

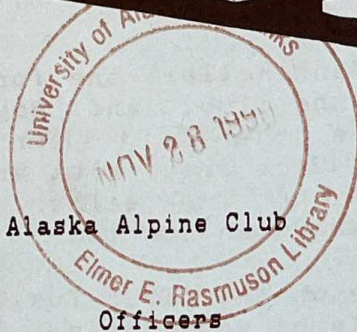


DESCENT

Volume 22 : No. 1

Alaska Alpine Club

December 1990



Officers

President..Tad Fullerton	479-4037	Vice President..Tim Milanowski	488-9445
Secretary/Treasurer.. Franz Mueter		Councilor.....Buckey Wilson	
Councilor.....Philip Marshall		Editor.....Mike Seizys	372-3045

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Calendar

December	Monthly Meeting	Schaible Auditorium	7:30 PM
January	Monthly Meeting	Schaible	7:30 PM
January 23	Intro to Ski Mountaineering	Schaible	7:30 PM
	Register, Frostbite, Hypothermia		
February 5,6	Monthly Meeting	Schaible	7:30 PM
	Vern Tejas, A Year in the Life		
	Snow Caves, Ice Axe, Crampons		

The DESCENT is published 1 to 4 times a year on a hit or miss basis. Copies are sent to current members of the Alaska Alpine Club. Non-members may receive DESCENT for \$5.50 per issue. Membership in the Alaska Alpine Club is open to anyone having an interest in the mountains. Meetings are open to the public and are normally held on the first Tuesday of each month, September through May, on the UAF campus. Tea and crumpets are provided. The Alaska Alpine Club is a campus organization of the University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

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Another season is underway for the Alaska Alpine Club, and we have a host of new officers. Besides myself, Tim Milanowski is our new Vice President, Franz Mueter has taken the job of Secretary/Treasurer, and thanks to the efforts of our new Editor, Mike Seizys, this issue of Descent is coming to you. Two familiar faces will still be herding us 'new sheep' in the right direction, Philip Marshall and Buckey Wilson, our Councilors. Mike really has been the driving force behind getting this issue going, and I feel like this is helping us newcomers to the status of Club officers get in gear.

For the last year or so, John Keller, the former President has been requesting new blood for the Club, and "Boy, have we got it now!!" I was talking to Tim the other day, your basic, "So, now that we're the Club Prez and Vice Prez, what are we going to do now?" To my great relief, he didn't know either. So we called John for help and with that we have gotten started.

Our monthly meeting will be on the first Tuesday of each month. So far, we have had a couple of good ones. In October, Gary Donofrio started the year off with a great show on the proper way to fall off a ridge, and then film your own rescue. Thanks Gary. Last month, Bob Groseclose and Stan Justice showed slides of a trip to the summit of Mt. Logan. Bob provided great entertainment, as he couldn't remember the names of some of the glaciers and peaks he had slides of, and when he asked for help from Stan, there was silence. No problem, just say it was somewhere in the area and move on.

Really, it was a fun show, and quite well attended. The unofficial count was somewhere around 65 people. Let's try to keep this high attendance up for future meetings, as we will be bringing you many interesting slide shows and guest speakers.

This year the Club will again be offering the climbing class. Stan has agreed to organize and run it again. My understanding is that it will be similar to last years class. I feel that the class is the single most important function of the Alaska Alpine Club. Stan has done a great job with the class in the past, and this year should prove to be a great one in the mountains. I'm sure that help will be much appreciated, so let's get together on these trips, have some fun, and help introduce our little part of Alaska to some new friends.

See you out there,

Tad Fullerton

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EDITOR'S NOTES

Once again the Alaska Alpine Club will be offering instruction in ski mountaineering and climbing this spring. Two sessions will be offered.

Introduction to Ski Mountaineering For persons with cross-country skiing and cold weather camping experience. Will teach the basics of camping and ski travel in Alaskan mountains, including introductory crevasse rescue and safety topics.

Intermediate Ski Mountaineering and Climbing For persons having successfully completed the intro course or with equivalent experience.

