

THE NORTH WING OF THE COLUMBIA GROUP

CANADIAN ROCKY MOUNTAINS

BY J. MONROE THORINGTON

A MOST striking topographical feature of the central Canadian Rocky Mountains, that portion of the main range between the Canadian Pacific and the Canadian National Railways, is the tendency of the main watershed to deviate from its general northerly course and make sharp bends towards the W. These deviations occur at three points: Howse Peak, the Snow Dome, and Fortress Lake Pass, leaving as a result, in the mountain groups in which they are found, huge N. wings or wedges of peaks projecting from the watershed into the river forks of the Alberta slope.

Thus, at the Howse Peak deviation, one finds a mountain mass extending into the angle between Mistaya and Howse rivers, terminating in Mt. Sarbach. From the Snow Dome, on the Columbia icefield, there stretches the gigantic sector of peaks on Habel and Lynx creeks, filling in the Athabaska-Sunwapta angle. North of the bend at Fortress Lake lies the group of peaks between the Athabaska and the Whirlpool, culminating in Mt. Fryatt. Even now these wedges are little known and but incompletely mapped. The present paper is devoted to the central of these sectors, the mountains of the Athabaska-Sunwapta angle, the N. wing of the Columbia Group.

When one is on the Columbia icefield it is quite evident that this area forms a distinct compact unit. From the vicinity of the Snow Dome, the hydrographic apex of the icefield's tri-oceanic watershed, the troughs of the Athabaska and the Columbia Glaciers descend in opposite directions from the same névé, their drainage swinging northward into the gorges of the Sunwapta and Athabaska rivers, whose valleys then converge and unite at the northern apex of the wedge. The officially named peaks within it, The Twins, Kitchener, Stutfield, Woolley, Diadem and Alberta, all exceed 11,000 ft. in elevation, North Twin (12,085 ft.) being the loftiest peak entirely within Alberta territory.

The northern part of the angle formed by the converging rivers is unmapped, for the Boundary Survey extends but a few miles beyond the main watershed. On the Sunwapta side the range drops in abrupt precipices, drained by short creeks descending in canyons from bench-glaciers. On the Athabaska or western side the mountains are penetrated by deep but longer valleys: Habel Creek, Lynx Creek, and the unnamed valley opposite Fortress Lake.

The mountaineering history is brief, climbers having devoted themselves chiefly to the high peaks of Habel Creek and the adjacent margin of the icefield. Collie,¹ Stutfield and Woolley ascended Diadem from the Sunwapta in 1898. Three years later the German explorer, Jean Habel,² in a remarkable tour, reached the head of the stream which bears his name and looked down into the Sunwapta Valley. More than twenty years elapsed before the writer's party,³ in 1923, reached the summit of North Twin. South Twin fell to Field⁴ in the following year, the same season in which Palmer⁵ and Hickson, coming from Jasper, visited Habel Creek and 'Little Alberta,' without, however, being able to attempt its loftier namesake. In 1925, both Mt. Alberta and Mt. Woolley fell to the Japanese group⁶ led by Yuko Maki. The Harvard party⁷ secured Kitchener and Stutfield in 1927, while Strumia⁸ and his companions of 1930 reached the unnamed peak, 10,700 ft., at the head of Habel Creek by an arduous route from the Sunwapta side. The writer's party,⁹ paying a flying trip to Habel Creek in 1931, made no attempt to climb there.

E. Cromwell, E. Cromwell, jun., F. S. North and the writer returned to the region in 1936, intent upon obtaining more detailed information concerning the northern tip of the group, which could then be joined to the maps of the Interprovincial Survey along the axis of the Lynx Creek Valley. However, as our plans included additional climbing at the head of Chaba river and the western fork of the Athabaska, this interlude would break the continuity of our exploration of the northern and southern portions of the Athabaska-Sunwapta angle. We knew that the northern portion of the area contained a deep valley, with a lake on the Athabaska side of the divide, as it had been noticed in 1919, when the Interprovincial Survey occupied stations in the vicinity of Fortress Lake Pass. 'Not far from the [Athabaska-Sunwapta] junction, on the E. side of the valley, a lake with water of a very peculiar shade of brownish-green is held in by the side of a hanging valley which extends back S.E. to the Sunwapta Valley. The lake is about a mile long and a quarter of a mile wide, and is fully 1500 ft. above the river bottom. It has been named Gong Lake on account of its appearance.'¹⁰

