

ALASKAN ADVENTURE

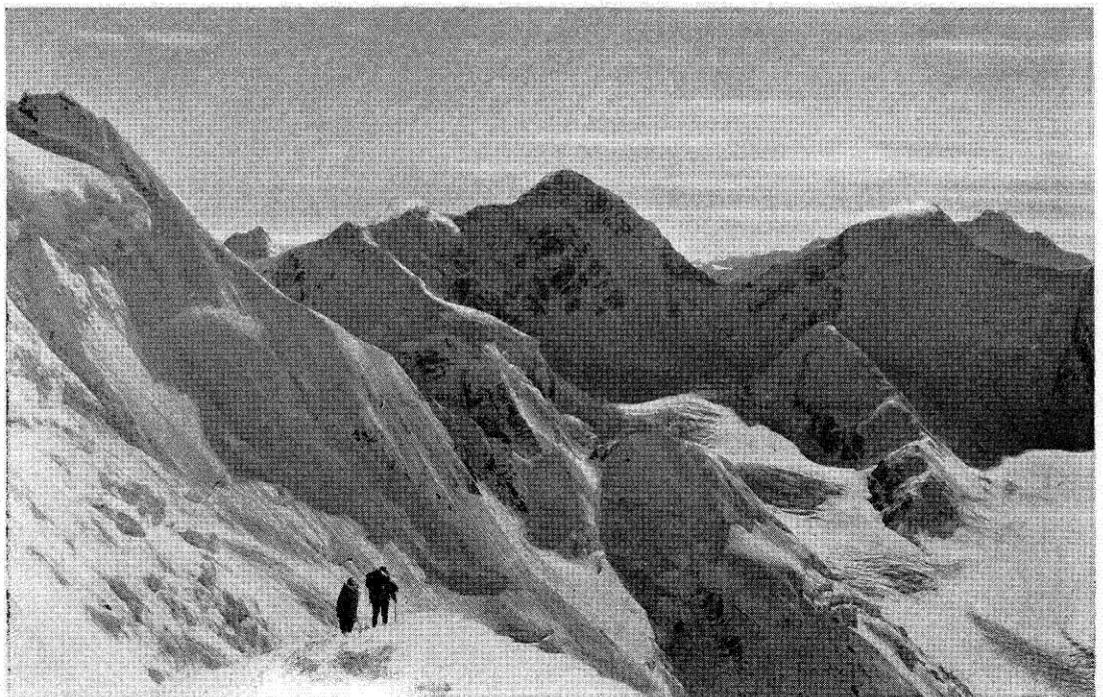
By WILLIAM SHAND, JR.

It was my good fortune to accompany the Hall-Washburn expedition to the central Alaska Range during the summer of 1941. The purpose of the party, besides the ascent of Mt. Hayes, was to explore and map this little known mountain area, and to investigate the Black Rapids-Susitna Glacier system. Besides Barbara and Bradford Washburn and Henry Hall, the climbers included Ben Ferris, Lt. Robin Montgomery, Sterling Hendricks, who received his Doctorate in Chemistry at Cal Tech in 1926, and myself. Mt. Hayes, 13,740 ft., is the highest peak of the Alaska Range east of Mt. McKinley, lying between the Richardson Highway and the Alaska Railroad some 100 miles south of Fairbanks, and 200 miles south of the Arctic Circle. Earlier attempts on the mountain had ended in failure, the party of Oscar Houston reaching 11,000 feet on the north ridge in 1937 under very adverse weather conditions. Several approaches are possible, the easiest being from the north by airplane. The supplies were flown in from Fairbanks and dumped or parachuted near the Base Camp, while the members of the party landed 13 miles to the north at Conradt Field, a somewhat level gravel bar beside a turbulent glacier torrent. We gathered at the Base Camp for the attack on the mountain on the 20th of July, the five previous days having been employed in backpacking food and equipment across the glacier from the slope where it had been parachuted. The weather, which had afforded us only a few brief glimpses of the summit since we had arrived, took a turn for the worse, but we continued to establish the higher camps.

