



MARCH 1994

A Publication of the Mountaineering Club of Alaska, Inc.
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MARCH MEETING

Wednesday

March 16, 7:30

Pioneer Schoolhouse, 3rd & Eagle Streets
Downtown Anchorage

Slide Show: Nick Parker will show slides of the *West Rib* on Denali.

Denali Panel Discussion: Following the slide show there will be an opportunity for members to put questions to a panel of people who have a wide variety of experience on Denali:

Julia Moore, who last year climbed the West Buttress, offers a first timer's view on the planning and training that goes into accomplishing a big route. Mike Miller and Dolly Lefever, both with many years of adventures in the Alaska Range, provide ideas and thoughts on commitment, partners, and teamwork. Nick Parker, guide and a leader in the AMRG has been climbing in Alaska since the 1960's. If you are wondering about being on a guided party, Nick will be able to answer your questions. The National Park Service will be represented by Kevin Moore, who will be able to share the role that the climbing rangers play in patrolling the mountain and supporting climbers. Dr. Peter Hackett, honorary MCA member, and high altitude expert can advise on what to expect from your body above 10,000 feet.

Our guests have volunteered their time to make high altitude climbing a safe and rewarding experience for you. Come prepared with your questions.



HIKING AND CLIMBING SCHEDULE

- Mar 17, 23 Flattop
Weekday conditioning climbs. Meet at 6:15 pm at Glen Alps. Bring crampons, ice axe, shovel, avalanche beacon. Class C. Leader: Dave Hart 243-0975
- 20 Basic Mountaineering Class
Will cover ice axe use and self-arrest, snow climbing technique, crampon use, etc. Need crampons, and ice axe (club gear is available at AMH). Class will be near Glen Alps. Leader: Ron Rickman 345-7919
- 30 Bird Ridge
Weekday conditioning climb. Meet at 6:30 pm at Seward Hwy trailhead. Class B. Leader: Dave Hart 243-0975
- Apr 1-3 Matanuska Peak
Chugach, near Palmer. Ski in first day, climb second day, ski out third day. Class C. Leader: Dave Logan 276-2666
- 9-10 Bold Peak
Western Chugach. NW Face route. Class: Technical, Fifth Class. Skills required include: self arrest, avalanche assessment, snow anchors, and snow climbing. Limit 7 plus leader. See leader about gear required. Leader: Jonathan Rose 278-3189
- 16-30 Grand Canyon
Backpack in Grand Canyon, Arizona. Down Hance Trail, to Little Colorado River, exit Tanner. Class C. Full with wait list, but who knows? Leader: Bill Wakeland 563-6246

Hiking and Climbing Committee Organization Meeting

Join the committee and help plan the spring/summer schedule. The meeting will be held March 17 at Don Hansen's house. Everyone is welcome. Bring your ideas for club trips. Contact Don Hansen, Chairperson, 243-7184.

TRIP REPORTS

Aconcagua via the Vacas River Valley: A Refreshing Approach

by Ken Schoolcraft



erro Aconcagua (22841), in the Andes of Argentina, is a scree and boulder-covered mass, dotted with dying glaciers, harassed by scouring winds, and guarded by armies of closely-grouped, sharp pillars of snow called "nieve penitentes." The mountain's normal route, followed by most climbers, starts at Puente del Inca and goes up the Horcones Valley on the western side of the mountain to a base camp at Plaza de Mulas and well-established higher camps. The Plaza de Mulas has a modern refugio and a floating daily corresponding amount of trash, theft, and toilet paper. Along the eastern side of the mountain, however, is a beautiful, clean, and tranquil route that is little used: up the Vacas River valley to the Arroyo Relinchos and a base camp at Plaza Argentina. While the Vacas is a slightly more difficult and longer approach, with the accompanying commitment of more time and money, it is a refreshing alternative to the mass of humanity and garbage present on the other side of the Western and Southern Hemisphere's highest mountain.