Proceeding from Jasper, we left Sunwapta Falls with pack-train on June 27, following the Athabaska trail for some miles until we had rounded the western buttress of the conspicuous rock peak, named 'Confederation' by the Harvard party of 1927. This is situated to the east of the river and almost due east of Fortress Lake Pass. Picking

¹ *Climbs and Exploration in the Canadian Rockies*, 127.

² 'The Western Sources of the Athabaska.' *Appal.* x, 40.

³ *The Glittering Mountains of Canada*, 78.

⁴ 'Mountaineering on the Columbia Icefield.' *Appal.* xvi, 146.

⁵ 'The First Ascent of Mt. King Edward.' *A. J.* 37. 314.

⁶ 'Mt. Alberta and Mt. Woolley.' *A. J.* 37. 374.

⁷ 'From the Athabaska River to Tsar Creek.' *C. A. J.* xvi. 17.

⁸ 'Gleanings in the Canadian Rockies.' *A. A. J.* i. 308.

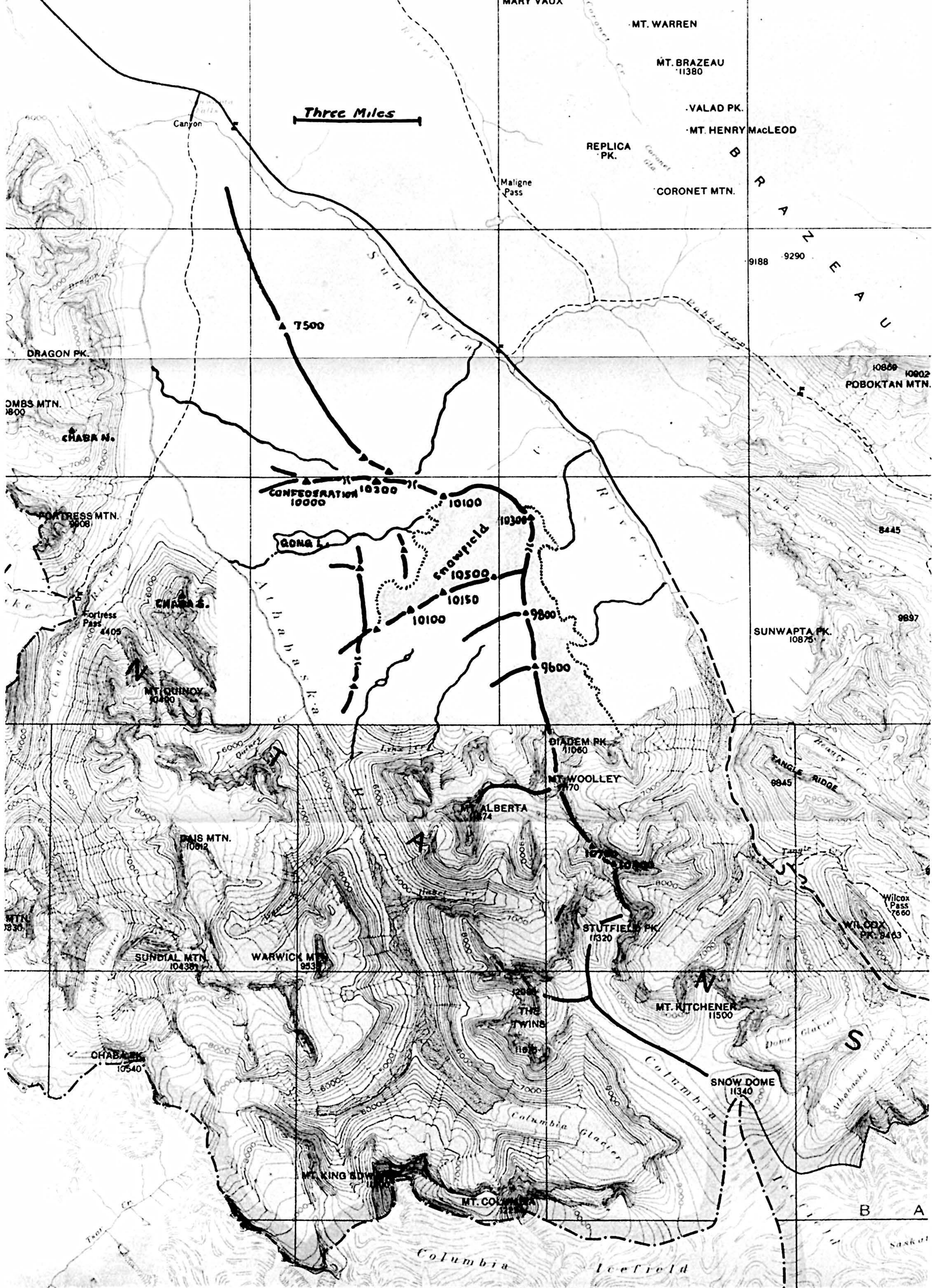
⁹ 'Up the Athabaska Valley.' *C. A. J.* xx. 30.