From the Base Camp at the foot of the north ridge, the long axis of the mountain runs roughly north and south, rising at first steeply to a shoulder at 6500 feet and a peak at 8500 feet, then running along a series of humps nearly two miles to a definite peak at 9800 feet. Here the ridge is deeply notched,

forming a natural campsite at the foot of the 12,800 foot shoulder, a mile beyond which the summit looms. Further to the south, beyond the summit is the 13000 foot south shoulder, with its beautiful frost-fluting and granite cliffs. In spite of snow and bad weather, by July 26th we were all at Camp I at the 8500 foot level; on the 28th we were in the 9500 foot notch with food reserve for ten days. The following day the weather was reasonably clear, so we set out to reconnoiter the route on the ridge, and if possible, to make the summit. From the notch a very steep and narrow snow ridge leads upwards 400 feet to where the ridge broadens into a slope, broken at places by bulging masses of ice and crevasses, or cracks in the snow. The only difficulty was a steep cleft near the upper end of the slope: Hendricks cut a few steps in the ice and we were soon on the 12,800 foot shoulder. The snow varied from hard crust to waist-deep powder, where each took his turn at the exhausting task of breaking trail. The weather began to look worse, and a strong wind sharpened the cold. Dark clouds began to pile in from the southwest, but we continued onwards. The ridge beyond the shoulder was a veritable knife-edge: great double-cornices festooned the rocks which appeared through the snow. On the right the west face dropped 7000 feet to the Hayes glacier, and on the left a precipice of equal depth fell away into another vast glacial amphitheater, "Avalanche Cirque." The others waited while Brad, Barbara, and I pushed on towards the base of the summit cone about 13,000 feet. The clouds closed in on the south peak and began piling up over the summit; the powder snow whipped from the ridge in biting streams of whirling snow-devils, and forced us to turn about. Carefully we traversed the narrow ridge and returned to the shoulder, hurried over the crevasses and reached the shelter of the tents just as the storm struck the notch.

Climbing from
the North Ridge
of Mt. Hayes
towards
Camp No. 2.



Washburn photo

The wind howled and the tents flapped ceaselessly throughout that night and the following day, but by noon of the 31st the storm had blown itself out, and blue sky appeared in the west. We prepared everything for an attempt the next day. At 6:15 a.m. all except Hall left Camp II prepared for the final push: we had 200 willow trail-markers and two rapelle pickets for use in case of bad weather, and food enough for several meals. The storm had blown the powder snow from the slopes, and solidified our steps of three days previous; we reached the 12,800 foot shoulder in half the time it had taken before. The knife-edge ridge was safely passed, and soon we were at the base of the summit cone. Rather than break trail through deep powder snow on the main slope, we stayed on the hard edge of the cone along the west face. The weather continued clear above, although clouds filled the valleys and obscured the view somewhat. At 2:15 p.m. we reached the summit. The temperature was 12° F., there was a slight wind. The jagged Cathedral Peaks to the west, and Mt. Bagley to the east rose majestically above the clouds. Mt. McKinley, the highest peak of the Continent, was obscured, but occasional rifts revealed the vast expanses of the Susitna, the West Fork, and the Black Rapids Glaciers to the south. The wind increased in violence, and we did not tarry long on the peak. A great snow plume was forming from the top as we crossed the ridge, and occasional clouds sailed up from the cirque below, casting weird lighting on the cornices, whose ghostly shapes appeared and disappeared in the fog ahead and behind. By 6:15 p.m., when we reached the notch again, the upper part of the mountain was completely enveloped in swirling mists, although it was quite clear and warm at the camp. We celebrated by eating most of the remaining supplies, and staggered off to the sleeping bags as snow began to fall again outside.

