

TWO NORTH AMERICAN EXPEDITIONS

By M. E. B. BANKS

*(Four illustrations: nos. 5-8)**Mount McKinley*

Adventure training is making an increasingly important contribution to Service life; week-end parties of young servicemen have, for instance, become a commonplace sight in the British hills. The more ambitious aspects of adventure training have not been neglected, and a biennial Joint Services expedition, with Treasury backing, has been instituted. I led the first of these official expeditions in 1962—and it gave me my introduction to North American climbing.

My first problem was to select an objective for the expedition which would fit the ability of the party. A grant of Government money is (very properly) made with a number of strings attached. The expedition would, among other things, be required to give experience to people who were already contributing to adventure training, thereby widening their scope. These restrictions immediately ruled out an ambitious Himalayan expedition which could only be tackled by the first team of Service climbers; I was not to be allowed to preach to the converted by running a 'mountaineer's benefit'. The team would be nine strong (three from each Service) of whom only three would be seasoned alpinists. Within these limits I sought a project which would fully extend such a party. In the recondite way of the Service I was given forty-eight hours to present my finished plan. This did not worry me in the least: I had had my eye on Mount McKinley for a long time! In any case, every planning detail I could possibly require was to be found in Dr. Bradford Washburn's superb article on McKinley in *The Mountain World* of 1956.

McKinley, at 20,320 ft. the highest peak in North America, would suit us well. It had not been climbed by a British party, although I afterwards learned that a Briton had reached the summit with a Canadian party. It would produce an amalgam of Arctic and Himalayan conditions which, combined with foul weather, deep snow, low temperatures and rotten rock, would offer a severe enough challenge to satisfy a masochist. The actual climbing would not be technically difficult. Washburn sounded a note of caution: 'The ascent of McKinley is a curious paradox. Under certain conditions it can be surprisingly easy, while under others it can be almost fiendishly difficult . . . its weather is fickle enough so that even the most powerful group of climbers may be forced to take a month or more to do this climb by the easiest route,

