a great view of the range as well as ending our journey on a luckier number of summits, 14 in all. We estimated we did 50 or more technical pitches, many of which we simul-climbed with gear between us. The whole trip was done in a four-day period.

We were amazed at the quality of the climbing we had encountered, and it left us with an overwhelming sense of accomplishment not usually available in the lower 48 states. Each day held

magic that I hope all climbers can experience at some point. As one of the Three Picketeers, Mark, said later, “the only problem is this smile I can’t seem to get off my face. It’s starting to freak out everyone at the office!”

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS:

Area: Washington State, North Cascades National Park, The Picket Range

ASCENTS: The Complete Southern Pickets Traverse (VI 5.10+), Mark Bunker, Colin Haley, and Wayne Wallace. East to west traverse, ascending 14 summits. Three routes were first ascents: The Rake, East Twin Needle, and Himmelhorn. A total of about 50 technical pitches in all.

Peaks as follows: July 25: Little McMillan Spire, southeast face, III 5.8; East McMillan Spire, east ridge, II 5.6; West McMillan Spire, east ridge/face, III 5.8. July 26: Inspiration Peak, east ridge, III 5.9; Pyramid Peak, east ridge/face, II 5.8; Mt. Degenhart, east ridge, class 4; Mt. Terror, east ridge, II 5.6; The Rake, east ridge, IV 5.9. July 27: East Twin Needle, southeast ridge/face, II 5.10a; West Twin Needle, east ridge, class 3; Himmelhorn, east ridge/north face, II 5.10+; Ottohorn, east ridge, class 4; Frenzlespitz, southeast ridge/face, II 5.6. July 28: Chopping Block, northeast face, II 5.6.

A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

*Wayne Wallace has enjoyed adventurous climbing for over 30 years. His two children and a high-rise carpentry job keep him on his toes. Wayne spends his available time chasing after the classic climbs in the western states and a particularly hard-to-get girlfriend. His main goal is not to be placed in the very back of the AAJ too soon.*



Thirteen summits, but who's counting? The Three Picketeers, left to right: Wayne Wallace, Mark Bunker, and Colin Haley.  
*Mark Bunker*