Tuition for each course is \$20.00. Additional expenses include \$17 for text, gas money, food, restaurant food on field trips. Anyone in the Fairbanks community with appropriate experience is welcome to participate. These courses are a great way to get in to the mountains and meet other mountaineers! Safety is everyone's individual responsibility. The club carries no liability insurance.

The course consists of weekly lectures or discussion sessions held Wednesdays at 7:30 PM in the Schaible Auditorium on the UAF campus and weekend field trips, some of which are long day trips and others are overnight excursions.

TEXT- "Mountaineering- The Freedom of the Hills" by The Mountaineers of Seattle. (available at Clem's or REI)

CREDIT- Available for up to 3 credit hours as independent study. Contact Tom Wells of the PE Dept for details. (See following page for schedule)

Along with the climbing class, the club will also be sponsoring several exciting lectures and slide show presentations featuring Alaskan mountaineers. Vern Tejas will be here in February to give us a glance at his climbing experiences and a look at his new book, "Dangerous Steps".

The DESCENT will also bring you articles and short stories on climbing in Alaska by Alaskan mountaineers. If you are interested in having one of your experiences published in the DESCENT, or you have ideas on articles for the newsletter, contact Mike Seizys, 372-3045.

Looking forward to a great class and a fine climbing season. See you all on a high windy ridge.

- Mike Seizys, Editor

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CLIMBING CLASS SCHEDULE

DATE	CLASS TOPIC	WEEKEND TRIP
<u>Intro to Ski Mountaineering</u>		
Jan 23	Register, Frostbite, Hypothermia	None
Jan 30	Gear, Make your own or buy	Feb 3 Survival ski workshop @ Cleary
Feb 6	Snow caves, Ice axe, Crampons	Feb 9,10 Wickersham Dome Overnight
Feb 13	Prusik, Rappel, Z-Pulley, Anchors	Feb 17 Skills Workshop in town
Feb 20	Glacier Travel, Crevasse Rescue	Feb 23,24 Fels Glacier Cracks
Feb 27	Avalanche Safety	Mar 3 Panorama Slopes
Mar 6	First Aid, Altitude Effects	Mar 9,10 Obrien Peak

Intermediete Ski Mountaineering and Climbing

Apr 3	Snow Climbing, Igloos, Fly-ins	Apr 6,7 Peak 9400
Apr 10	Ice Climbing	Apr 13,14 Jack River Ice
Apr 17	Leadership, Expeditions	Apr 20,21 Institute Peak
Apr 24	Rock Climbing	Apr 28 Grapefruit Rocks

For further information, contact Stan Justice 479-5017, John Keller 479-3630, Carol Hsieh 479-3093, Tad Fullerton 479-4037, Tim Milanowski 488-9445, or Franz Mueter, 479-4082 or 474-7768/7724

ALASKA MOUNTAIN SAFETY CENTER, INC. and the ALASKA AVALANCHE SCHOOL 1990-91 SCHEDULE

Date	No./Name Workshop	Location	Cost*
12/15	1. Avalanche Hazard Recognition	U of A, Anchorage, Library, R. 118	\$ 18
1/11-13	2. Backcountry Aval. Haz. Eval. Workshop	Ski Bowl, Mt. Hood, Oregon	\$165**
1/19-21	3. Backcountry Aval. Haz. Eval. Workshop	Toklat Chalet, Aspen, Colorado	\$250***
2/8(e)-10	4. Special Snow Studies Workshop	Talkeetna-Kenai Mts.	\$115
2/15-18	5. Comp. Backcountry Aval. Haz. Eval. & Resc. Tech.	Hatcher Pass, Talkeetna Mts.	\$195
2/23-24	6. A Weekend with Ed LaChapelle	Talkeetna-Kenai Mts.	\$105
3/1-3	7. Backcountry Aval. Haz. Eval. Workshop	Hatcher Pass, Talkeetna Mts.	\$165
3/6(e),3/9-12	8. Safe Glacier Travel Workshop, Level I	Anch.(e), Matanuska Glacier, Chugach Mts.	\$205****
3/9-10	9. The Art of Snow Shelter Construction	Hatcher Pass, Talkeetna Mts.	\$ 70****
3/14-17	10. Comp. Backcountry Aval. Haz. Eval. & Resc. Tech.	Thompson Pass, Chugach Mts.	\$195****
3/20(e),3/22-24	11. Safe Glacier Travel Workshop, Level II	Anch.(e), Matanuska Glacier, Chugach Mts.	\$190
4/19-21	12. Technical Mountaineering Skills Workshop	Turnagain Arm, Chugach Mts.	\$185
5/17-20	13. Ocean Kayaking Skills Workshop	Resurrection Bay, Seward	\$195
Open	Custom Workshops for your Organization	Open	Open