Snow was still drifting down on the morning of the 2nd, but nevertheless we decided to return at once to Base Camp, as Brad wanted to go out to Fairbanks to take the aerial mapping pictures of the Hayes Range while there was still a chance for good weather. Two tremendous avalanches crashed down the face beside the abandoned camp as we hurried down the ridge. Hendricks, Ferris, and I were to explore the second highest mountain of the range, an unnamed 13,000 foot peak ten miles to the east of Mt. Hayes. The north and west sides presented formidable and repulsive precipices, so we decided to try the approaches up the glaciers to the east and southeast of the peak, intending if possible to traverse the Black Rapids Glacier basin to Rapids, on the Richardson Highway. For the next week we advanced our camp slowly up the Delta Creek Glacier, during the drizzles which punctuated the downpours. On the evening of the 8th of August it cleared sufficiently for us to reconnoiter a route through the great ice-fall which cascades in frozen waves 2000 feet from the upper snow fields of the E. Prong Glacier. The 9th dawned clear, the first good day in a week. We hurried through the lower icefall, but slowed up in the chaos of cavernous crevasses, towering ice-blocks and avalanche debris of the upper part. At last we could go no further with the heavy packs; Hendricks and I climbed out to the top over some

shaky ice-bridges. Above, the glacier was badly broken into huge snow-blocks, and another ice-fall blocked the way beyond. Reluctantly we gave up the southeast side of the mountain and retraced our steps to the north side, to "Blitz Ridge," as we had named the route that we had seen from Mt. Hayes. Unfortunately Hendricks had to leave on the 11th to do some government work at Livengood, and with real regret we watched him cross the glacier as we took our loads up the base of the ridge. To him belongs the credit for making the climb possible for us.

The route followed a little hanging glacier on the northwest buttress of the mountain, gaining the ridge over a steep snow slope just beyond the first ice-fall in the glacier. Late in the afternoon we camped on a big serac, or ice-block, at 9700 feet, well sheltered from the wind. The 12th was a cloudless morning—a real Alaska miracle. We wasted little time in getting under way. The lower ridge ran out into a 60° face measuring by the aneroid 600 feet from the usual deep cleft, or bergschrund, at the bottom, to the upper ridge. The bergschrund offered no difficulties, but to our dismay the face above soon turned to ice at an angle of 65°. Cutting handholds and steps was very time-consuming, and our position became more exposed as we were forced by an overhanging ice-mass out over the 8000 foot north face. In about two hours we had made only 300 feet and were becoming discouraged with the prospects when the ice gave way to packed snow. A troublesome overhanging ice-wall was overcome and we were soon on the ridge above. The last obstacles were some rock towers corniced with several feet of powder snow, which had to be brushed away carefully before holds could be found. Just as we were about to reach the summit, the noise of an airplane over Mt. Hayes attracted our attention. It was Washburn on his photographic flight. On the top we discovered that we had taken the only practical route, for a third ice-fall blocked the route above the two which had already frustrated our plans. Cliffs draped with icicles and frost feathers fell off on all sides except the northwest, whence we had come. Clouds began forming over the south peak, two miles away, and we hurried to descend. The snow had softened on the ridge, making progress very slow. One of the cornices suddenly broke off, carrying Ferris over the precipice with it. The rope held, and as he shakily regained the ridge the remains of the cornice crashed onto the glacier several thousand feet below. At the ice face we tied the rope to a tent peg jammed in a convenient crack and slid down 250 feet over the worst part. The tent was a welcome sight, and we wasted no time in cooking a side-bulging banquet. All excess food and the less valuable equipment were abandoned here, as we hoped to make it to the cache at the landing field in one day. Three days later we arrived at the field, bedraggled and crestfallen, after a thorough dousing in an icy glacier creek, an encounter with a bear at night, and a meager subsistence on bitter, watery arctic blueberries. On the 16th of August, as we flew out toward Fairbanks, Mt. Hayes was obscured by the clouds, but the 13,000 foot peak was still visible above the mists. We were sorry to leave them.