¹⁰ *Report of the Boundary Commission*: Part ii, 67.



Photo, Interprovincial Survey.]

GONG LAKE AND MT. CONFEDERATION FROM CHABA S. STATION.
NOTE EMERGENCE OF OUTLET STREAM.



THE NORTH WING OF THE COLUMBIA GROUP, SHOWING ATHABASKA-SUNWAPTA DIVIDE.

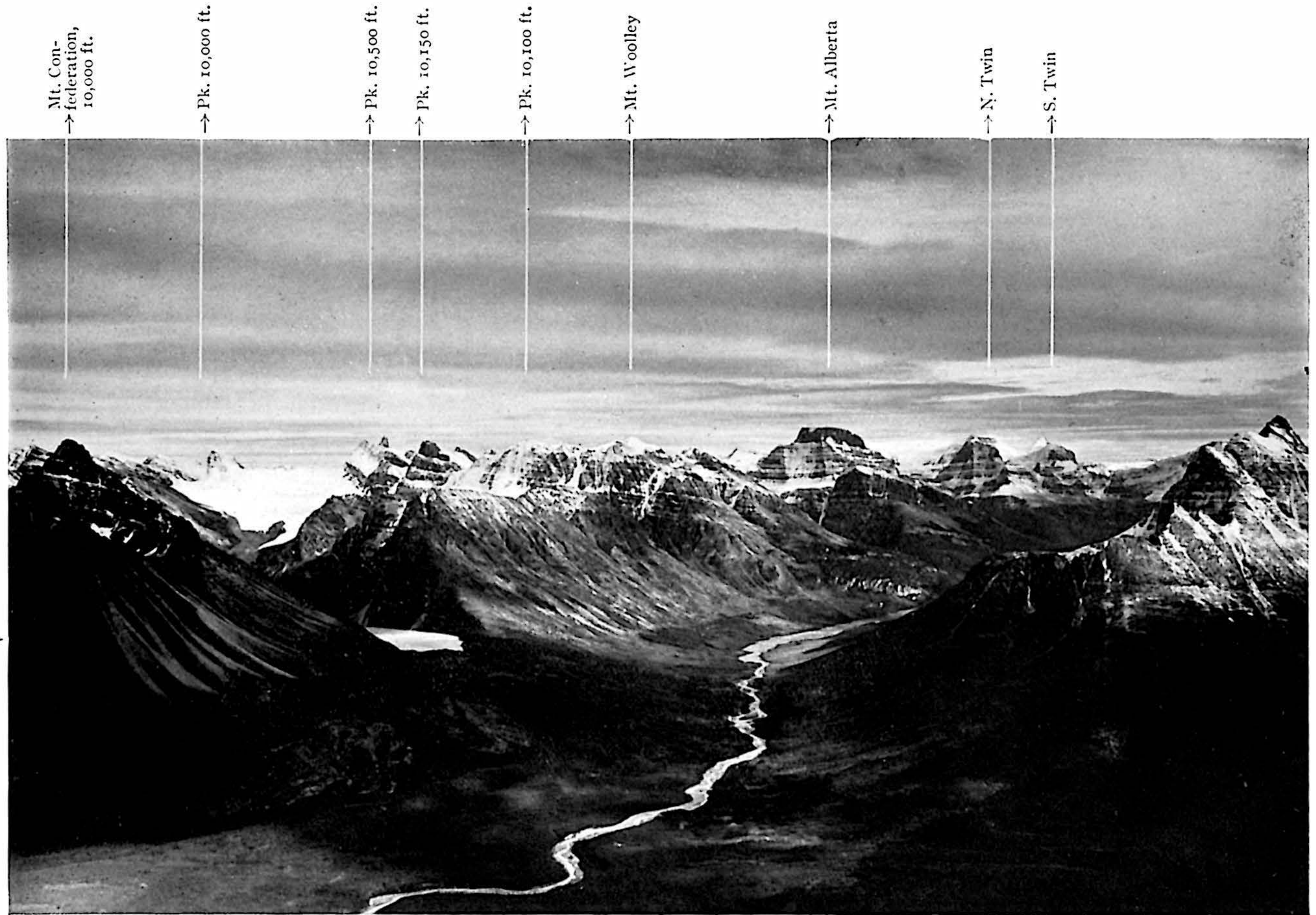
the more open slopes of scrub timber, we led the pack-train upward, searching for the lake. It proved to be higher than expected, and was found with some difficulty in fog and rain after we had climbed to 5700 ft., 1300 ft. above the main valley. Gong Lake is almost a mile and a half in length, and we camped beside it until July 3. Mt. Confederation forms its northern shore. The lake itself is strange in its behaviour. Its depth is evidenced by the high angle of the rock-slides which cut its shores. The water is pale opaque green and rose almost two feet during our stay, completely covering a patch of beach where we at first contemplated setting a tent. The entire shore is strewn with masses of bleached driftwood in tangled piles.

