

## THE FIRST ASCENT OF MOUNT LOUIS

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BY A. H. MACCARTHY

The scenery around Banff, as viewed from the car window, does not reveal to one the exceptionally fine rock climbs that are near at hand and easily accessible from the Alpine Club House as a base. It was not until after a visit to the Club encampment on Healy Creek in 1916 that I had an opportunity to make a trip into the Forty Mile Creek Region back of Mount Edith to see the two rock towers lying northwest of it.

In company with Dr. and Mrs. W. E. Stone, Mrs. MacCarthy and I left the Club House at 6 a.m. on July 19th, under the guidance of Conrad Kain, for a day's picnic "to view the scenery," as one of the party guardedly announced, for we had heard of the formidable character of these towers and, as it was early in the season and none of us felt in proper condition to hazard the strain of a first class climb, we were content to consider it simply a trip of exploration. However, the exhilaration of three hours in the saddle at a brisk pace over a good road and a fine trail, winding up through the pine and balsam to the summit of the pass between Mounts Edith and Norquay, and the first view of the towers so inspired us that we immediately decided that we must go to the base of Mount Louis, the first tower.

The formation of this tower is very interesting, for it consists of thick strata of red limestone on edge, the line of stratification running north and south, and on those sides the massif is grooved with many couloirs and chimneys; above the massif a final tower rises for about four hundred feet, consisting of great slabs somewhat separated from each other, like the leaves of a partially-opened book and presenting a vertical face on the east

side and deep cracks on the north and south sides between the successive leaves.

The second tower, unnamed, is more regular in shape and from the east resembles a massive turret with innumerable vertical grooves cutting its face from top to bottom and portholes dotted here and there at various levels.

We followed the trail down towards Forty Mile Creek for about a mile and then led our ponies over the ridges through burnt and fallen timber for another mile until further progress with them was impossible. Here they were tethered for the day and we continued over the hog-backs to the summit of the green-covered shoulder at the northeast base of Louis, the barometer showing 7,000 feet elevation. The hard going over the innumerable ridges and the final climb up the shoulder made a second breakfast most welcome, and soon the good food and warm sunshine threw all of us into that dreamy state of delicious indolence when any movement is an effort and one is content to lie and gaze at the figures and images outlined by the cracks on the rock walls and to work out possible lines of ascent without trying them. And thus we probably would have spent the day had not Conrad's audacious look through massive vertical slabs, and bold assertion that my suggested route up a chimney showing at the base on the north side of the tower would either pinch or terminate in an impossible overhang, broken the spell for me, and I immediately set out to explore the route and prove his mistake.

At the same time, Conrad began a traverse along the ledges on the east side of the mountain and it took me over an hour of strenuous climbing to rejoin him beyond the couloir on the east face and admit that he actually could see through solid rock; for my chimney, after running up for several hundred feet, terminated with smooth side walls and a smooth overhanging cliff at the top, with apparently no outlet from this *cul-de-sac*.

At twelve o'clock we continued up the ledges on the south side of the couloir above the snow patches until we reached the last horizontal ledge or terrace and here we cached our ice axes. This terrace carried us toward Mount Edith, to the base of the red, vertical slab south of the couloir, and there broke off abruptly with a rough face dropping for about one hundred feet and seemed to terminate in a sheer drop of several hundred feet to the pass between Edith and Louis. While Conrad made a study of the section along the south edge of the slab, I tried the broken ledges to the north and worked up for about fifty feet until I came to a blank wall with no way around it, and in descending was forcibly impressed with the fact that an ascent on vertical stretches with narrow hand and foot holds is far easier than a descent. Upon rejoining Conrad at the base of the slab, I found him gazing at the narrow, vertical face-crack on the slab, and unlacing his boots. The prospect did not please me at all, and, in order to save him further trouble and perhaps to save my face, I emphatically said "No," and the boots were laced up again. The south side of the slab had proven as impossible as the north side and the two-inch crack seemed to offer the only possible line; but the day was early and I was in no condition for thirty feet of finger and toe exercise such as this crack would have necessitated.