LIFE DURING 80 FEET

by Gary Donofrio

A faint yell, "Off rappel!" makes its way through a cold biting wind, through webs of ice inset in sharp-edged cracks of weathered rock of the Keystone Canyon. My eyes were wide open showing all the excitement of an under-aged little boy who trustingly let his older brother sneak him onto the scariest roller coaster ride in the whole park. All my senses were alert as I quivered from the overflow of adrenaline. While waiting for my body chemistry to readjust, I put myself on rappel.

Working the ropes into my stitch plate was like coiling a garden hose at ten below. I kept drifting back to the first verglass climbing I had just experienced. Containing the intense "rush" that came with "flashing" my first mixed rock and ice route was like trying to hold back Niagara Falls with a Dixie cup. Trying to mentally calm myself, I kept hearing the words of my partner over and over. "Welcome to the world of Grade Six," is what he said after I followed his spectacular lead on "Marginal Desperation." I began to double check the system.

"Harness buckle looks good, locking carabiner is locked, stitch plate looks good," I thought to myself as my eyes scanned for any sign of weakness. The ropes were anchored to a three-inch spruce tree by one-inch tubular webbing backed up by kevlar around a thick alder branch. "This thing will hold a truck," I thought as I bounced my body weight on it to test for that "bomber feeling." Seeing no sign of weakness, but noting that the double fishermans knot looked a little funny tied with ropes of different diameters, I decided to try something new.

Normally I keep the ropes from getting tangled by using my left hand. This time I would try keeping the ropes separated with the aid of a sling. I clipped the sling to my harness, then clipped the other end around one of the ropes of the double rope system. After one more quick glance at the set up, I confidently let the ropes take my body weight as I hung my back out over the edge.

I slowly turned my head as would a victim in a horror movie expecting the terrifying ghoul behind him to spread his guts on the wall like modern art. I could see Paul, my partner, directly below me. Looking for the best way to rappel, I chose not to go straight down the face to an overhang. I saw a slight ramp to the right and headed for it instead. Once at the bottom of the ramp, I found that I was at the same dead end I tried to avoid by not going straight down. I felt as if I were in an alley surrounded by walls on three sides and an L.A. street gang with switch blades on the other. My only option; swing left, out into free space.

Feeling like a bob on the end of a pendulum of a grandfather clock, I could only wish that my movement was as controllably smooth. Finally letting go with the last two fingers, I committed to the traverse. The ropes slid across the face above with all the lubrication of a motorcyclists face sliding across the interstate pavement.

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Looking up, I could see that the ropes had to go over one more small lip before I was once again hanging directly off the anchor. Dangling in free space, I tried to flip the ropes over the lip. My body weight working against me, I was like a small fish on a line trying to pull the fisherman off the dock. Though the thought of equipment failure never entered my mind, I felt as comfortable as a dog who had just bit a porcupine and had quills sticking out of the top of its nose. I gave up on moving the ropes and decided that I had just better descend.