At the N.W. angle of the lake one finds a place where, at times of high water, driftwood has been carried out for several hundred yards through green timber. This is not the outlet, and none was discovered during the time of our stay. Later on, from the main valley, we noticed that to the S.E. of our camping place a subterranean stream of considerable volume emerges about 150 ft. below the level of the lake, and descends to the Athabaska.

From our camp in burned timber we walked around the lake. The southern shore is preferable, but annoying rock-slides so impede progress that we were never able to reach the head of the lake in less than an hour and a quarter. The northern shore is an almost impassable tangle of slide and windfall, which we never revisited. Immediately behind the tents was a hillock from which Mt. Columbia and the head of the Athabaska are visible. One could reach it in a few minutes, and the sunset colourings were often gorgeous. Steeply below is a small tarn, a hundred yards in diameter and an equal distance below the level of the main lake. There is probably underground connection between the two, and the smaller body of water is much visited by ducks and other wildfowl.

On June 30, as we penetrated beyond the head of the lake a splendid valley revealed itself. We followed game trails through the woods, and gravel-bars of the sparkling stream, gay with the magenta of blossoming fireweed. A snowfield arched against the skyline, and rock towers shot up to the S.E. No one had been before us. Mt. Confederation (10,000 ft.) presents a grim prow of rock at its eastern end, followed by two peaks of gentler slope, separated by low saddles not far above timber-line. Then to the E., closing the valley, is a broad, gleaming snowfield, a bell-shaped peak (10,300 ft.) centred above it, the snow ending in steep glacier and an arch of ice. Behind us we had still a glimpse of the lake, with Fortress Mtn., across the Athabaska, shining in new snow. It is the S. rim of this valley, however, which catches the eye. From left to right in breath-taking array there is a broad wall, surmounted by a gigantic pinnacle (10,500 ft.) resembling the dorsal fin of a shark; then a sheer tower (10,150 ft.), black as night; and, finally, a broad double peak (10,000 ft.), with corniches, couloirs and icefalls—as fine and continuous a rampart as one can imagine.

