



Depot tent at the foot of the third icefall on the Athabaska Glacier, where equipment was stored while being relayed to the Alpine Club's high camp on the Columbia Icefield

Summer Ski-ing on the Columbia Icefields

By Alan Carscallen

THERE are a lot of negatives connected with the Columbia Icefield. It is not a myth; it is not new; it is not in the Arctic regions; it is not another miracle exhibited to an incredulous world by the Province of Alberta; in fact, it is not entirely in Alberta. And to complete the series, prior to this summer not more than one hundred people (my own estimate) had seen the main body of the Icefield.

Now for some positives. Although this is supposed to be a few notes about summer skiing on the Icefield I believe some short explanation regarding the "where" and "what" of that body might be in order. Approximately half in Alberta and the other half in British Columbia, it blankets the main watershed of the

Rockies. Possibly it would be better orientated for those in Eastern Canada by the information that it is mid-way between Lake Louise and Jasper, about 300 miles due north of Spokane in the State of Washington, and practically in Calgary's suburbs—a mere 150 miles as crows are reputed to fly. And for the sake of any crows who may decide to check that distance take my advice and carry a lunch with you for there are poor pickings on the Icefield.

Now then "what" is it? When mother makes a cake she pours icing on top of it. The icing that does not stay there runs down the sides in enticing looking dribbles. And similarly, when mother nature creates a high plateau and then causes snow and rain to fall

on it (and more falls than the temperature, humidity, etc. will permit to evaporate) it runs down off the plateau in the form of glaciers. That is the Columbia Icefield.

Why won't the rain and snow dissipate itself by evaporation? Because the average altitude of the Icefield is about 10,000 feet above sea level and away up there you have more rain and snow—especially the latter—and a great deal less warm weather. Of course if ice didn't flow rather an odd situation would arise. The yearly fall of H₂O, as snow or water, would accumulate until it got as high as the highest clouds from which it fell. A good place to sell polar bears lots for pent houses!

Since the stuff does flow it runs down from the Columbia Icefield in two main ice streams known as the Columbia, Athabaska, and Saskatchewan Glaciers. They have an average length of five miles and bring the upper, excessive accumulation down to an average altitude of 5,800 feet where the forces of sublimation and melting can cope with it.

It was up the Athabaska Glacier that friends and I climbed the stairway to the Icefield on three occasions this summer. The Alpine Club of Canada Camp was near the lower end of the Glacier and it was from there that our trips were made. As this is designed to be a somewhat factual, rather than a "human interest" account, I shall take the liberty of skipping many details of those three trips. Suffice it to say that the glacier part was not strenuous, it was necessary to be roped on the latter part of it, and the usual time (for the glacier only) was about three hours.

The Athabaska Glacier has, in its upper part, just after it leaves the main Icefield, three icefalls. These are sections where the gradient is much steeper and the ice, in flowing down them, becomes wildly broken and crevassed. We picked our way slowly and cautiously up over icefalls one and two on the first trip, but found it faster and surer in later trips to avoid them as much as possible by flanking their ends on the lateral moraine. The third icefall didn't present much of a problem as it was well covered with good solid snow. To that point skis were worn on the shoulder instead of on the feet, which in most cases were adorned with crampons.

While we are getting our breath at the foot of the third icefall let me give you a bit more information. On the first two trips "up above" we were helping to pack up equipment and establish a high camp on the Icefield for the Alpine Club. Bob Hind and Captain Gibson, both well known skiers and climbers, were in charge of that work. Through their kindness the rest of us (Kathleen Chapman and Jean MacDonald of Edmonton, Mary Read, of Conshohocken, Pennsylvania, and the writer) availed ourselves of their expert guidance. We tried to justify our presence by helping to pack

some of the equipment for the upper camp. While here at the foot of the third icefall one tent was pitched and left as a depot in which we could leave our skis and boots when, later in the day, we would go back down the ice to the main camp at the Glacier snout.

After the stop at "Depot Camp" we proceeded on skis, unroped, to a point on the upper field where it was decided to pitch the High Camp. This was the only time that it was safe to dispense with the rope when climbing the third icefall as on the next trip the hitherto even, solid snow surface of the icefall had melted sufficiently to suggest the wise precaution of being tied together.

From a few hundred yards beyond the high camp-site it was possible to get an excellent view of the greater part of the field. We were at the foot of the Snow Dome which rose in long even slopes to the north of the camp-site. Looking west Mount Columbia, second highest peak of the Canadian Rockies, appeared to be but a stone's throw away. Actually it was seven miles. The Icefield mantled its slopes to within a short distance of its 12,294 foot summit. More to the right and at about five miles distance across the Icefield were North and South Twin. The latter presents a very precipitous rock face that falls away nearly seven thousand vertical feet to the tongue of the Columbia Glacier. At the southern extremity of the field, and about twice as far away as the twins, stood beautiful Mount Bryce.