Dan Shearer, Barry Bruninga, Dave Wark and I left Anchorage on January 13 to climb Aconcagua using the Vacas River approach. After a series of long flights that took us through Los Angeles and Santiago, we arrived in Mendoza, Argentina, where the temperature was a stifling 102 degrees. In the city center, however, leafy trees arched over the streets, creating cool tunnels. Mendoza is a large, modern city, heavily influenced by Spanish and Italian cultures. The tradition of the afternoon siesta is widely recognized, with businesses closing in the hot afternoons. There were numerous stores where we could have purchased food and other supplies, if we had not brought from Anchorage all we were going to need. We spent the night at the comfortable and convenient Grand Balbi Hotel before we hired a pickup to take us to Los Penitentes, our Andean staging area. (We could have taken a bus at a quarter of the cost.)

It was a three-hour ride to Los Penitentes, through dry, colorful foothills and mountains. There, at the Hotel Ayelen, we met Ricardo Jatib of Aconcagua



Express, who had obtained our climbing permits for us (each person is required to obtain from an office in Mendoza an \$80 permit to climb Aconcagua; the money supposedly goes to the salaries of rangers on the mountain and to efforts to keep the mountain clean), and from whom we had hired a muleteer and mules to carry most of our gear to Plaza Argentina. We had communicated with Ricardo by FAX from Anchorage. He and others offer a variety of services from mules to accommodations, meals, transportation, white gas, and permits. After a night at the Ayelen and a typical Argentine dinner of mostly meat, Ricardo drove us to Punta de Vacas (8100), where the Vacas route starts. We tumbled out of the truck, shouldered light packs, and started walking up the valley. The climb had begun.

The Vacas River is fed by glaciers and is the color of light chocolate. It is swift and cold in the morning and swift and warm in the afternoon. It flows through a dry rocky land of lizards and sun-hardened, prickly plants. Even a small amount of dampness behind a shading rock creates a micro climate of delicate yellow flowers. Rock walls and massive scree slopes rise above the valley and clear, fresh water flows from arroyos to join the river.

After following the rising terrain along the river for seven miles, we arrived at the river plain of Llenas. The muleteer and three mules carrying our duffels caught up with us and we set up camp for the night. We were the only group there. A ranger, who lives in a rock hut during the climbing season, checked our permits and gave us a garbage sack. Reportedly if you do not gather your garbage and turn it in with the sack, you will be fined \$100.00.

The trail crosses to the eastern side of the Vacas at Llenas. In the morning, the muleteer gave us a ride across the river and we headed for the next camp eleven rocky miles away at Casa Piedra. Although the sun was hot, we were cooled by wind in our faces. The high deserty terrain became more dry and more stark. Even the lizards decided it was too inhospitable for them. While the Vacas was with us all day, there were long stretches without clear water from which to drink. We put on paper dust masks when the wind-blown grit became too thick.

There is a large boulder at Casa Piedra, with a small hut against the backside, built for the muleteers. A spring waters a small patch of green grass on the hillside above the hut. The mules have grazed the grass so close it resembles a putting green.

At Casa Piedra, looking west across the Vacas and up the Arroyo Relinchos notch, we first saw the

glaciated summit. It didn't seem so tall, but it was still miles away and we were seeing it from about 10,800 feet. Cerro Ameghino (19680), a mere runt on its right, was connected to Aconcagua by the Ameghino Col.

The next day, we forded the cold Vacas River and started up the canyon formed by the Relinchos. We boulder-hopped from one side to the other, then back again. After a short uphill climb through yellow flowers to the top of the canyon, we again crossed. The trail rose gradually through a moonscape of dust, rock, and boulders, with patches of vegetation until eleven miles after leaving Casa Piedra. We soon reached a large dry lake bed and then the rock-covered Relinchos Glacier, base camp of Plaza Argentina at 13,860. After checking in with the ranger we found good tent sites behind wind-protected rock walls.

