

EIGHT

AN EARLY SKI ATTEMPT ON MT. PTARMIGAN

This article about the first ski attempt in the Canadian Rockies was written for *The Canadian Alpine Journal*, the official journal of the Alpine Club of Canada (ACC) since 1907. For many years, *The Canadian Alpine Journal* was the principal place where important landmarks in mountaineering in Canada or by Canadians who were members of the ACC were described and recorded. The purpose of these articles was to provide documentation about new routes, as well as provide evidence (sometimes contested by other Club members) of important and difficult ascents. At this time, the ACC was a scientific organization as well as a serious mountaineering club, and so Tex did not write this article in his Tex persona, but as the educated (even slightly Romantic) Nello Vernon-Wood who rhapsodizes about the beauty of the peaks even as he tells us their precise heights. It is worth contrasting this story with “Us Winter Sports,” where Tex pokes fun at his poor skiing (presumably he was a better skier than this if he was in the climbing party) and is suspicious about the building of a ski lodge. There is no evidence of that comedy here about similar events, and so this article demonstrates how completely Tex/Nello could adopt a convincing writing persona and see the world through those eyes.

—JR

AN EARLY SKI ATTEMPT ON MT. PTARMIGAN

By N. Vernon-Wood

IN ADDITION TO ANY OTHER function it may have in the scheme of things, a mountain is a challenge. It arouses one's curiosity. Can it be climbed, what will one see behind and beyond? To the outdoorsman, it seems to say, "Come, test your legs and heart and courage." Many men and women have accepted the gauge of the peaks since first De Saussure and Pacidus a Spescha braved the terrors and difficulties of the unknown in Europe. Virgin peaks decrease in number with each year, but be the ascent the first or the fifty-first the satisfaction of proving oneself and theories, of overcoming the physical difficulties incident to any major climb is rich reward. A day spent in intimate contact with almost overwhelming grandeur is reward pressed down and running over.

During the winter of 1930 a small group of ski enthusiasts were prospecting the hills and alplands in the vicinity of Banff for a suitable location in which to establish a permanent camp for the use of an ever increasing number of fellow skiers and mountaineers.¹ Most of the winter was passed travelling with back-packs over the passes and through the valleys seeking an ideal combination of snow conditions, slopes free from avalanche hazard, reasonable accessibility, and scenic excellence. In Skoki valley,¹ immediately north of Lake Louise, they found their desideratum.

1. On the Skoki valley, with a mention of this ascent, see Passes of the Canadian Rockies on David Birrell's PeakFinder: <http://www.rmbooks.com/Peakfinder/>

Here, conditions, approximated the best of European ski centres, slopes on which the novice may try his 'prentice hand, open alplands, spruce filled valleys. The expert has an almost unlimited choice of slopes and hazards where great speeds and lightning turns may be executed. The valley is dominated by the Ptarmigan massif. Ptarmigan peak rises 10,070 feet, Richardson 10,125, and Pika, 10,015. The northern slopes are glacier hung, with a stupendous ice-fall terminating in a small unnamed lake of surprising beauty.

While engaged in building the log cabins which constitute the camp, the group often paused to gaze at the tempting slopes, and discuss the feasibility of a ski ascent of Ptarmigan. Possible routes were surveyed with the aid of field glasses, and it became a tacit understanding that soon the attempt would simply have to be made.

Spring had come to the lower valleys before the multitudinous duties of camp building were disposed of. Conversely, snow conditions at the higher altitudes had improved. A cornice that overhung a possible route fell under the accumulated weight of spring snow. The increasing power of the sun, thawing a little by day, made a crust which vastly improved ski travel, and at last on May 15th (1931) the party left the cabin to attempt the first ski ascent yet attempted² in the Canadian Rockies.