Gong
Lake →



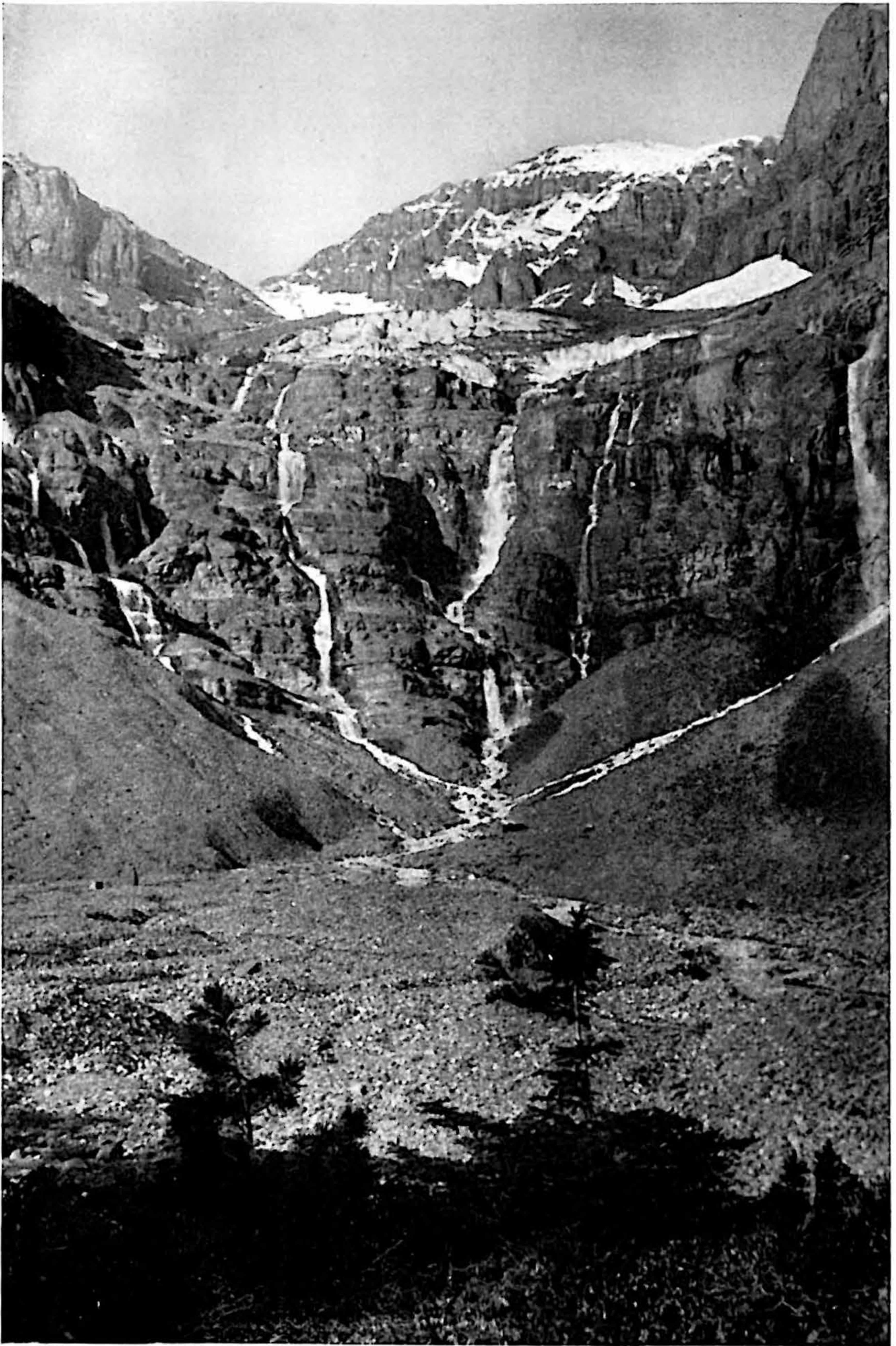
Photo, Interprovincial Survey.]

VIEW S.E. FROM CHABA N. STATION, SHOWING ATHABASKA VALLEY AND PEAKS IN VALLEY OF GONG LAKE.

