



View south from Maccarib Pass. Mount Edith Cavell in centre background

(Photo. G. Morris Taylor)

First Winter Ascent of Mount Edith Cavell

By G. Morris Taylor in the *Journal of the Alpine Club of Canada*

LIKE other climbers, Swiss guide Ernie Neiderer and I were anxious to make a first ascent of some major peak. However, since most readily accessible peaks in Jasper Park had already been climbed, we compromised on a first *Winter* ascent. For this purpose we chose Mount Edith Cavell, and planned to use the Alpine Club Memorial hut in the Tonquin valley as our base camp.

Accordingly, one morning early in February, 1934, when snow conditions looked favourable, we loaded our skis, packs and parkas in the back of the car and headed for Portal creek, "Gateway to the Tonquin valley." The light, deep snow impeded our progress so much that the first night we "Siwashed" at the head of Portal creek, having progressed only eight miles the first day. The next morning dawned clear and cold, thirty below zero in town from later reports, and colder at timber line where we were. On our arrival at Maccarib pass, the tempting treeless slopes and brilliant sunshine invited us to remain—Ernie to practice Telemarks and Christianias, and me to make use of my trusty kodak. In the afternoon we pushed on to the Park Warden's cabin, four miles from Maccarib summit. On the third day we skied the remaining six miles to the Memorial hut

at the head of Penstock creek. Having taken three easy days instead of one hard one for this trip, we felt ready and eager for our climb, and decided to start the next morning if the weather was favourable.

At five a.m. the sky was brilliantly starlit and we knew that this was our day. By six o'clock we were flying down the Penstock and Astoria rivers, making the seven miles to the mouth of Verdant creek in just an hour. Here our climbing began, following up Verdant creek between Throne and "Sorrow" mountains for about a mile. Then we cut upward through steep timbered slopes of Sorrow mountain. We found it heavy going through the light, soft snow, and we were relieved to reach timber line about ten o'clock. We had a little lunch here and a consultation. As far as we could see ahead the slopes were bare rock. To use skis was evidently impractical, but we were determined to climb Edith Cavell *with* skis, if not actually *on* skis. So here at timber line we left one pair and carried the other. From timber line to the Mount Sorrow col we found the conditions not very different from those of a summer climb, just a bit colder (about eighty degrees), and more slippery, as our ski boots were without hob nails. We reached the

Sorrow ridge about twelve-thirty, and stopped to take a few pictures and have a bit of lunch. Here the real climb began. The hours were going by, and we were a long way from the summit. A couple of times we nearly gave it up. But we were just fools enough to keep on, with the prospect ahead of a mighty cold night, and little assurance that we would get back to shelter before the next day.

As we approached the summit the rocks became frost-covered to a depth of six inches or so, and our slippery ski boots gave little traction. At last, at five o'clock, weary and cold, we came to the rock climb, three hundred feet below the summit. At this unpleasant place there is the choice of the side above the glacier, with two hundred feet of steps to cut in the packed snow, where a slip means a three thousand-foot sheer drop; or the choice of going right up the rocks, which is almost as bad. We chose the rocks, and Ernie unpacked the rope and started up. We then roped up the packs and skis. My turn came last, and without Ernie's assistance at the upper end I doubt if I could have made it. Three rope lengths and we were on the summit of Mount Edith Cavell. It was five-thirty, and the winter sun was just setting. We found the summit cold and forbidding and covered with a thick layer of frost, such as I have observed before at high elevations in winter. We had just time enough to snap a few pictures before the sun sank into a dense cloud bank on the western horizon. Then we deposited our record on the west ridge cairn. (We had prepared and placed it in a bottle the night before in anticipation of success). We didn't tarry long: it was too cold, twenty-five or thirty below, with a brisk breeze, and well we realized what was ahead of us in the way of returning.

We had planned on the moonlight, but it was starting to cloud up, so we high tailed for lower regions. We got down to the Sorrow col

just at dark. Here, instead of climbing up again the hundred feet or so to get over to Sorrow mountain, we headed straight down the Cavell-Sorrow couloir, which was entirely filled with snow. We didn't dare to slide the three thousand feet down to timber line, as this was a perfect place for starting an avalanche. Also, from a previous summer climb, we remembered the waterfall at the bottom, a twenty-foot drop over a cliff. So we roped and lined down, I going first, Ernie anchoring behind. We never did find the waterfall. The glissade would have been a matter of minutes, the roping took two hours.

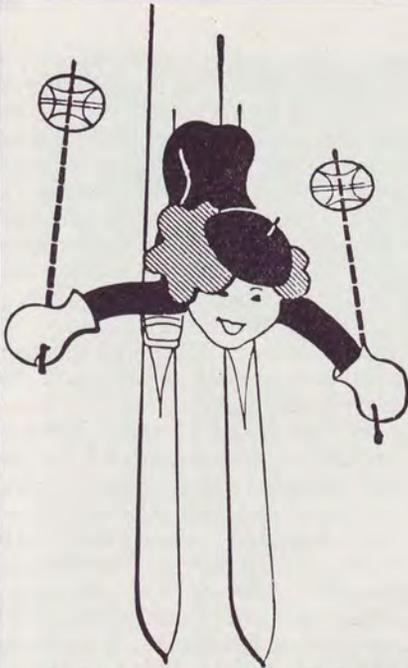
Now that we had reached timber line and had the worst of the descent behind us, the next task was to find my skis, which we had deposited in a snow bank nearly twelve hours earlier. We had descended about a mile south of the trail we had taken up. So we traversed around the shoulder of Sorrow, Ernie on skis, I on foot. During this time I got my shoes full of snow as I repeatedly broke through the crust and sank to my waist. This snow in my boots melted and later froze, a most uncomfortable condition. When we came to the approximate place where we had left the skis we searched for half an hour by the pale moonlight before we finally found them. Then came the timber run down to Verdant creek, which we found annoyingly difficult. Have you ever tried a slalom through dense timber in the dark? I was all for Siwashing, but Ernie would have none of it.

Finally we reached the Astoria river bed, and had ahead of us the long trek back to the Alpine Club hut. The seven miles seemed like seventy to my weary bones. At one-thirty a.m. we welcomed the sight of the stone cabin we had left nineteen and a half hours before. We had made at least *one* record—the *slowest* climb of Mount Edith Cavell in history. And what a time I had getting off my boots, frozen as they were to my socks!



② Alpine Club Memorial Hut, Mount Edith Cavell

(Photo. G. Morris Taylor)



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