The chimney over the north branch of the east face couloir pinched at the top and showed a decided overhang for about ten feet, while the south branch chimney, although not visible throughout its entire length, seemed to end in the same way, and both of them carried only to the base of the first leaf of slabs that form the summit of the mountain, with no indication of what lay beyond it; so we decided to work down the south side of our terrace and, at a point about twenty feet above the vertical cliffs, worked a traverse along narrow ledges and up two short, broken chimneys that finally carried us

over a rib into the steep cut that is a prolongation of the crack between the second and third leaves of the summit formation.

We were now on the south side of the mountain, with the walls just below us dropping sheer to the pass, while, a short distance above, a vertical face stepped the bed of the cut up between two smooth side walls, thus blocking its ascent. From near the bottom of this cut we worked up and down over rock faces and one long, diagonal angle-crack between a cliff of the mountain side and an outlying rib, and landed on the edge of the lower stretch of the third leaf of the summit mass. From this point we had a clear view up a narrow couloir, of which stretches were almost chimneys, to the top ledges of the massif below the final tower. Fortunately, our position on the rib was forty feet or more above the abrupt ending of this couloir over the cliffs, so we roped down from a projecting rock about twenty feet into the bottom of it. This point we reached at 2.30 p.m. and the barometer read 7,800 feet.

The couloirs and chimneys from here to the base of the final tower are narrow and the faces and sides are rough, making the ascent safe but exhausting, as many of the stretches are very steep. The ascent of five hundred feet to the terrace at the summit of the massif took forty-five minutes. Upon reaching the terrace, we rested and gazed at a most interesting prospect; running up between the third leaf and the main tower was a steep pitch and then a black chimney, apparently going to the very summit, no more than a crack in the face of the cliff, with two perfectly straight walls and the inner face so deep inside the cliff that it would not be seen; a truly wonderful chimney to delight the most exacting climber. With such limited space to work in, we hastily cached our ruck-sacks and rope and made for the final test, for it was apparent that if the crack above was wide enough to admit our bodies we were certain to reach the summit,

but if it should prove too narrow to enter, then we should have to try one of the nearly vertical edges, with a leg and arm inside for pressure holds and the other two members on the face of the cliff to take advantage of whatever irregularities were found to offer a hold and footing, a very doubtful expedient, owing to the great height to go.

Crossing the terrace, we found the first stretch of seventy-five feet a steep scoop with rough surface and easy going. This carried us directly into the chimney, which proved just wide enough to admit my shoulders with a slight squeeze. We walked into it for about ten feet to the back face, which went up at a seventy-degree pitch, and looking up we saw perfectly smooth walls on each side and a narrow strip of blue sky far above, the back face continuing from ten to fifteen feet inside the outer edges of the crack. Here was a real chimney, the kind one speculates about but the like of which I never before had seen; with side walls so smooth that they afforded no hold or footing at all, the inner face so covered with ice that only an occasional footing was available, and the climb so high that the all-important question was whether or not one's strength would hold out until the top was reached. However, the chances for success inside the crack were so great over the chances on a route at the outer edge, that we did not stop to reckon with our wind or strength, but wedged ourselves in between the walls and climbed up the inner face as far as it afforded us a footing on the rock pile at the bottom, and then began with pressure holds, first pressing hard with the arms and shoulders and with the palms of the hands flat against the walls near the waist line until the knees were drawn up as far as possible, then with edge nails scraping the sides and a pressure with the knees and thighs, a hold was afforded long enough to raise the body for a fresh pressure with shoulders and arms. At one point the walls gradually pinched until, for about

ten feet, it was necessary to turn the body sideways and, as the space was too narrow to allow the knees to be used, this stretch was doubly hard. Thus we climbed, with an occasional interval of rest whenever the inner face presented a footing, until we reached the sky itself, only to find that we still had two wide chimney-stretches of about 125 feet to the final slab on top. Clouds were now settling over the peak and a light drizzle began, which warned us to make haste, but a hundred feet of this sort of climbing had told on us heavily so we rested, and, gazing into our black well, we speculated as to how our hands and elbows would fare when braking down such a stretch, for, although the body had to be lifted when ascending, the danger of a fall was slight so long as strength lasted, while on the descent we realized that when the body was in motion, a slip, or too much speed, would prove disastrous.