There were perhaps a half dozen other camps set up at Plaza Argentina. Clear glacier water flowed on the other side of the muddy Relinchos, a short distance across the glacier. Above that a small tarn of cold glacier water allowed us to soak our feet and wash off accumulated grit. We spent the remainder of the day and all the next in camp, acclimatizing.

After our rest, we made a carry to Camp I at 16,200 feet. Our route followed the lateral moraine above Plaza Argentina before crossing the river to the glacier, then back. Rock walls and spires rose above and a massive frozen waterfall fell from the top of Ameghino. We went up through a gnarly patch of scree and nieve penitentes on the left side of the glacier to reach the gravel bench with Camp I. There were several rock-wall sites, but not many tents. We dropped our loads, rested in the thin air and headed back down. We returned the next day with the remainder of our gear.

The day after returning to Camp I, we made a carry up the switchbacks of a large scree amphitheater to a small Camp II at 17,800 feet. Groups often bypass this wind-ravaged site and move directly to a camp at the base of the Polish Glacier. However, we built up the rock walls around the two tent sites and decided that we had gained enough altitude.

The next day, when we returned with the rest of our gear, the wind was howling across the Ameghino Col and through Camp II. The skies were clear and the sun intense, but the wind was cold. We tore down one of the protective walls and made one grand wall for our larger tent. Running water was found in a stream flowing from a snowfield below camp. We spent a cramped night with the four of us nose to toe



in heavy bags, the tent tugging and shaking.

The next morning the wind continued. After struggling to take down the tent and pack our things, we followed the trail up to 19,000 feet at the base of the Polish Glacier. We earlier had decided not to go up the glacier, but to traverse west from the base to White Rocks at 19,700 feet (East Berlin Camp), where we would join the normal route on summit day. There was no definite traverse trail to White Rocks, so after locating the aptly named rocks, we laboriously crossed patches of nieve penitentes and scree slopes to the top and far side of White Rocks. We found a good niche that was protected from the wind, built another rock wall, and settled in.

The wind had calmed by morning and the sun strengthened. Still, it had been zero degrees before sunrise. We spent a rest day melting snow and reading. Looking down the west side of the mountain, we could see the numerous tents at the various camps on the normal route and were content with our isolation at White Rocks.

Summit day started before 5:00 a.m., clear, calm and dark. With heavy parkas and down pants, we left camp by six, just as it was getting light enough to travel without headlamps. A few hundred feet above our camp we joined the normal route and European and South American groups coming up from the west side. We stayed ahead of them all day. The route passed by Independencia Hut, a small roofless hovel at 21,320 feet (said to be the highest permanent structure in the world). We crossed a patch of snow, the only snow all day, then traversed to the base of the Canaleta.

The Canaleta is the mountain's punishment for climbers with hubris. It is a steep, thousand-foot pile of loose rock and scree. There is a dogleg about halfway up, at which point we realized the Canaleta continues to the summit. Although the summit is in view, with the thin air and slow pace, it might as well have been in Kansas. Step by step we persevered and reached the summit ridge, then suddenly the summit itself. There was a colorful metal cross adorned with gifts for the gods. Everything was down; it was a beautiful day.

The day after we reached the summit, we hauled all our gear and garbage down to the Plaza Argentina. There we hired a mule to take our climbing gear out and set off with camping gear for Llenas, twenty-some miles away. We met no other parties the entire way. The next day we walked the final miles to the trailhead at Punta de Vacas. We were thirteen days from trailhead to trailhead, including our two

rest days and two carry days.

Aconcagua is high, stark, and geologically interesting, but not dramatic or overwhelming. To approach and climb this ancient volcano, the clean and uncrowded Vacas route is a wonderful alternative to the normal route. Anyone seeking solitude on an increasingly crowded mountain should consider using this beautiful and tranquil approach.



MINUTES

FEBRUARY MEETING

February 17, 1994. **Dave Hart** called the meeting to order, and had new members introduce themselves.