Continuing down, still hanging free, I had trouble evenly feeding the different sized, cold, stiff ropes through the stitch plate. "CLICK!" I heard. I instantly stopped the descent. Every muscle in my body froze like a cat who had unexpectedly come face to face with a killer attack dog in that still, split second of panicked realization before the pounce. My lungs took a short, quick breath in, then became as stationary as the rock face I was hanging from. I was as silent as deep space listening for any little noise. Slowly I let only my eyes wander to look for the problem. I found that the carabiner clipped on to one rope had mysteriously clipped itself around both ropes. Still hanging, I took a little more time to get back on to one rope. With no luck in completing my task, I rationalized that the gate must have opened on the tape marking half rope. Now feeling as comfortable as the dog watching its master pull the quills out of its nose, I saw the first belay station. "I'm almost down," I comfortably thought.

"OH MY GOD, I'M FALLING!" Shocked, my mind raced at the speed of light. "Did the anchor that could hold Fort Knox let go?" It felt as if the primary anchor gave out, but the back-up held. In reality, it was the sheath cutting open to expose the ropes core. After a brief moment of false security, I realized that I was "taking the big whinger" and there was nothing I could do but go for the ride.

Feeling like I was up-side-down, I closed my eyes while many short thoughts quickly bounced through my brain the way my body bounced off the webs of ice and rock. "I'm going all the way down this time...I hope I don't break my neck...That would suck...What went wrong with the system?...Did that funny looking fishermans slip apart?...I'm sure I'll do some nasty permanent damage to my body this time...God, I hope I don't die..." Not really fearful, it was as if I were enjoying what was happening. I blacked out and never felt any impact.

Paul came running down the slope calling, "GARY! GARY?" In a timidly forceful sort of expression, he awoke me from my disoriented daze. I woke from the edge of death as if God was giving me a second chance, or as if I were a cat that had just used up its first life. Paul's reaction reminded me of the time I came upon an over-turned pick up truck with the cab crushed in on the drivers side. Running to the aid of the driver, I didn't really want to look inside afraid of finding a dismembered body. I soon became less dizzy and more aware of reality.

Paul was staring straight into my eyes without blinking. His face was blank and expressionless, except for minor hints of

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terror he was unable to keep hidden. He looked like he had just seen a ghost. With all the intensity of a laser beam, we did not break eye contact with each other. We were both assessing ourselves and each other at the same time. For a moment time was again frozen, but it now included Paul. "I never saw anyone fall that far and live!" he said. I felt lucky to be alive. The spoken words put an opaque object through the laser beam. My mind was now free to assess body damage.

The left knee was sending most of the pain messages to my brain. I knew at that moment my knee would never be the same again. Thinking of the worst, I hoped I would be able to walk again. Although not feeling anything wrong internally, I was not certain and afraid to move. What a headache! The left collar bone was the next source of pain. It felt like the time I had broken it getting squished between two big football players in ninth grade PE class. Seeing a climber finish the last pitch of "Glass Onion" across the canyon, I wondered how this would effect the rest of the climbing season.

Being tangled in an alder bush was not conducive to a relaxed setting. I felt like a twig stuck in a nappy head of dreadlocks that hadn't been washed for three weeks of wilderness bushwhacking. Becoming extremely claustrophobic, I could no longer stay in the spaghetti-like grasp of the bush. Wanting to straighten my knee overcame the fear of doing internal damage by moving. "Don't move, don't move!" Paul yelled. "But I'm uncomfortable" I replied and slowly removed myself from the bush. Lying out motionless, I tried to come up with a plan, although I didn't know what for.

Still assessing the damage, I started cursing about my knee as I saw more climbers on "Greensteps" across the canyon. My collar bone no longer felt broken but was very sore. I took off the equipment sling from around my neck that had three freshly sharpened recurve ice tools clipped to it. As my eyes caught the ugly cold steel edges, I was amazed that I didn't get impaled like the old Dracula effect. It wasn't my time.

Finally Paul helped me get up. He said I looked like a rag doll. I walked back to the truck with my knee straight. "It can't be that bad if I can walk on it" I thought. Paul went back up the hill to get the ropes and to find out what the culprit was. At the truck we observed the completely cut nine millimeter and the half-cut eleven millimeter ropes. In the bone chilling February winds blowing through Valdez's Keystone Canyon, we threw our equipment in the back of my truck with no regard for organization.