Preceding nights had been stormy and new snow was plastered into every corner. We crossed the snowfield to the southern base of the bell-shaped peak, reaching a saddle through which we looked along the cliff-glacier that stretches on the eastern side of the divide to Diadem. Below us were the green marshes of the Sunwapta. The total glacial system here occupies some 15 square miles. Our mountain required care, its down-tilted strata wreathed in icicles and fans of frost. We were on top, all summits save the shark-fin below us. The barometer read 10,300 ft.

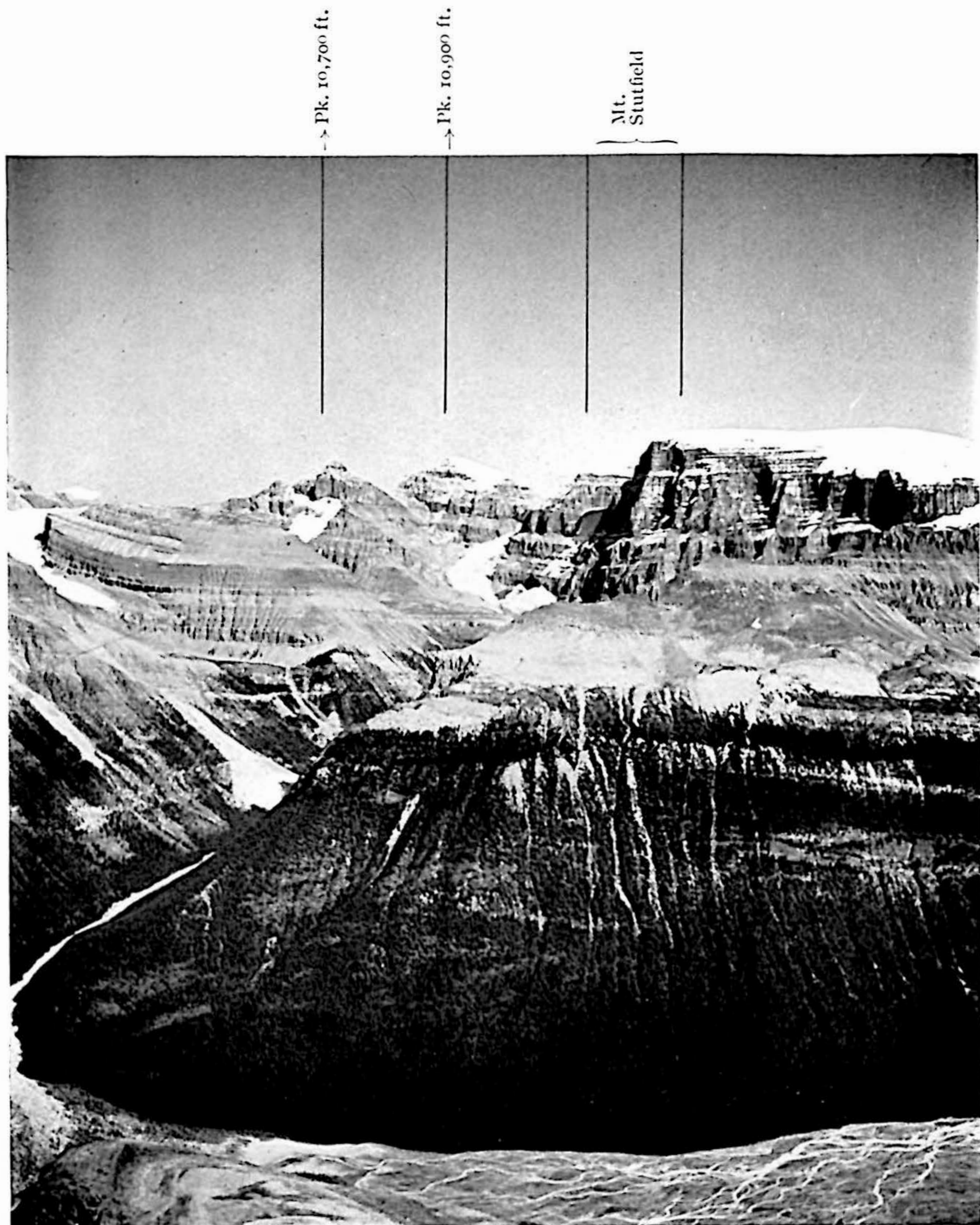
Far to the W. we could see the turquoise waters of Fortress Lake, a brilliant jewel set against the dark wall of Chisel Peak. Clouds swung in from the S., hiding the top of Alberta. A storm was on its way, and it was snowing before we could unrope at the ice-tongue. Sun-showers followed us to the forest, but by the time we regained our lake a steady downpour had commenced, never ceasing as we crossed the dreary slides through the gathering darkness. On July 2 Cromwell and North made a determined but unsuccessful attempt on Mt. Confederation. The route was undoubtedly the correct one, a tremendous slanting gallery being traversed from W. to E. across the southern face, and bringing them to the skyline at 9500 ft. There they were turned back by a succession of broken towers, which will require more time, much rope and special technique if they are to be overcome. We were unprepared for long siege tactics. As it is, several pitons now grace this ridge. On the following morning we left for Fortress Lake.