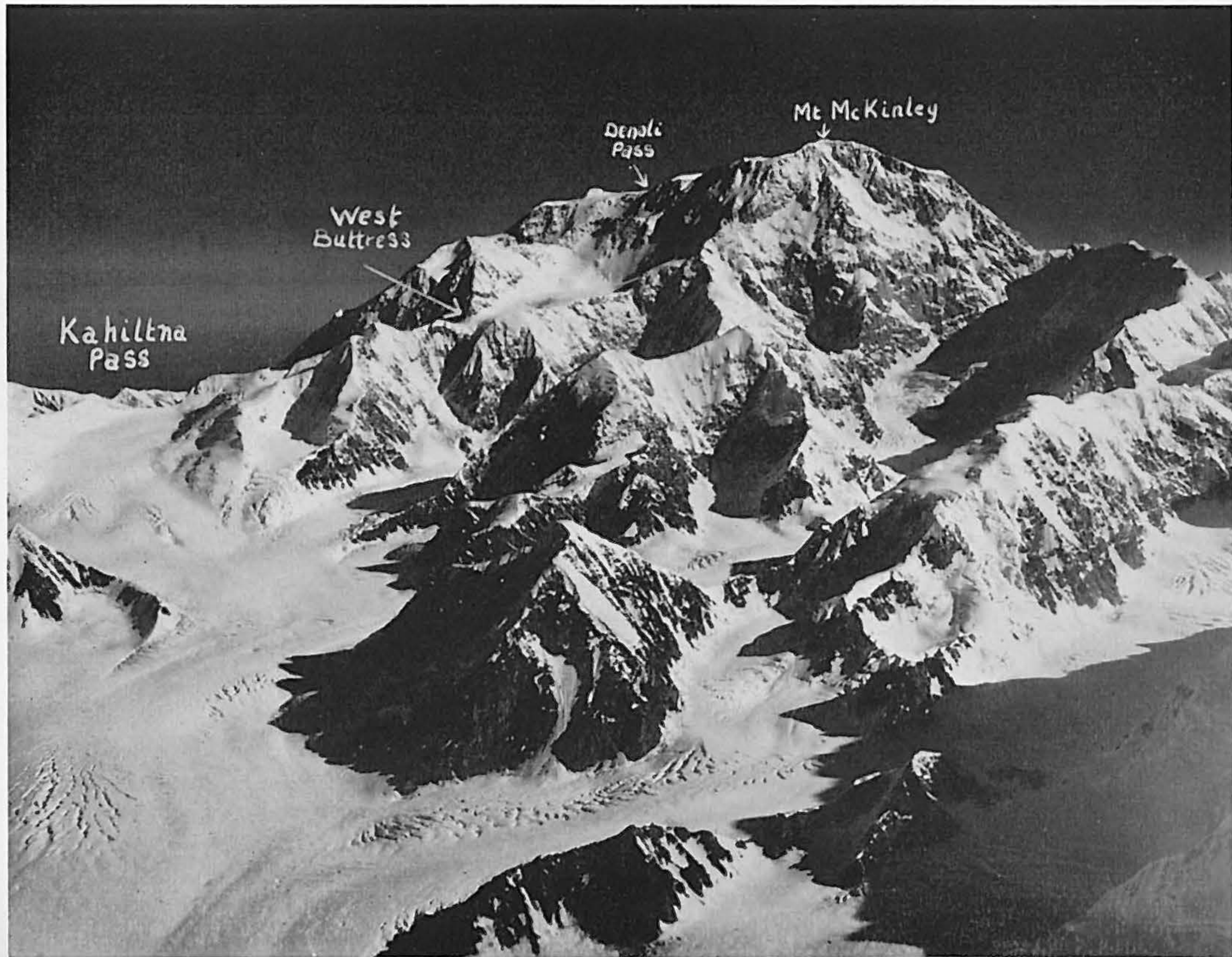


Photo: Bradford Washburn]

MOUNT MCKINLEY (20,320 FT.) FROM THE SOUTH.

(No. 5)



Official photo]

M. E. B. BANKS AT *c.* 12,000 FT. ON MOUNT MCKINLEY. SNOWSHOES WERE WORN UP TO *c.* 14,500 FT.

(No. 6)

if weather and snow conditions do not co-operate properly.' He goes on to say that the temperatures above 17,000 ft. normally remain below 0°F, even by day. This, of course, is far colder than the Himalayas. Ordinary mountaineering footwear will not do, so we used American vapour barrier boots.

The mountain is extremely inaccessible. We planned to fly into the Kahiltna glacier by ski-plane and then climb the peak by the West Buttress route. Even so, it would still be a sixteen-miles slog to the summit. Once we had climbed McKinley we hoped to attempt some virgin peaks in the same massif.

On June 5 we flew to Anchorage, Alaska, over the polar route. A sixty-mile ride on the Alaska Railroad took us to the village of Talkeetna, the customary taking-off point for the south side of McKinley. We were then flown into the mountains by that very famous Alaskan bush pilot, Don Sheldon. This part was, to my mind, more harrowing than the climbing which was to follow. Like all good bush pilots, Sheldon flew by instinct, assisted by a vast store of local knowledge. He would flit between layers of cloud, barely skimming over passes, his wheels seeming to touch the snow cornices, his wing tips brushing the mountain walls as they slipped past. This was real flying: you could feel the aircraft, sense the speed and, at a glance, understand the scale and inaccessibility of the mountains. It was a thrill not to be compared with cruising in an eighty-seater jet cut off from reality at 40,000 ft.

Sheldon would make his ski landings on a section of glacier sloping gently uphill. On completion of his landing he would turn the plane downhill, ready to take off, before coming to a halt. Take-off was quite a performance, particularly when the snow was soggy. A man was required on either side to rock and push on a wing strut. Sheldon would rev. up the engine and at the same time waggle the control column furiously. The little plane seemed to throw a fit of hysterics, the engine snarling like a demented terrier, the whole aircraft juddering and bucketing about in some obscure aeronautical version of the Twist. Then it would jerk forward, soon to gather speed and hurtle downhill, leaving a spume of driven snow behind it.