Pretending to myself that this was no big deal, I drove us out of the canyon. Halfway back to Valdez, I could no longer concentrate. I couldn't keep the truck on the road. My eye lids grew heavy. My hands started shaking uncontrollably. I began to realize the magnitude of what just happened to me. I no longer had control of what I needed to do. I could let Paul take it from here. I broke down. Paul drove me to the hospital but I didn't want to go in. Once back at Andrew Embick's basement, I climbed up to my top bunk just to prove to myself I could do it. All I

could do was lie still, soaking wet and embarrassed of showing my inept climbing abilities to the forty other climbers who would soon return from their own successes during the 1989 Valdez Ice Climbing Festival.

HOT TIME AT TOLOVANA HOT SPRINGS!

Ski into Tolovana Hot Springs on March 23rd! The larger cabin has been reserved for the nights of Saturday, March 23 and 24. This allows for a day to ski in, a day of exploration and relaxation, and a day to ski out. Tolovana Hot Springs is accessible via an 11 mile trail at a point 90 miles from Fairbanks on the Minto-Manley Highway.

The larger cabin is (18 x 24) which sleeps 6 in beds and who knows how many on the floor. This cabin has wood heat and a four burner propane stove for cooking. However, I would suggest that people come prepared to cook their own meals. The hot springs is contained in a hot tub approximately 1/4 mile from the cabin; it is maintained at approximately 110 F.

The smaller cabin is a frame cabin which sleeps four.

The trail descends from the Minto-Manley Highway into a valley characterized by black spruce. It is not a trail for beginners. After crossing this valley one ascends Tolovana Dome, an approximate gain of 1000 feet of elevation. (It's steep!) However, the view from the top is fantastic--the Alaska Range!! The trail descends steeply via a sharply twisting trail into the springs. The area around the springs is beautiful with large birch, aspen, and spruce lining the creek which runs year round due to the hot springs.

A visit to Tolovana Hot Springs is a truly unique experience. The managers, Tom DeLong and Paul Hummel, deserve praise for maintaining the springs in a primitive condition suitable for that segment of the population who desire to experience the wilderness in a minimally developed setting. If you are unable to make the trip in March, you may want to arrange a trip of your own in the future. Contact Tom DeLong, PO Box 83058, Fairbanks, Alaska 99708. Phone: 455-6706

Persons desiring to join the trip should phone Joanne Groves, 479-3079 (home) or 474-7870 (work). Reservation of the cabin for the two nights cost \$100. This expense will be divided equally among the participants. I will also endeavor to coordinate transportation to the trail head.

ALANCHE!

no McKinney, NOLS Instructor

"Four Elude Death in Vail Avalanche: Preparation makes difference for Colorado Springs Residents. By all rights, they should have died on the mountain. Instead, the four Colorado Springs residents Sunday were telling friends how intense preparation helped them survive an avalanche that experts say would have killed most other skiers. . ." --Colin Flaherty, Colorado Springs Telegraph

Thus read the front page of Monday, January 9, 1989's paper. Thirty-six hours earlier, I had been gliding carefree through the woods, my skis solidly locked in the tracks of the eight preceding skiers. We were doing the ski tour called the Commando Run from Vail Pass to Vail Ski Area. The combination of excellent skiing, scenic backcountry, and the lift ride up to Vail make this eighteen-mile tour a Colorado favorite.

Our group had left the normal route at lunchtime, opting to follow the recommendation of some veterans of the tour. We dropped off the regular route on the ridge and carved turns in deep powder through the trees and then began a long traverse toward the back bowls of Vail.

The good skiing, the tracks of the preceding skiers, and the resemblance of this traverse to the normal ridge route I had done three years ago, all conspired into allowing myself to let down my guard. The slope angle was low, we were in thick trees, avalanche conditions were reported moderate below treeline, and we hadn't seen or heard any signs of instability.