After successful climbing along the main watershed to the S. and W. we camped on Habel Creek, below the moraines, on July 16. We had long admired the peak which closes the valley, for which Collie originally intended the name 'Stutfield' before it was transferred to its present location by the Interprovincial Survey. Our objective is 10,900 ft. in elevation and accessible, unclimbed peaks of such height are becoming rare in the Canadian Rockies. It was successfully attained on July 17. The route is complicated, but the visible portion of it had been carefully worked out by Cromwell in 1931. Starting with the earliest morning light, we crossed on a log the stream at the waterfall coming from the cirque E. of Mt. Alberta. Then follows a curious flat corridor, where the ice of the Horse Shoe Glacier below North Twin has withdrawn from the moraine. Crossing long stretches of the lateral moraine, one comes into a magnificent cirque, through which waterfalls descend from the hanging glacier on our objective peak. At the edge of the woods we placed the equipment for an emergency bivouac, a comfortable safeguard which we never used. Mounting by a route which we later realized coincides with Habel's, we came above timber-line. The sun was rising on North Twin, illuminating its fluted cliffs of ice—a scene which is without question one of the most splendid in the world. We roped for 100 ft. of broken rock, and a white goat showed us the easiest way to follow. We were above the cirque of waterfalls, entering the basin of the hanging glacier



