

MOUNTAINEERING SECTION

THE HOWSER AND BUGABOO SPIRES,
PURCELL RANGE

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FIRST ASCENT OF HOWSER SPIRE

At the head of the Bugaboo Creek, which joins the Columbia at Spillimacheen, Bugaboo Pass carries over into the Howser Creek Valley and to the north of this pass, beyond a long ridge of six peaks, running up in altitude to about 10,000 feet, which suggests the name of Sextet Ridge, is the wonderful outcrop of granite spires spoken of by Doctor T. G. Longstaff in his article "Across the Purcell Range of British Columbia," which appeared in the 1911 Canadian Alpine Journal.

No map of this section has ever been published and it still remains little known, the only available data concerning it being that given in Doctor Longstaff's article wherein it is stated that the highest peak of the group is but 10,244 feet in elevation. This determination was made from the survey work done on this trip by Mr. A. O. Wheeler, and it, therefore, is certain to be accurate, but it has been suggested that from Mr. Wheeler's points of observation he may not have been able to read angles on the highest peak and so obtained the above result with regard to the spire lying to the east of the highest peak. This, however, seems improbable, for opposite page 35 of the 1911 Journal the upper photograph shown is that of the highest peak as seen from its southwest side, and if this is the peak to which Doctor Longstaff refers then all the readings of two aneroids, which heretofore have given very satisfactory

results, must be pulled down about seven hundred feet in every observation recorded below.* This massive spire and its many worthy companions show up very prominently from "Sir Donald" and other high peaks and offer an excellent field for a two weeks' expedition. Even though their altitudes may be somewhat in question, there is no possible doubt concerning the many difficult climbs they afford.

On the afternoon of August 25th, 1916, after a two days' easy trip by pack train from Spillimacheen, our party, consisting of Mrs. George E. Vincent, John Vincent, H. O. Frind, Mrs. MacCarthy and the writer, with Conrad Kain, guide, and two packers, camped at an elevation of 5,000 feet at the head of the north fork of the Bugaboo in the forest about a mile below the foot of the glacier flowing from a vast snowfield, through which the spires bristle on all sides. From the valley below it was possible to see but few of these spires, and speculation was great as to which one, if any, should prove to be the massive fellow that had beckoned to us from every high peak we had climbed in the Purcell Range during previous expeditions.

The field for exploration was great, so we started at five the next morning, determined to locate a spot for a bivouac, to discover our peak and to explore a route to it if nothing more. The first two and a half hours to an elevation of 7,000 feet was the usual work of ploughing through dense undergrowth, crossing and recrossing small streams, and diagonally traversing a much crevassed dry glacier to mossy slopes up a steep face which carried to the level of a glacier-bed above tree line.

*The altitudes obtained by Mr. Wheeler at the time of his visit to the Bugaboo-Howser country with Dr. Longstaff, in 1910, can only be accepted as approximate. Unfortunately, cloudy, wet weather at the close of the survey, late in September, prevented his making connection with a point definitely established in altitude. On the other hand, altitudes obtained by the readings of a travelling aneroid barometer are subject to the variations of atmospheric pressure and cannot be considered as final.

Howser Peak, so called by Mr. Wheeler, is the one directly on the east side of the Bugaboo-Howser Pass, and is lower than the peak referred to by Mr. MacCarthy as Howser Spire.—Editor.

From here we received our first impressions of the vastness of this granite region and the great number of climbs it offers. To the northwest in a row the three spires referred to by Doctor Longstaff as "The Nunataks," shot out of the glacier, so we designated them from south to north. Numbers 1, 2 and 3; to the west beyond this line several other peaks showed between these three, and several more rose on the east of them. All these spires presented more or less the same appearance and several seemed to be of about the same height, so at Conrad's suggestion we crossed the glacier to the east of the three and ascended to the summit of the saddle between Nos. 2 and 3, which we reached at 9 a.m., the barometer reading 8,650 feet. And now a still grander view lay before us: a broad, more or less circular glacier stretched out and rounded up to rest on the sides of several beautiful spires along its south edge, one of them with its outline capped by an image of a pouter pigeon; at its west side it ran up high on the walls of a lofty ridge that stood in a semi-circle with five sharp peaks vying with each other for leadership, and down in the center of this glacier a long, low ridge showed just above the snow, like a half buried train of cars.