Suddenly, we were out of the trees and on to a steeper slope that curved up to a cliff band and we were sliding down-slope with the entire snowpack. I had enough momentum to ski across to an island of trees, but it was to no avail. Susan Taylor, also in the trees, and I were caught in the slide.

The faster-moving surface snow pushed us over and I remember yelling to Susan to "swim and try to stay on top." But swimming in wet, moving concrete is no small task. I was tumbled over a few times and dragged over a rock. As the slide began to slow down, I managed to get my hand up, but couldn't pull my arm over to create a breathing space. Trapped. My jaw was pressed shut and I had to pull my cheeks back to breathe through clenched teeth. With chest compressed, I could only pull in a little air.

A hand was free above the snow and, for a moment, I thought I might be able to dig myself out. A small divot around my wrist was the fruit of my labor. I tried to bust out. Nothing moved. An ice cage. Terror. I thought of my friends and family and finishing my life this way, so soon. If all of our party was buried, we were doomed. Nobody would be following our tracks in the near future.

At the edge of consciousness I heard footsteps and Tim's voice above the snow. As he stood over me digging, the snow was crushed down even harder. Breathing was now impossible and I

passed out.

"Tim Smith raced down the hill and saw McKinney's hand sticking out of the snow. Using a collapsible shovel from his pack, Smith freed McKinney within minutes."

With equipment scattered over the mountain and no sign of where the others were buried, Smith and McKinney began to search. It was then that credit for the four's survival turned from luck to what one Vail Ski Patrol member called 'phenomenal preparation.'

Once out of the snow and recovered, training took over: hasty search, transceivers on, grid search, dig like mad with shovels, primary and secondary surveys, artificial ventilation, re-warm a hypothermic comrade, build a shelter, light a fire, develop a rescue and evacuation plan for our weakened party, help coordinate the rescue, take care of yourself. This was our training and lucky enough to have survived being caught unsuspecting in an avalanche -- we were able to respond like professionals.

At the edge of consciousness I heard footsteps and Tim's voice above the snow. As he stood over me digging, the snow was crushed down even harder. Breathing was now impossible and I passed out.

Our mistakes: (1) Inattention; we let down the shield of awareness of terrain and snow characteristics. The opening in the trees was suspect terrain. A quick snow pit would have revealed a thick layer of depth hoar. (2) We assumed the ski tracks of eight skiers a little way ahead meant safe passage. (3) We were skiing too close together and thus three out of four of our party were buried. (4) We got caught.

Otherwise, we were well prepared for skiing in the backcountry and had the training to respond quickly and effectively. We wore avalanche beacons and had practiced using them. Most of us had snow shovels. (Every member in a ski party should carry a shovel.) We kept hydrated and fed through the day, though water bottles were freezing up by late afternoon. I recommend insulating them. Extra insulating layers and wind clothes helped keep us warm. Fire starting tools and an emergency blanket were critical in re-warming Susan when she was recovered after twenty minutes six feet under the snow. First aid skills and artificial ventilation also helped us care for Susan. With Susan drying and warming behind snow walls and next to the fire, with wood collected to keep the fire going all night if necessary, with enough gear collected for two of us to ski out for help, and with plans made for our evacuation, Taylor and I set out for help.



NOLS student practices using avalanche beacon ("Pieps") on a winter NOLS course.

Winter is here again, and with it the celebration of backcountry skiing. The experience of last winter is vividly imprinted in my mind. What was once theoretical understanding of avalanche dynamics and rescue techniques is now a passion for awareness and self-preservation. I won't be caught again unaware, but the development of the highest level of awareness and preparation shouldn't require such a misadventure.

A number of resources for education are available. *Avalanche Safety for Skiers and Climbers* by Tony Daffern, *Avalanche Handbook* by the US Forest Service, *The ABC's of Avalanche Safety* by Ed LaChapelle, the two editions of *Snowy Torrents* by Knox Williams and Betsy Armstrong. Check in your area for avalanche seminars or contact The American Avalanche Institute at 307-733-3315. NOLS winter courses also offer avalanche training.