The extreme clarity of the atmosphere on this trip gave one the impression that you could don your skis and scamper all over the Icefield in one day. Since its area is estimated as high as 150 square miles that, of course, would be a very full day.

Before listing general comments and observations, I may say, to make the log complete, that two days later four of the original party and Miss Aileen Harmon, of Banff, made a second trip to the top to carry more tents, air mattresses, Primus stove and gasoline. The last visit the writer made to the Upper Camp was about a week later on, one of the scheduled climbing trips of the Alpine Club. This time, with a stay of two nights and most of three days, we had the pleasure of climbing Mount Columbia. Three members of our first trip, Mary Read, Bob Hind and the writer, were the only ones of the party of twelve (three ropes) to use skis. As the seven-mile trek to the point where we had to forsake the skis and take to the rocks is downhill for the first half of the way, and uphill the last half, we used less time and energy in going down and about the same as the pedestrians in climbing. That was true on the return journey too when we were back in camp nearly an hour ahead of those on foot.

I have given this scattered information regarding two one-day return trips, and one trip



Sunshine Valley Ski Lodge near Banff in the Canadian Rockies

embracing three days, for the following reasons. First, to attempt to give some idea, sketchy though it may be, of the Icefield itself, and secondly, to let you know the exact nature of my summer ski knowledge of the Icefield. Realizing, then, how limited it is you will not, I hope, accept my observations, in the next few paragraphs, as the "last word." My acquaintance with the Columbia Icefield, prior to this summer, was limited to four visits. On three of those occasions we did not go more than a mile up the lower ice and on the fourth we were on Mount Castleguard and surrounding area at the southern end of the field. On no one of the four occasions were skis used.

As it is possible that the wonderful new highway, connecting Lake Louise and Jasper, may be completed by the end of next year and visitors will be looking forward to the thrills of summer ski-ing, here are some condensed comments that may raise—or dash—your hopes.

Accommodation:—Camping has, to the present, been the only means. A chalet is now being constructed, however, within a few hundred yards of the end of the Athabaska Glacier. The road may possibly be open each year, with seasonal variations, between June 1 and November 1.

Snow Conditions:—Until mid-June snow will likely extend most of the way down the Athabaska Glacier. On July 13 of this year snow was fit for ski-ing on the third icefall which is about four miles up the Glacier and 2,000 feet above the road at its snout. In July the mid-day temperatures on the upper Icefield can be quite high, and the sun terrifically bright. The mid-day snow is accordingly wet and grainy. As it freezes every night there are two transitional periods every day (possibly 8 to 10 o'clock in the morning and 6 to 9 o'clock in the afternoon) when the snow is in reasonably good condition. As July advances the surface becomes increasingly rough and "hummocky." This condition would undoubtedly be to some extent retarded by summer snowfall. Although there was no appreciable snowfall there in July this year I have, on two occasions, seen falls of upwards one foot in the Icefield district during that month.

Courtesy
Canadian Pacific

Safety:—The upper Icefield is comparatively safe if ordinary judgment is used and danger not courted by too close approach to open crevasses or to the few places where the contour suggests they might exist. To get to the top, however, it is necessary to incur the risk of crevasses on the three icefalls and on that part of the Glacier near the then existing snow line. Snow bridges in that area will, of course, be much less secure than they are higher up. In these places it is absolutely essential that the party be roped. On a glacier a rope with only two people on it does not contribute much toward assuring a long and happy life. As there are several miles of travel on rough "dry" ice one needs to be shod with climbing boots. If ski boots only are available, crampons are necessary. Every party should have at least one ice axe, preferably of course, one for each member. A compass and map should be carried, and if the weather is at all questionable, bearings taken as soon as the upper Icefield is reached. Clouds have a lazy habit, up there, of rolling along the ground—and sometimes staying there for days.

These things all tend toward one conclusion: no party, particularly one inexperienced in mountaineering, should venture, unguided, to ski on the Columbia Icefield. Possibly guides will be available at the chalet that is being built at the end of the Athabaska Glacier.

What Incentives? Ski-ing on the Icefield will likely be more a matter of touring than of downhill running. True, there are long runs, but they are the means, not the end. If you were at the summit of Snow Dome there would be a continuous downhill run of about three miles to the head of the Glacier. But why talk of runs? That borders on sacrilege when you realize you are confronted by the most stupendous feast of mountain beauty you will ever see. In winter it is the thrill and the dash of the sport that holds one. If you are ever so fortunate as to ski on top of the Columbia Icefield in mid-summer you will realize that ski-ing has given you a new and deeper reward to add to the many with which it has already blessed you.

The Canadian Rockies, in the vicinity of Banff and Lake Louise, offer boundless ski-ing possibilities and are attracting skiers from all over the continent



Courtesy
Canadian Pacific