The drizzle quickly turned to sleet and this drove us hastily up the two remaining chimney stretches, the first narrow and deep for about fifty feet, and the second of seventy-five feet, with wide, flaring sides, until it ended at the base of low, broken cliffs at the summit, which we reached at 3.50 p.m., the barometer reading 8650 feet.

Conrad's yodel announcing our success was a welcome signal to our friends below, for, after following our course with a glass until we disappeared on the south side of the mountain, they lost sight of us and immediately worked around over the pass to the glacier northwest of Edith, when they again were able to follow much of our route until we reached the base of the final tower, which appeared from below to offer no possible line of ascent, as the crack looked to be impracticable. Our sudden appearance at the summit was a great surprise to them.

The wind was cold and the snow-squall rapidly increased, so we spent little time examining the formation of the other sides of the mountain. From the summit we

could see no route that seemed at all inviting and decided it safer, under the circumstances, to retrace our steps. We built a small cairn and deposited a record in a tobacco box, and began the descent at 4.10 p.m., well aware that the hardest part of the climb lay before us, for, with tired muscles and scratches and bruises all over our bodies, the hours of constant tension to avoid one careless move or mis-step and to touch no loose rocks was certain to tax us to the limit of endurance.

For almost the entire length of the couloirs and wide chimneys we faced out and heeled down, pressing the side walls with the palms of our hands that seemed to strike every sharp point or edge along the route. Leather gloves would have saved us many cuts, but there was need for every finger nail in many stretches, so the flesh had to make its sacrifice and bear its pain.

The walls of the narrow chimney were now dripping with water and made its descent very slow, for the long, nearly straight drop to a mass of sharp rock at the bottom was constantly before our eyes to warn us of the dangers of an uncertain movement. Under the same conditions, had this chimney been a few inches wider, such a descent would have been almost impossible, for it still would have been too narrow for back and knee work, while the increased width would have made too great a space to cover by chest expansion for arm pressure.

Great care was necessary on Conrad's part to retrace our steps as nearly as possible, for it was apparent during the climb up that many cuts and ribs offered a line of ascent for long stretches, only to end in an impasse, and for us to come down on any one of such routes would mean a climb up for another start. At 5.30 we reached the point where, on the ascent, we had roped down from a rib into the couloir, and here considerable time was required to throw a loop of the rope from such a confined space over the projecting rock above. After many trials, it finally was accomplished and we then

began the diagonal traverse above the cliffs on the Edith Pass side. This stretch without doubt was the most dangerous section of the whole climb and especially for the descent. The route was irregular and in most places ran along narrow ledges, with scanty finger holds in small cracks and over rib ends, and with sheer drops everywhere along the line to the pass below. We, therefore, double roped along and down from every point which afforded even the slightest anchorage, and, although the rope was not depended upon for assistance, we were grateful for the assurance it gave in case of actual need. This stretch and while roping down into the couloir were the only times when the rope was used on the climb.

At six o'clock we reached the base of the red slab on the east face, and, picking up our ice axes at the north end of the ledge, made rapid progress directly down the east couloir, reaching the high snow patches at 6.40 and the scree slopes below at 7.45 p.m. Our party lost sight of us when the descent began and, late in the afternoon, were filled with apprehension when they noticed on the big snow-patch below the east couloir two dark spots that were not there in the morning; but Conrad's mountain yell from the scree slope belied the suggestion of disaster and we made off in a straight line for the meadows where the ponies had been taken. Upon reaching the edge of the timber east of Mt. Edith, we stopped and looked back at our mountain, which towered up magnificently in the dusk, and Conrad spoke volumes when he said, "Ye gods, Mr. MacCarthy, just look at that; they never will believe we climbed it."