TREASURER'S REPORT.

Total - \$8420.36

COMMITTEE REPORTS.

Huts.

Chair. **Maxine Franklin** announced upcoming meeting.

Hiking and Climbing.

Dave Hart, Jonathan Rose, Bill Wakeland talked about upcoming trips.

Equipment.

Chair. **Dave Logan** reminded members that we are missing step-in crampons ever since last fall's Ice Climbing School. (The honor system failed.)

Parks Advisory.

Chair. **Scott Bailey** reported on Anchorage Trails plan, which is on hold until later (perhaps until we get a new mayor). Fire Lakes Trail is in the plan.

Dave Hart outlined the latest Chugach State Park Advisory Board minutes:

- ⊗ Preparations are being made to bulldoze a trail along the slopes of Flattop, and then build a tourist-friendly, commercial strength metal stairway to the summit.
- ⊗ Oil spill at Indian was a very expensive clean-up - in excess of a million dollars.

- ⊗ Plans are ready to build a cabin at mile 3 along Eklutna Lake. A user fee will be required from users.
- ⊗ Chief Alex cabin will require a user fee.
- ⊙ Operation Raleigh will return to offer services to the park this summer.
- ⊙ A safer bridge will be built at mile 2.5 along Eklutna Lake.
- ⊙ Park Watch is always seeking volunteers.

Programs.

Chair. **Jonathan Rose** announced next meeting's "Denali Preparation" panel discussion, for questions and answers on climbing the mountain.

OLD BUSINESS.

Dave Hart talked about a National Park proposal to charge a registration fee of \$200-\$500 for Denali and Foraker. The MCA has already sent a formal protest letter to N.P.S. pertaining to fee proposals.

NEW BUSINESS.

None.

ANNOUNCEMENTS.

Paul Bezilla announced that tickets are available for the Banff Film Festival, March 24, at West High.

Paul Bezilla also announced an upcoming Alaska Outdoor Education Conference, March 24-27 at APU.

Willy Hersman announced a freeze-dry bulk order for members. Order forms were available only at this meeting, to be sent in after the March meeting and delivery by the April meeting.

Dave Hart talked about the Valdez Ice Climbing Festival.

Thanks to **Jim Saylor** for 'Mountains of the Month,' this time featuring backpacking routes beyond the normal trails near Anchorage, between Crow Pass and Ship Creek.

Thanks to **Dave Logan** for slides of the club trip to the Northwest Territories last summer.

Respectfully Submitted,

Roy Smith

ADZE



National Nutrition Month

Ellen Coleman, R.D., M.A., M.P.H., exercise physiologist and author of Eating for Endurance, will speak Friday, March 18 at 7:00 p.m. at UAA, Lucy Cuddy Center. \$10.00 - students, \$15.00 - general public. She is being sponsored through The American College of Sports Medicine, Gatorade, and Alaska Dietetic Association.

Outdoor Leaders Wanted

To manage high school work crews on conservation projects nationwide. Proven youth leadership, camping experience, and Wilderness First Aid Certification required. Trail construction and environmental ed. experience desirable. Send cover letter, resume to: Student Conservation Association, 2524 16th Ave. South, Seattle, WA 98144.

Banff Festival of Mountain Films

Thursday, March 24, 7:00 p.m. - 10:30 p.m. West High Auditorium. \$7.00 - students, \$8.00 - general public. Tickets at REI, AMH, APU, AWS. See "BASEclimb," "Walking on Ice," "Assault on Empire State Mountain," "Ballad a Devil's Tower" and more.

Himalayan Trek and Climb -

October 1994

Trekking peak Mehra (6431 meters) in the Khumbu Valley. With clear weather there is an excellent view of several well-known peaks. Trekking only option will be offered. There are a number of trekking routes possible. Trip length 3-4 weeks. Cost \$3500 including air fare. Call Dolly Lefever 243-7027.