Again, speculation was rife as to which peak was the ruler of this mighty array, and, as we were too close under Nos. 2 and 3 to see their summits, we crossed to the centre of the glacier to get a clear view of all of them to settle this all important question, I devoutly hoping that No. 2 would not be chosen; for, with the sheer cliffs on all sides we had seen, it seemed clearly impossible. The decision lay between No. 3 and the third peak of the circular ridge to the west. Opinion was about equally divided, and we finally decided to try the peak on the ridge, little realizing that Nature had clearly indicated it to be the ruler, for later we found at the west end of the train of cars a perfect profile of the

sphinx gazing intently at its master. This clear-cut image suggests the name of "Sphinx Glacier," as "Howser Glacier," doubtless should designate the glacier on the west side of the mountain that is the source of Howser Creek.

Conrad laid a course along the south side of the glacier towards Pigeon Spire until we reached a line of bare rocks that edges the drop into the deep cut south of the first peak of the ridge; here we rested near a small waterfall while trying to make up for the sweltering effect of a glaring sun on the snowfield, and Conrad examined the mountain side to choose his route. We then worked over and up to a point at the base of the bergschrund below the saddle between the second and third peaks, where we had our first thrill in climbing up the vertical face of the upper lip of the schrund: about ten feet of deep steps in soft snow with hard jabs into it for handholds.

The slope above the bergschrund had but a light coating of snow over the ice and seemed so steep that our estimates ranged from sixty to seventy degrees, but when the clinometer was placed on the stock of an ice axe laid on its surface it showed an angle of but fifty-two degrees which, of course, was a distinct disappointment at the time, but long before we reached the rocks above, at 11 o'clock, all hands conceded that a fifty-two degree slope was sufficient. The first bit of rock work was a six-inch crack between a high, blank wall on the right, and on the left a steep, smooth slab of twenty feet lying at an angle of forty degrees. There were no hand or footholds on either side and it was interesting to note results of the different methods of attack. Taking it in what seemed to be the natural way, with the right leg in the crack and hands on the edge of the slab, one was forced to shin up, twisting the right knee in the crack to hold position for the next pull, and the rucksack jammed the wall and made the pull doubly hard; whereas, by

tackling it apparently in an awkward way, with the left leg in the crack and sitting on the edge of the slab, the rucksack swung clear above it, and with the right foot placed squarely against the wall, the hands and foot made the boost easy, while the seat on the edge gave a comfortable rest between efforts. No doubt the divergence of opinion with regard to the difficulties experienced on a particular mountain is greatly due to the different climbing methods employed on its various stretches; a little study of mechanical gymnastics often turns a fearsome stretch into an amusing one.

Three steep snow cornices along the sharp edge of ice ridges then came in rapid succession until we landed in a narrow, horizontal crack at the top of a huge slab that had just begun the descent to its final resting place at the bottom of the valley, where all its companions above were ultimately to join it. Those on my rope were fortunate in having this secure stand, while the members on Conrad's rope were forced to stand in narrow ice steps, one foot at a time at the beginning of a mighty ice couloir that seemed to run almost straight up and down, while he cut steps diagonally across it to gain the base of the ridge above. Probably the thoughts which came to one member of the party while thus poised on one leg, with the other dangling over green ice, contributed their part to a declaration made later on the summit about a mountaineer never knowing when to quit.