Finally, dig snowpits and do snowpack studies. Then dig more snowpits. All the schooling and theory is of little value unless we develop our ability to interpret the data accurately. Snow is an exceedingly variable medium and ultimately, only experience can clue us in to the slide potential of any particular slope on any particular day. And, until completely confident in our forecasting abilities, conservative judgment is the most valuable rescue tool. All of these skills and knowledge are of little use, as I learned, if one doesn't use relentless awareness of terrain and snowpack. When transceivers are turned on at the beginning of a ski tour, so should vigilance be turned up. The best way to survive avalanches is to stay out of them.

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NORTHWEST BUTTRESS OF DENALI
from "High Alaska" by Jonathan Waterman

Perhaps it is because the Northwest Buttress leads to the North Peak instead of the higher South Peak that this moderately difficult ridge is seldom climbed. However, it is a classic Alaskan route because it offers the full spectrum of climbing: snow and ice cornices, a knife-edge ridge, couloirs, frost-fractured schist towers and pink-speckled granite. Last, but not least it has an awe-aspiring view down the biggest wall in the world and across the vast Alaskan tundra.

The first ascent (1954) was conceived during meetings of the University of Alaska Alpine Club in Fairbanks and was based on Bradford Washburn's detailed description in The American Alpine Journal 1947. That year, the Fairbanks members would simultaneously climb both the Northwest and South Buttresses of Denali.

Following the lead of Stuck and the Sourdoughs, Alaskan climbers would continue to be one of the most prominent and consistent forces in the Alaska Range for the next three decades. This could be due, in part, to their proximity to the mountains and their propensity for arctic weather.

The Fairbanks contingent, Donald McLean and Charles Wilson, enlisted Captain Bill Hackett and Henry Meybohm. Meybohm was a ski instructor from Germany, living in Anchorage.

The thirty-five-year-old Hackett had already taken part in the 1947 Muldrow Glacier ascent with Washburn, testing various cold weather gear for the military. He would also return with Washburn and do the first ascent of the West Buttress in 1951. Hackett was responsible for inviting Fred Beckey, whom he had befriended in the army. After the Northwest Buttress climb, Beckey and Meybohm would continue to climbing with the characteristic Beckey fervor and knock off first ascents of Mounts Deborah and Hunter.

Hackett was an unusual man, successfully integrating mountaineering and military careers. In World War II, he was a leader of a forty-seven man platoon in Italy that saw all but nine men wounded or killed. When he completed the Northwest Buttress, the zenith (but not the end) of his Alaskan career, he would be the first man to have reached the highest mountains in five continents, a record that would stand uncontested for twenty years.

On the Northwest Buttress, the team planned to test vapor barrier sleeping pads and down-filled, "walk-around" sleeping robes for the United States Air Force. And contrary to popular belief about climbing in the fifties, the foresightful Beckey had stiff boot soles and frontpoints for ice climbing.

On May 2, 1954, the five men landed twenty miles from the Peters Glacier, just north of Mount Foraker. Within three days, they were established at the foot of the Northwest Buttress.

When their airdrop pilot buzzed right over their heads, they thought it strange that he didn't return. Out of sight of their base camp, a sudden down-draft forced the plane down onto the glacier, where it overturned. An hour later, much to everyone's

surprise, the pilot and passenger sheepishly strolled into camp. They were "rescued" three days later by the Air Force. This experience provided a prime incentive for the National Park Service to ban airdrops in 1964.

The climbers began work in earnest, chopping steps and fixing ropes up a couloir on the northern side of the ridge, across a plateau: from here they followed a coxcomb section of the ridge, occasionally straddling it like a horse. They established Camp 1 at 10,500 feet, just below Frederick A. Cook's 1903 high point.

Beckey found the high-profiled Logan tents to be "spooky" in the wind, so with his usual relentless energy, he set to digging a snow cave for shelter. Because of the protected nature of this spot on the ridge, they only used it for storage.