The altitude of camp is around 7000 feet, and from it the valley floor ascends gradually to the foot of a cliff, on top of which lies the nameless lake. The going was easy and, the lake crossed, a pause was made to come to a final decision as to route. The easier slopes swing westerly from the apex of the fan of the lower glacier. On examination this proved to be in danger of avalanche. The more difficult climb, under the cliffs that break the centre of the icefield, proved the safer. In an ever shortening series of traverses the point was reached, and the only really dangerous part of the ascent began. The rope adjusted, proceeding singly, each member of the party negotiated a sheer slope in a series of side steps to a narrow ledge, just wide enough for skis, leading to the ice-fall of the middle arm of the glacier. Later in the year this fall is badly crevassed, but at this time, an accumulation of snow from the upper icefields had filled or bridged

passes.asp?passname=Deception+Pass (accessed 9 February, 2007).

2. Original note: "The idea that this was the first ski ascent attempted has gained wide currency. Niall Rankin, in his article "Ski-ing in the Canadian Rockies" in the *British Ski Year Book*, 1932, repeats this error. For some prior ski climbs see the *C.A.J.* Vols. xix and xx. (Editor)."

them. The slope is very steep; a misstep meant an accident if not a tragedy. Fortunately a few inches of new powdery snow overlay the hard surface providing ideal footing for skis. At the end of each traverse ski poles had to be driven reversed into the snow to provide a safe anchorage while turning by means of the “kick.”

By noon, the col between Ptarmigan and Pika had been reached and a pause for lunch on an exposed scree slope was welcomed. To the left the undulating stream of the upper glacier swept on to the summit. No crevasses appeared, and with the exception of a broken ridge about half way no great difficulty appeared. Rested and refreshed, skis adjusted, the final series of long swings commenced. As the peak came into full view, the disappointing fact was revealed, that the final 75 feet were bare of snow, and a complete ski ascent impossible. At three-thirty the snow limit was reached, and nothing further would be accomplished³ by scrambling over the rocks. The aneroid registered exactly 10,000 feet, and in a cyclorama of titanic magnitude, a halt was called.

To the north was the Lake Louise group, Temple, Ten Peaks, Lefroy and Victoria, glacier hung and majestic. The valley of the Bow was immediately below with its waters visible here and there, flowing easterly, to drain at last in Hudson [sic] Bay. A little to the west the Kicking Horse, breaking through the famous pass of that name, hurried to the Pacific. Southward the Douglasses guarded the portals of the Red Deer valley. The world seemed snow-covered and silent. A brooding calm, accentuated occasionally by the roar of a distant avalanche.

The sun was sinking rapidly westward, and at 10,000 feet, even in May, freezing begins almost the instant the shadows appear. The return trail would be icy unless an immediate start was made, so with a last eye-filling glance the “ride” down began. And what a ride! The horizontal mileage to the lake at the foot is approximately one and a half miles. The vertical descent is 3000 feet. Twenty-five minutes later the party shot out onto the level surface, blood racing, nerves tingling, and spirits high with the satisfaction of a thing well tried.

In March of last year, A.N.T. Rankin of London, England, with his wife, the Lady Jean, accompanied by two of the original climbers made a ski ascent of Ptarmigan. This was one of a number of major ascents accomplished last spring.

3. Original [sour] note: “Except, perhaps, the ascent of the mountain. (Editor).”

In March, Messrs. White, Bennett, and Weiss conquered the Snow Dome, 11,340 and in May a Winnipeg party made a number of climbs. Doubtless these climbs are the fore-runners of a number of winter ascents. They proved the undoubted superiority of “downhill” ski technique as developed in the Arlberg.⁴ The ability to negotiate steep slopes at high speed, turn quickly, and stop instantly are requisites for the ski-mountaineer.

However, the particular technique one favors is secondary to the game. There is a feeling of adventure in making a winter expedition into the heart of the high places, that one does not get at any other time. The beauty of the country, silent and glittering, is beyond description. The feeling of physical fitness worth the effort.

Canadian Alpine Journal, vol. 21 (1932), 135–137

4. Original note: “Hardly, as the majority of ski ascents up to the time of writing have been made by skiers who have not yet had the pleasure of seeing the Arlberg technique. (Editor).”