

## Chapter 12: Adventure in the California Mountains.

A group of us 'hp' employees are members of the Sierra Club and enjoy climbing the Sierra Nevada, the magnificent range of mountains running north and south the full length of California. John Borgsteadt, another engineer and close friend, and I are setting ourselves a challenge, to climb a different Sierra peak each year. Through this challenge I am discovering the magic of the mountains. John Muir becomes my hero. He persuaded Congress to make Yosemite a national park in 1890.

In the summer of 1962, we get to the top of Mount Hoffman and find the Sierra Club logbook protected in a watertight, aluminum container. At the front we read: This mountain was first climbed in 1863 by Professor Whitney, from Harvard University and his team of geologists. I think in amazement that that is right in the middle of the Civil War.

I discover later that Professor Josiah Dwight Whitney had been asked to make a complete land survey of California for the state. Mount Whitney, the highest peak in the contiguous United States, is named after him. The team must have been great mountaineers as well as geologists for they were the first known climbers to scale the highest peaks in the Sierras. Professor Hoffman was one of Whitney's team. We, of course, proudly sign our names in the log book. On the way down, scrambling across a vast, steeply sloping field of scree, we realize that the coming summer, of 1963, would be exactly one hundred years since the first climb. What can we do to commemorate the 1863 event? The idea comes quite quickly. John Borgsteadt or I, I cannot remember who, speaks out with imagination:

How about a series of beacon flares, signaling from peak to peak from Mount Whitney in the south to Yosemite in the north? After all, that was how the fall of Troy was signaled in ancient Greece and how England was warned of the arrival of the Spanish Armada in the reign of Queen Elizabeth the First.

So, in a sense, we will be reliving history. Ideas have legs and, as we hike back to our campsite in Tuolumne Meadows, a possible plan takes shape. In four weeks, we send a letter out to all Sierra Club climbing groups in California with a list of the top Sierra peaks, asking for volunteer leaders to choose a peak and be there on the summit on the Sunday night of the upcoming Labor Day weekend. We organizers of The High Sierra Centennial Climb would provide flares and coordinate the operation. Everything works out well. I look at John after we send out the circular and say ruefully:

It's easy to promise the flares but from where do we get them and how do we distribute them to our climbing leaders?

Fortunately this is in the days before 9/11. After a feverish hunt and many phone calls, we find the Red Devil Firework Company willing to not only provide the green flares (Green for Peace) but also willing to deliver them to John Borgsteadt's home in Palo Alto. We are able to UPS sets of six flares to each climbing group.

We have twenty volunteer climbing parties on the twenty highest Sierra peaks on the night on September 1. Weather wise it is perfect with a full moon flooding the mountain range. The first flare is lit at nine p.m. on Mount Whitney and at one and half minute intervals, flares are lit from peak to peak with the final one on Half Dome. This signals the famous Fire Fall, an annual bon fire of burning embers that is tipped over the edge at Glacier Point, making a spectacular fall of fire visible from all over Yosemite Valley.

My group consists of four climbers, Kent, from hp, George from Fairchild and Mrs Joyce Dunsheath, from England. She was the leader of the British Women's Himalayan Expedition of 1956 and is visiting California on vacation. The Sierra Club told her about our plan and, although into her late sixties, wants to join us. We are honored. Our initial plan is to climb Mount Darwin but find there is a dangerous stretch of ascent which would need ropes. We are not prepared for this. We are faced with a last minute change of plans and settle on Mount Tom, over thirteen thousand feet above sea level. But we are behind schedule and have to commit to a full day of nonstop climbing in order to reach the summit by 9 p.m. Kent and George are experiencing altitude sickness so Joyce and I have to leave them three quarters of the way up. The two of us are still climbing at 8:45 p.m. We are completely exhausted and nearly desperate. Will we get to the summit in time?

Suddenly we reach the jagged summit ridge as it gets dark. It is a knife edge! The lights of the town of Bishop thousands of feet below shine up at us. It is an ecstatic moment. From climbing doggedly in the dark up the steep, craggy ascent to the wonder of reaching our goal in this surprise instant, brings a unique moment of exquisite joy. The combination of relief that we are on time to light our flares, the experience of being able to stop climbing and resting our weary limbs and the beauty of range upon range of moonlit mountain peaks is almost too much to take in. At 9:10 we see a flare 25 miles south on North Palisade peak. We see another flare way to the south and light our flares. A minute later our first flare is burning and Mount Abbott takes up the signal to the north. The third, on Mount Ritter is very faint.

As we unroll our sleeping bags wedged between ledges of summit rock, under a brilliant full moon, we sleep fitfully with discomfort but are deeply satisfied. This is my first opportunity to organize an expedition since the journey with Jumbo. It is with some relief and much joy that we found that the whole enterprise is a success and nobody gets hurt. Sleeping on or near the summit of a mountain peak is highly dangerous if there is lightening around. I also have the extra benefit of meeting Ansel Adams, the famous naturalist and photographer, David Brower, President of the Sierra Club and Frances Farquhar and Jules Eichorn, well-known mountain climbers, after whom peaks have been named.

Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men's blood! Daniel Burnham 1904  
The quote comes to me as today, July 2015, I discover a letter written that April. Evidently we start thinking even bigger plans. After all, we are on a roll! This is spelled out in a letter I write to President Lyndon Baines Johnson, The White House, on April 6, 1964. Having explained the Whitney story, the success of our earlier memorial climb and as the Whitney expedition was still climbing in 1864, we write in terms of a suggested 1964 commemoration:

Our Sierra Centennial Committee would like to extend an invitation to you as President of the United States to make a major address on that evening at Yosemite National Park. We believe your address will be a fitting climax to the following notable event.

It is the plan of the Committee to launch a Centennial Commemoration on this coming July 4th. We would petition Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy to light a firebrand from the late President's tomb in Arlington National Cemetery and have this lighted flame carried in relays by runners or horseback across the country to Mount Whitney, timed to arrive on Labor Day.

We feel that this commemoration will serve two significant purposes: 1) as a fitting tribute to the exploits of our early pioneers and 2) to remind the nation of today's new frontiers. Through the life and dynamic leadership of our late President John F. Kennedy, we have been reminded of the dangers and challenges that lie before us....I personally will be very happy to fly to Washington to discuss these plans with you or members of your staff.

Very sincerely yours, John M. Hoyte, Chairman, Sierra Centennial Committee.

The letter is hand carried to the White House by a friend, Roger Kent, who has direct contact with the president. I have his letter to me dated April 10th 1964 in my hand now in 2015. It reads:

I have your letter of April 6, and will take it to the President back with me to Washington on Monday and drop it on the appropriate person in the White House.

Here is my confession. Frankly, after fifty one years, I simply cannot remember what happened next or even if we receive a reply. I google Roger Kent, as his letterhead reads that he is a partner of Crimmins, Kent, Bradley and Burns, but he has no middle initial and his partner, John Lockwood Bradley, died nine years ago at the age of 89 so Roger must have passed away. The mystery remains. No national commemoration occurs in 1964, no invitation to Jackie Kennedy, no horseback riders crossing this great continent, no repeat flares. One final note:

Last year, in 2014, was the one hundred and fiftieth year since the Whitney expedition. I try, Oh, how I try to get someone, anyone, at the Sierra Club, or the American Alpine Club or other climbing clubs to pick up the banner and plan a 150th commemoration but to no avail. Long after I have gone, we will have to wait another 50 years to celebrate the 200th anniversary. Perhaps someone reading this memoir will be the chosen one.