A rapid climb up the ridge landed us at 2.15 in the cut between the second and third peaks; it could hardly be called a saddle for it dropped off sharply on the other side, affording us little room for comfort while resting and eating our luncheon. The barometer showed an elevation of 10,450 feet and, levelling back at No. 3 peak, we saw that already we were above the level of its summit; our guess had proven correct, we were making for the highest peak of the group. The formation

on opposite sides of this mountain was in marked contrast; the whole east face, although very steep, was much broken from summit to glacier, while on the west side it dropped in one sheer cliff for several thousand feet to a small, nearly flat glacier at its base, presenting a face that would defy any sort of an attack. While at luncheon we were amused at the frank curiosity of a small mountain squirrel which ran about on the rocks chattering at us in a most friendly manner, finally coming within a few feet to enjoy its noonday meal of lichen, thus showing it did not believe man's treachery would carry to such heights. It certainly could not have had a permanent home so high above earth and vegetation, and this day must also have been on a tour of exploration.

At three o'clock we began working up the arête, frequently being forced to divert to the east face to avoid smooth boulder sides, and at 10,750 feet our only apparent course carried us through a very small window back of a huge boulder that capped a short rib below. Besides being a tight squeeze for a man and rucksack it had no sill on the opposite side, the footing being a narrow slab edge along the mountain side at right angles to the window, an arrangement that did not commend itself to us as being good architecture. From this point up, there was a series of broken chimneys and a long stretch over uniform water-washed and pitted slopes to a snow cap and a few dry slabs at the summit, to which Mrs. Vincent led us at 4 p.m., our barometer reading 10,950 feet.

While Conrad built a cairn of the few small rocks that were available, in which to deposit our record, we speculated as to the best route down and discussed the possibilities offered by the other spires; and when Mrs. MacCarthy suggested that No. 3 looked very inviting and we should attempt it, we were astonished to hear the most enthusiastic member of the party say, if she got down from this peak alive, Howser Spire certainly would

be a memorable peak for her, as it was the last mountain she would ever climb. How one's point of view changes with a change of surroundings, the real psychology of the mountains! This very positive soul, two days later, spent fifteen hours in a traverse over all the summits of the Sextet Range and on the way to camp climbed twenty-five feet down into a fearsome crevasse in order to cross it, and never once lost her cheerful smile.

At 4.50, true to habit, Conrad turned his back on our route up and led the way northward along the ridge and down the steep, broken arête and snow patches to the first big gendarme, and then down the east face until, at 10,475 feet, we reached the snow slopes above the bergschrund at 6.40 p.m. Just below our last rock stand the bergschrund was extremely wide and necessitated a horizontal traverse on a 55-degree slope for about two hundred yards to a point below a small water course that had caused a snow slide and left a chute two feet deep to mark its wake. The snow from this slide Conrad figured would so fill the bergschrund that it would afford us a safe passage. The slope was too steep to heel down with safety, so we faced about and backed down, and the 160 toe steps, one member moving at a time with ice axe buried at each step, took a long time to negotiate, but it landed us safely at the upper lip of the schrund where we found a drop of twenty feet to the lip below with a ten-foot gap between it and the rock face partially filled with snow.

In the chute, a few feet above the edge, Conrad drove his ice axe to the head and then passed a double rope over it, letting the two ends run over to the lip below, and, one at a time, the members of the party were lowered from a turn of his own rope around a second axe, each dropping hand over hand on the double rope for security until he landed. It was now up to Conrad; he had intended to jump down, but the distance seemed great and the narrow landing broke sharply down the

névé, and this combination suggested the possibilities of a sprain or a broken leg, so he revised his plan. The ice axes were lowered and he then passed the loop of the double rope over a large mass of snow with his coat tied at the turn to prevent the rope cutting through, and came down hand over hand in safety.

At eight o'clock we were again roped up and set off at high speed for the pass between Nos. 2 and 3, and reached it at 8.45, catching the last rays of the afterglow from a most brilliant, crimson sunset. Our footsteps of the morning across the eastern glacier were easy to follow, and we gained the edge of the high grass plots at about 9.30, just as the sky became streaked with northern lights, the display shifting every few minutes and finally covering the whole heavens with most wonderful shapes and patterns. For a moment the sky would be black, then a bright spot would appear and from it would radiate shafts of light in all directions. These shafts would quiver, contract and then expand until they almost met, then contract and from their common centre quivering rings of light would run out with incredible speed like waves and cross-bar the heavens: suddenly all would be darkness again, only to be broken in a moment when the display would take on still other forms. If the climb of the day was really to be the last for any of us the heavens joined in for an hour with their mightiest display to mark the occasion.