On May 13, Beckey and McLean climbed unroped on frozen and rotten schist, placing fixed ropes to the top of a pyramid at 12,500 feet. Another pyramid was circumvented by traversing into a cirque. They chopped steps for six hours, up a couloir out of the cirque, watching the ice chips skitter 6,000 feet to the Tluna Icefall. They regained the buttress at 14,200 feet.

Camp 2 was established in the cirque and loads were carried in framepacks which Beckey described as digging into his shoulders. Those were the days of canvas and Goldline ropes and "Goodyear" boots. And ice climbers had arms like lumberjacks; routes which can now be dispensed so quickly with frontpoints were laboriously chopped with steps from top to bottom, despite Beckey's presence.

At the 15,000-foot level on the ridge, Beckey stroked his fingers over beautiful pink granite. In a fitting gesture, for Beckey would become the most prolific mountaineer in North America, he hammered the first rock pitons on North America's highest peak. Ropes were fixed and Camp 3 was established at 14,800 feet, beneath these cliffs.

Beckey led his party to the next camp, at 15,600 feet, in just a few hours. Camps were made at 17,400 feet, and then again at 18,500 feet in a matter of a few days. As three of the climbers contracted acute mountain sickness from climbing so rapidly, McLean injected them with a hormone known for its value in stress conditions.

On May 27, at 7:30 P.M., they reached the North Summit; it was a threatening day, and Beckey continually looked askance at the deteriorating weather. They retreated to their high camp at 18,500 feet, hoping, eventually, to get a shot at the South Summit.

After four days of storm, their fuel ran out. They rappelled the rock cliffs with a long rope. Six feet of snow covered their steps at the thirteen-thousand-foot cirque, where they were forced to shovel their way back to the windblown ridge.

Down, but not yet out of danger, Hackett nearly drowned in a river crossing. At Wonder Lake, as a final, sad blow to end an enjoyable expedition, they were informed that Elton Thayer had died while descending from the ascent of the South Buttress. In the fifties, there were very few climbers and a death within this close-knit community was an irrevocable and devastating loss.

Variations

In 1982, two members of Gary Bocarde's guided Mountain Trip team completed the second ascent of this route. They made a variation on the start by climbing the couloir on the south side of the buttress. Other variations were made which avoided the coxcomb by traversing under it and by climbing around on snow and ice to avoid various sections of rock.

In 1984, Vern Tejas (who made the first winter ascent of Mount Hunter in 1980) and John Schweider became the first climbers to reach both the North and South Peaks. Tejas climbed the route with Footfangs strapped to his floppy bunny boots.

NORTHWEST BUTTRESS ROUTE GUIDE

Approach: 10 miles from the 7,200-foot Southeast Fork of the Kahiltna, via the 10,000-foot Kahiltna Pass to the 7,700-foot base.

Total Time: 12-24 days

Climbing Miles: 9 (North Peak 6)

Vertical Gain of Route: 12,600 feet (North Peak; 11,900 feet)

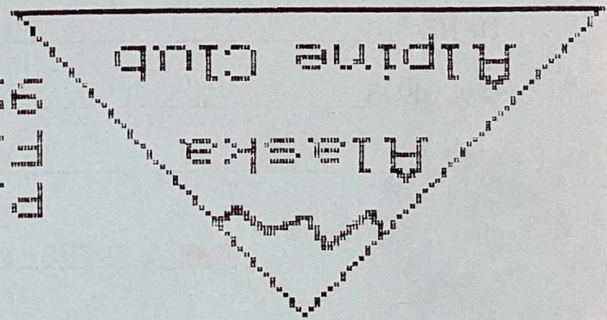
Alaska Grade: 4

Difficulties: Occasional mixed climbing through the two rock pyramids; snow and ice up to 65 degrees; low class 5 rock climbing on rotten schist and frost-shattered granite.

Camps: 10,200; 11,000; 12,500; 14,200; 15,600; 16,600; 17,400; 18,500

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