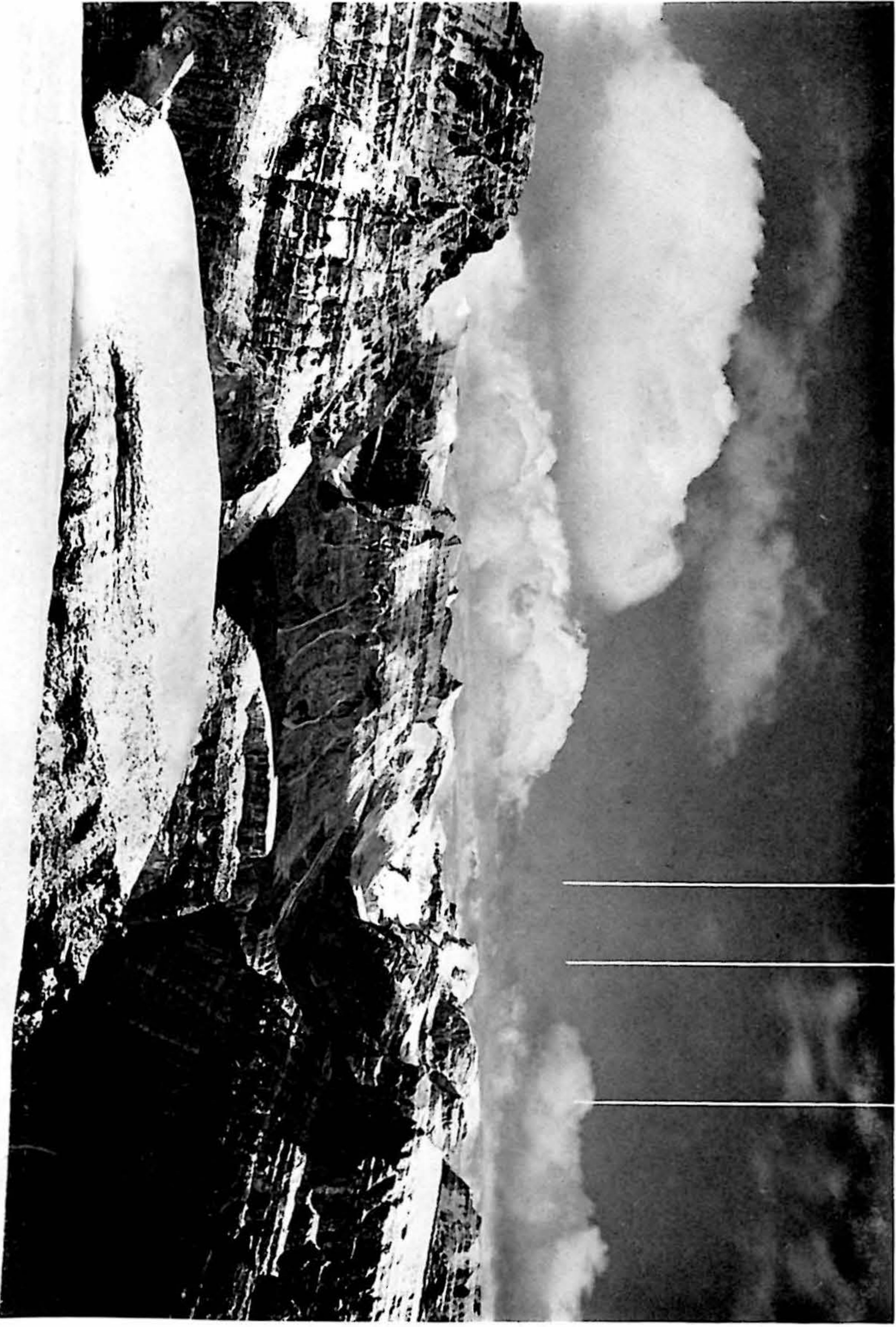
Photo, E. Cromwell.]

PEAK 10,900 FT. (MUCH FORESHORTENED) AND CIRQUE AT HEAD OF HABEL CREEK.



Photo, Interprovincial Survey.]

PEAKS OF HABEL CREEK, ACROSS THE ATHABASKA VALLEY, FROM WARWICK STATION.



→ Lynx Cr.

→ Diadem Pk.

→ Mt. Woolley

Photo, Interprovincial Survey.]

BASIN OF LYNX CREEK FROM DAIS N. STATION.

which sweeps down from Mt. Stutfield at the extreme N.E. angle of the Columbia icefield. More than 200 steps were cut before we came out on the crest and again looked down upon the Sunwapta. The final 1000 ft. of crumbling rock gave us no difficulty. We were on top shortly after noon.

We had established the feasibility of a new route to the Columbia icefield, for nothing but gentle snow slopes intervened between the last of our steps in the ice and the summits of Mt. Stutfield, above which the top of North Twin now rose. All in line to the S. were the lines of gigantic corniches which margin this side of the icefield as far as Mt. Athabaska. Mt. Alberta, from our viewpoint, now presented as formidable a wedge as one can imagine, standing, with Woolley and Diadem, on the rim between Habel and Lynx creeks. Across the basin of the latter we again saw the towers of the northern group in which we had climbed earlier. They look no more accessible from the S. A long, happy day came at last to an end, the bivouac not needed, and we ourselves by the camp fire before darkness fell. But as we sat there, watching the afterglow on the precipices of Mt. Stutfield, feet and muscles informed us that 16 hours had been just sufficient for our excursion.

On July 19 the Cromwells and North made the second ascent of Mt. Woolley, finding the summit record of the Japanese party, and enjoying new views of the little-known basin of Lynx Creek, with its ramifying streams and small lakes, to which as yet no climbing party has penetrated. There are challenging towers on its northern rim, not easily to be overcome.

Two days later we headed the pack-train down the Athabaska, bound for Jasper, the N. wing of the Columbia Group behind us.

[Illustrations of the N. Wing of the Columbia Group will be found between pp. 380 and 381.]