We landed at 6,700 ft. and set about our first task of concentrating all the men and stores at 10,000 ft., at the Kahiltna Pass. Sergeant Alex Fraser R.M. and I pushed ahead to open the route. Camped at 10,000 ft., we had our first taste of a McKinley blizzard when, for two days, the wind went mad, hitting the tent great pummelling blows so that Alex and I could not believe that it could possibly survive. At last, and to no one's surprise, the main guys chafed through and the tent collapsed. We crawled out to repair the damage, and in the first easement of the storm constructed an igloo, a safer and quieter snow dwelling.

While stores and men were being concentrated at the Kahiltna Pass,

Chief Technician John Hinde R.A.F. and I set off with the intention of opening up the trail to 17,000 ft. We climbed at first in peerless weather, with all the splendour of the McKinley Range unfolding before us. Then, at about 15,500 ft., we noticed soft tendrils of cloud reaching up towards us through the sunny air. We climbed on, to be wrapped about with vaporous cloud. Then, suddenly, out of the cloud a terrible wind sprang up which flung the snow in our faces with stinging force. With a shock we realised that we were caught on a huge mountain-side in a killer blizzard. Like infantrymen under artillery fire we dug for our lives, hewing a tiny platform barely wide enough to pitch our tent.

The next two days were hard. During the first night we crouched in the malformed tent, fully clothed and booted in our sleeping bags, just waiting for the weight of snow, which was piling up on the tent, to crush it. Next morning we moved the tent a few yards under the lee of an ice-cliff, which probably saved our lives, for an avalanche swept down obliterating our former camp site.

The day after that we ploughed down through thigh-deep snow, only to be hit by another blizzard of such intensity that it was unthinkable even to try to pitch the tent. Instead we crawled into the tent envelope, using it as a windbreak. Some time later, to our utter amazement, we heard voices. Four of our friends had arrived, having battled uphill and up-blizzard for nine hours. An incredible feat! Alex Fraser had led most of the way and in order to see he had frequently cleared the snow out of his goggles with his bare fingers, which were now blistered with frost-bite. With the extra manpower we were able to control the lunatic canvas and pitch the tents.

When the storm blew out, six of us set out for an attempt on the summit and established our highest camp at 17,000 ft. This involved climbing 800 ft. of steep snow, with icy sections. We were, in fact, in the very act of starting out from this camp on the summit bid when Junior Technician Oldham R.A.F. who had been feeling unwell, succumbed completely to the altitude. He was only nineteen and our youngest member. He lay in his tent in a state of semi-collapse, quite unable to help himself. My Himalayan experience warned me that a man can die with frightening rapidity as a result of hypoxia, and also that the young are the most easily afflicted. So, without hesitation but with many a wistful backward glance at the summit, we conducted a mountain rescue operation of the first order. We had to manhandle Oldham down 1,000 ft. of rock ridge, then lower him down the 800 ft. of steep ice and snow, and finally drag him in his sleeping bag down 1,500 ft. of soft snow. We used all the skills variously employed by the R.A.F. Mountain Rescue teams and the Commando cliff climbers. The operation went without a hitch and gave me as much satisfaction as our eventual success in climbing McKinley.

By now two men had gone snow-blind, Oldham had been put out of action by the altitude and Alex Fraser had been evacuated to hospital with frost-bite. We had been on the mountain for over three weeks and were right back at Base Camp. Washburn's caution now sounded prophetic and the summit seemed as remote as ever. I therefore chose the three strongest members to make a quick attempt on the summit. They were Lieutenant Hugh Wiltshire R.M., Chief Technician John Hinde R.A.F. and myself.