The head of the east lateral moraine was reached at 10.30, and we had easy going along its sharp edge until we struck the bush and tree growth, where, in the darkness, we found great difficulty in securing footing around it. At a point where the face of the moraine drops abruptly on the glacier side, a twig failed to measure up to the demand placed upon it, and Mrs. MacCarthy suddenly disappeared in a cloud of dust; and here again I was impressed with her speed in the mountains, for my quick pursuit was of no avail, she had shot down

between two lines of boulders and calmly awaited my arrival forty feet below the ridge, neither of us being even slightly injured, and having in the darkness performed a feat that neither would have essayed in daylight. Replying to Conrad's anxious inquiry, that we really preferred a lower line, it being dangerous to try to ascend such a face, we continued along the edge of the glacier to its forefoot and there waited half an hour for the rest of the party to join us, they having continued along the moraine and having found it very tiresome and difficult.

Our plans as formulated in the morning did not reckon with a night expedition, so no clear trail was blazed from the camp to the glacier, and this oversight caused us many scratches and bruises in our plunges through the dense brush and pines before we reached camp at 1.05 a.m., where Charlie Stewart still kept warm our delicious supper, that had lost none of its flavor by the delay in serving.

FIRST ASCENT OF No. 3 PEAK, OR "BUGABOO SPIRE"

On August 29th, the day after our traverse of the Sextet Ridge, Mrs. MacCarthy, John Vincent, Conrad and the writer left camp at 4.30 a.m. for a try on No. 3 peak, which we erroneously imagined was the one on which Dr. Hickson, of Montreal, had made an unsuccessful attempt during the latter part of July. Later we learned that, with Edouard Feuz, he had tried the main ridge of spires, ascending the north arête but was driven back on account of snow conditions after reaching the base of the last big gendarme. The weather was not promising, but by the time we reached the saddle between Nos. 2 and 3, the clouds had broken and we were favored with sunshine for most of the day.

Crossing the eastern glacier close along the cliffs of No. 2 peak, they presented a most forbidding aspect, as if trying to scare us from any search for a vulnerable spot that may possibly lie on the southwest side of the

mountain between its main mass and a low lying shoulder.

The lower reaches on No. 3 above the saddle, for about 1,200 feet, varied at angles from 30 to 60 degrees, with two thirty-foot chimneys and one smooth slide, the whole stretch affording every possible kind of interesting rock work. Up the easier parts of these stretches Conrad set a fast pace with John trailing close behind him, while Mrs. MacCarthy and I, following close behind her to avoid the necessity of using a rope, took a more leisurely gait.

The *pièce de résistance* that took nearly two hours to negotiate was reached at an elevation of 10,000 feet, and here the laggards again rejoined Conrad and John, who sat below it nonplussed at the sight of a veritable bugaboo, which immediately suggested to our minds the appropriateness of the name "Bugaboo" for this spire. Our route was completely blocked by a most formidable gendarme, whose base completely spanned the width of the ridge. Its wall on the west side ran up in prolongation of the mighty cliffs that rose from the glacier far below, and its top edge rose sharply like a horn to the point where it joined the high sheer east wall. The side to the west was blocked by the cliffs, and on the east side a broken section led down directly below the east wall for about forty feet to a ledge four feet wide that ended with a 2,000-foot drop, while above this ledge, although the face was broken, there seemed to be no safe line of ascent, and Conrad finally decided that the face of the gendarme offered our only hope. Relieving himself of his rucksack, he gradually worked up this face by means of several diagonal cracks until he succeeded in getting both arms over the top edge, and here he stuck for a long time, feeling about and looking for some little thing that might afford him a hold long enough to pull himself over; at last he found it, although it was not apparent to us when we followed, and slowly crept over the edge,