Being fit and acclimatised, we moved quickly up to 17,000 ft. During a clearing in the unsettled weather we started off on the 3,200 ft. climb to the summit. We left at 7.45 p.m., intending to climb throughout the night which would never get fully dark. The only difficult section came early: a long, steep leftwards traverse to the Denali Pass which is considered a danger spot on the descent when the climbers are usually very tired. At the pass 2,000 ft. of easy snow-slopes separated us from the summit.

Then the wind got up to its usual tricks. Clouds surged up from the valleys and an agonisingly cold blast sucked the life warmth out of us. The danger of frost-bite was only too obvious. Perhaps we should have turned back, but we had toiled for so long and overcome so many setbacks that we could not bear to think of retreat.

The altitude slowed us down and we tried to counter our fatigue by eating glucose tablets which seemed to produce a temporary spurt of energy. John Hinde's hands were so cold that he dared not take off his gloves, so I crammed the glucose into his mouth for him. As we became colder and more weary, the weather became more menacing. I was nagged with worry that I was leading the party into danger and frost-bite. Then, quite suddenly, over a snow hump, I saw the summit only a few yards away.

At 3 a.m. on July 3, with the sun rising in the north, we stood for a few moments on the highest summit in North America. My 16 mm. camera had frozen up but we took a few stills and hurried down.

Although John Hinde had been complaining of cold hands, he had, in fact, been frost-bitten in a big toe, probably caused by too tight a crampon strap. A partial amputation was later carried out.

Eight days of continuous bad weather at the Kahiltna Pass delayed our flight across to the Ruth glacier for an attempt on some virgin peaks. At last four of us managed to make the transfer (another hair-raising Sheldon flight). We then made the third ascent of Mount Barrille (7,650 ft.), and finally Hugh Wiltshire and I, having failed to force the ice-fall of the North fork of the Ruth glacier, to get at some of the big stuff, contented ourselves with making the first ascent of an unnamed peak of 9,260 ft. So ended the first 'on duty' Joint Services expedition.