much to our relief, for we supposed the difficulties were ended, but they had really just begun. Half an hour we waited while Conrad's body disappeared and reappeared at the edge; after each disappearance we expected to hear a shout that we could prepare to follow, but each time Conrad's fingers would slowly creep into sight and then he would appear again to survey the situation and make a fresh start. The whole trouble, he explained, was due to the lack of any sort of hold or footing on the steep, smooth face for a distance of six feet to a crack beyond, and as it was impossible to throw the rope over anything to give him support and the ice axe had proven unavailing, he was forced to depend entirely upon himself with no certainty as to what position he might find himself in when once in the crack. It was evident from his persistent efforts that he was determined to make it, and all we could do was to tend the useless rope, giving him slack and pulling it in again when he came back into view. Just how he finally got into the crack is a mystery to us but, after a dozen reappearances, he smiled and said: "I make it," and soon began to call for rope, until about sixty feet had run out and he called from the top of the ridge above the gendarme. We then bent on two spare ropes and with the aid of a double rope went up, one at a time, fully realizing, as we passed over the top stretch and up the broken course above, that the real climb on a mountain is the one made by the guide, who often must take his chances without assistance from any helping hand. We also felt confident that Conrad would not descend over such a stretch if any other possible route could be found.

The distance from here to the first summit was short and ended with a good climb up a right angle corner at the junction of two rough walls, and John led us to the summit at 12.45, the barometer reading 10,250 feet. We levelled across to the other summit, lying a few hundred yards to the northeast, which appeared to be a few feet

higher; so, after having a snack and building a cairn for the record, we started for the second summit, soon to be stopped by the sudden termination of the top mass which had run along on a level for a short distance and then dropped a little until its side cut sharply back for thirty feet or more, thus leaving the ledge pointing out into space over the glacier far below. Twenty feet down, where the receding side again joined the vertical cliffs underneath the overhang, a sloping slab lapped the cliff a few feet; so, with the aid of a double rope passed over a convenient rock, we dropped down to this level, the rope being left for use on the return trip.

Horizontal cracks on the slab carried us to a broken causeway with sections of it only a foot or two wide, which were topped with a rounded edge, making a straddle the only safe method to negotiate them. Three or four sharp rises and a short irregular chimney landed us on the summit at 2.40; forty minutes of work to find the barometer reading exactly the same as on the first peak, 10,850 feet, and the first peak now appearing a little higher than the second one, a trait that nearby peaks seem to have to lure one on.

The trip back to our rucksacks was easily made, each going up the double rope hand over hand to show that he was fit for the return journey, and at 3.20 we started down, all interested to see what was to be done at the gendarme.

Fortunately we had three ropes along, two of eighty feet and one of a hundred and twenty feet; so, after a survey of all sides, a route down the cliffs back of the gendarme was chosen and a double rope was passed over a projecting rock with Conrad's coat underneath to serve as chaffing gear for the loop and for the lowering rope. Half way down the eighty-foot stretch and a little out of line with the hanging rope a small ledge projected from a side wall, which offered a chance for a rest, but, as this and the narrow sloping ledge below were

insignificant edges above a 2,000-foot drop, no one cared to linger on the rope, but came down as quickly as possible, taking a turn of the double rope around a leg and pinching it between the feet to relieve the strain on the single rope. Conrad being the last to come down did not have the aid of a lowering rope and had to depend entirely upon his hands and the turn around the leg; but so long as the rope was kept securely pinched between the boots there was little danger, for a slight pressure on it will hold the weight of the body and relieve the strain on the arms.

The broken section carried us up forty feet to the base of the gendarme with just one hour spent in getting down its forty feet of height, and this gave us ample time to enjoy the many good short stretches that had annoyed us with delays during the morning. We also deflected from our route to try a short cut to the glacier, but were driven back by an unbroken row of cliffs that rise along the east side. Camp was reached at 8 p.m., and the next day we reluctantly turned our backs on the many spires whose intimate acquaintance we had not made, but with a resolve to return to them at the first good opportunity.