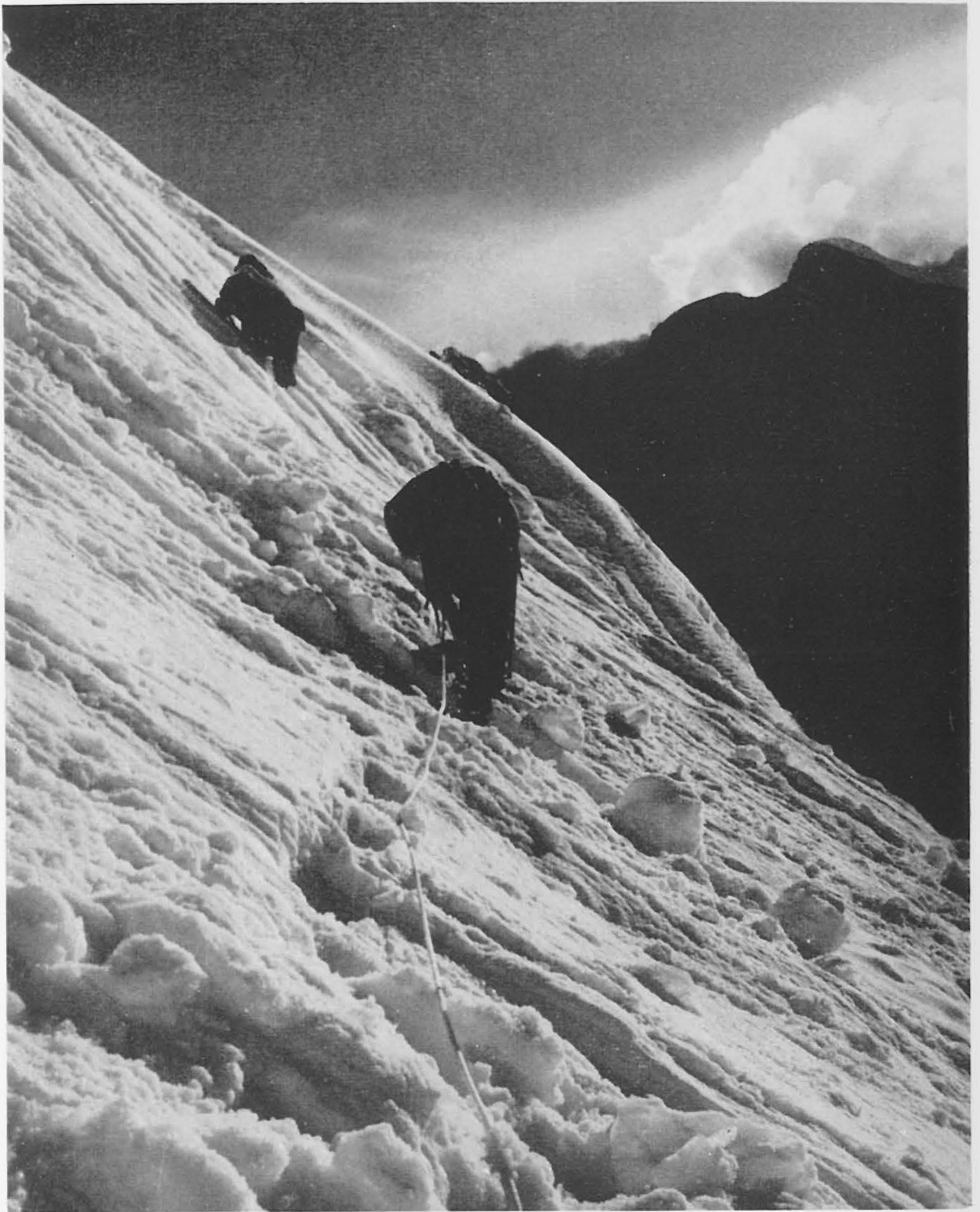


Photo: M. E. B. Banks]

CLIMBING THE UNSTABLE SNOW OF MOUNT BARRILLE (7,650 FT.) IN THE MCKINLEY RANGE.

(No. 7)

The Logans

It is many a long year since men went north to moil for gold. It is not that the gold has petered out; rather that the price has been kept so low that it is simply not worth all the moiling. In any case, the girls have long since gone. It was therefore mountain, not gold, fever which took me north in 1963 to Watson Lake in the Yukon, half-way up the Alaska Highway, where I met up with three American mountaineers. Our plan was to fly by float plane to a lake in the Logan Range, about a hundred and fifty miles to the north-east of Watson Lake. We would stay in the range for a month, climbing virgin peaks.

We were a mature quartet. At forty I was the baby of the party; Arnold Wexler was just out of the crèche at forty-five; Stirling Hendricks, an eminent scientist, was a craggy sixty-two; Don Hubbard was sixty-three and apparently immune to the laws of decline.

Perhaps it was our maturity which prompted us to seek a remote and virgin range where we could set our own pace and thus avoid the embarrassment of measuring our achievements against those of the thrusting young generation of super-climbers, as would have undoubtedly been the case had we chosen one of North America's well-worn climbing areas. There was the added advantage that, when we came back, it would probably be years before anyone would check up on our travellers' exaggerations.

We took off from Watson Lake and flew for an hour over unbroken bush: murderous country for travel. Then, quite suddenly, the Logan Range seemed to spring up, its granite spires cutting the horizon. As we flew closer we saw the granite walls plunged into deep valleys; the saw-toothed ridges connected elegant summits which rose to between eight and nine thousand feet. Snowfields and small glaciers added effervescence to the landscape. We had found our personal and private Chamonix, a range of virgin summits which could be attained without the ballyhoo of Himalayan endeavours; rock ridges and faces which could be comfortably climbed and descended in a day. I could hardly believe that such mountaineering prizes could possibly exist within twenty-four hours' flying of most of the big cities of America.

The pilot had located a small lake at the head of a steep-sided valley, or box canyon as they say. He seemed to be flying straight into the containing mountain wall when down went a wing tip in a tight, stomach-knotting turn. We dived and the lake rushed up to meet us. The stick came back and we flattened out to land almost immediately in a hiss of spray. It was the first landing ever to be made on this lake.

Soon we were ashore, watching the plane take off, knowing we would not see it again for a month. From the valley floor the peaks looked even more impressive, springing up all around us. Clearly there would be no shortage of rock to climb. The land itself seemed to be covered with

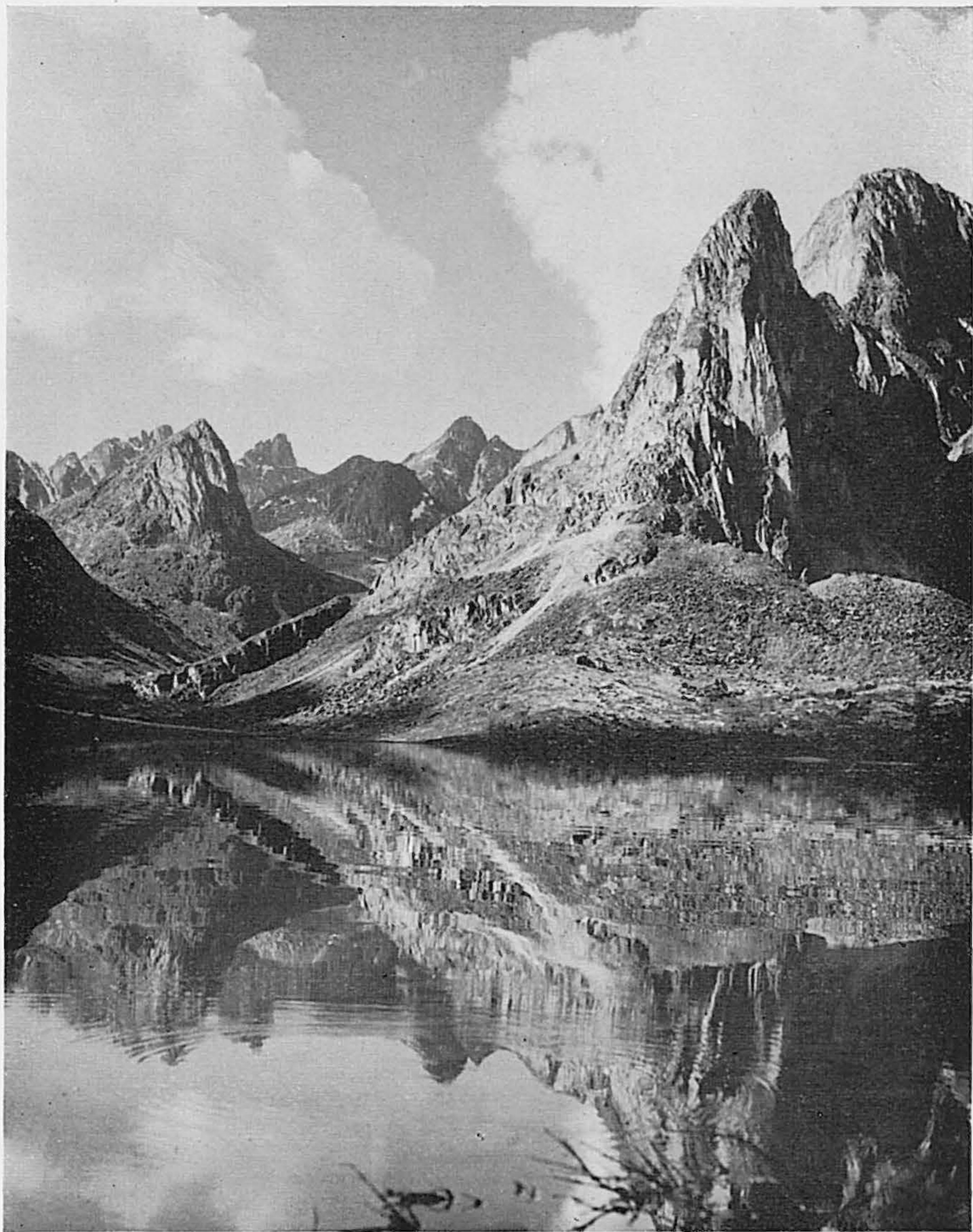


Photo: M. E. B. Banks]

PART OF THE LOGAN RANGE. THE PEAK IN THE RIGHT FOREGROUND WAS CLIMBED BY WEXLER AND BANKS.

(No. 8)

reindeer moss, yellow and spongy, and as yielding as a deep pile carpet, but devilish slippery when wet.

During the month that followed we climbed and climbed. As the youngster of the party one of my main difficulties was in keeping up with sixty-two-year-old Stirling Hendricks. We worked out each valley in turn, carrying up a camp into its deepest recess, and then polishing off the finest looking peaks within striking distance. Usually we climbed a snowfield; always we tussled our way up the firm granite of a face or ridge. The weather was kindly, in utter contrast to my blizzard-ridden expedition to McKinley the year before, even though we were at much the same latitude. The Logans were, if you can stand it, Canada dry!

The range could satisfy any taste. Some of the peaks were sheer-sided, with no obvious route to the summit. There were some tremendous faces which would only yield to siege tactics and would be prodigal of time and hardware; these we left unsullied for better men than us. At the other extreme, some high peaks offered no more than a long rock scramble. We climbed a couple of these to gain a high vantage point from which to assess the possibilities of an area. As a general rule we went for the elegant but not impossible looking mountain and usually had to climb about 800 ft. of rock.

A pair of symmetrical peaks that we called the Gemini provide a characteristic example. First of all we tried the West peak via the West ridge. A fierce groove sprang up for 80 ft.; then connecting ledges enabled us to outflank an impossible overhang. Higher up we encountered a 60 ft. 'Mummery crack' with the disadvantage of not having a Mummery in the party. Luckily, at just that juncture, the afternoon drizzle turned to heavy rain and we talked ourselves, without noticeable difficulty, into going home.

Next day the peak yielded by its East ridge, providing glorious hours of climbing and route-finding over the warm slabs.

Thirteen hours of good climbing on the East peak of Gemini gave us, I think, our hardest day. We climbed on snow and ice, we surmounted a series of small walls, often on loose, mossy rock, before we gained the main ridge. The ridge itself was sustained and, where it soared up abruptly for 200 ft., the standard was that of an honest Severe.

For every peak we climbed we caught sight of two or three more that attracted us. We did not, by any means, clean up the area; we merely climbed a representative peak or two in each valley. Great scope remains. Further, the range extends for some fifty miles. My companions had climbed in an area forty miles to the north in 1955. I have no doubt that between these two known areas much mountain exploration is there for the taking.

Trout were in the lake; a beaver family were our nearest neighbours; fresh grizzly tracks made me ponder our decision not to take a gun;

and moose droppings reminded me that these tank-like creatures are, as Wexler put it, 'more ornery than a grizzly'. We caught sight of marmots, chipmunks, ptarmigan and caribou.

By the end of the month we had climbed ten virgin summits and had come to terms with this remote and quiet range. Never before had I savoured with such deep relish the heady wine of mountain exploration. No soaring ambition nagged us. The tranquillity of the land seemed to evoke its own responses until we found ourselves moving in rhythm with our environment, calm yet still somehow summit-hungry; very philosophical in our several defeats and as much amused as elated by our victories. We had not come to prove anything and left content that we had done just that.

Almost as a farewell gift, we found, just before we left, a hot spring bubbling out of a mountain-side at exactly the right temperature for our ritual end-of-expedition soak. Tilman, I am sure, would have placed it on his list of Memorable Bathes.

Watson Lake, on our return, was much as we had left it. In our motel a construction man, one McGillivray from the 'oould countree', was hell-bent on spending five hundred dollars in thirty-six hours. I think he made it. Come to think of it, that's about what the Logan trip cost me. Curious spending habits people have!