

Mount Shasta Collection

Second Ascent of Shasta Butte

The Daily Herald (San Francisco)

October 9, 1854

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Second Ascent of Shasta Butte--An Interesting Narrative

The narrative of the first ascent of Shasta Butte, the loftiest mountain in California, was doubted by many persons at the time of its publication. The following, says the Yreka Herald, is a description of a second ascent by a member of the second party, Mr. J. McKee, of Scott's Valley, which we presume will be read, with great interest, and fully convince all those who were inclined to doubt the truth of the statement of the first party:

A party of nine men, viz: Chas. McDermit, L. Lane, D.M. Kellog, D.F. Lack, Perry Greenfield, A.J. Wright, Wm. Boothe, and the writer, all under the guidance of Capt. E.D. Pearce, left the Yreka Water Company's saw-mill, at the head of Shasta Valley, at noon on Monday the 18th inst., well mounted and equipped for the ascent of Shasta Butte. A brisk ride of twelve miles in a southerly course brought us to the meadows lying at the foot of its southwestern slope. Here we drank from a spring gushing with great force from the base of the mountain, supplying a volume of water fully equal to three hundred square inches, and at once assuming the character of a mountain torrent.

This is the source of the east fork of the Sacramento River-- probably the largest spring on the Pacific coast. We may realize more fully the height of Shasta Plains when we reflect that this water traces its course some four hundred miles ere it reaches the sea, and for one-half the distance with a rapid descent.

Our animals were here permitted to feed upon the luxuriant grass rather longer than prudence would dictate, because of the great abundance of delicious whortleberries to be found in this vicinity.

At three o'clock we were again in the saddle, slowly following the steep and tortuous trail, leading us here over precipitous points and there through dense chapparal and mansenita thickets, a distance of some six miles to the first bench of the mountain, where we were willing to halt and observe that mountains to us from the plains, were from this point but as mounds, as they lay in the valley below.

Thus far we had passed through forests of very heavy pine and fir timber, of different varieties, among which was to us a new species of pine, the foliage upon the outer edges of the boughs being of a light whitish color, presenting a beautiful appearance, and relieving the woods of that dark, sombre shade peculiar to pine forests. The sun now made a "glorious set," and as we hailed its tokens of a smiling morn, pressed forward, ascending with a gentle rise, an extensive plateau dotted with occasional groves of stunted pine and low brush, two miles to camp, at the base of the main peak, and at the foot of the snow.

Securing our animals to the brush, we were soon between our blankets, and dropped asleep, as our captain's "three o'clock in the morning boys" assured us there was work ahead. His "all hands up" brought us to our feet before a huge fire, at the appointed hour, and as we passed our only cup around, examined our iron-shod staffs and shoes, and laughed as one would "wonder how folks could drink syrup for coffee" and another express an equal surprise that "sugar should not be considered as being especially intended for the same." Substituting flannel overshirts for coats, and divesting ourselves of all dead weights, such as pen-knives, combs, etc, we fell into line behind our leader at 4 o'clock, to commence the ascent by starlight. In a few moments the frozen snow presented a smooth surface to our feet, as heading north-easterly we followed a gulch leading up between a sharp ridge of cragged rocks upon our right, with a similar ridge bearing nearly east, upon our left. At first we walked rapidly and comfortably, but as the grade increased our pace decreased, until at a point perhaps two miles from camp, the moon peeped over the bluff before us, seemingly directly overhead. Planting our staffs and iron shod heels firmly into the ice, we slowly climbed, halting frequently to regain our wind, and reached, as it were, a trail or track over which an avalanche had possibly passed, leaving the loose boulders bare. Here we sat down very carefully, lest we should provoke acres of loose stones into motion. Daylight now enabled us to select our steps, trying each stone before our weight was trusted upon it. We made however frequent slips, and traveled abreast to avoid the showers of rock we each set in motion, which bounding down with great velocity, probably suggested it to others, as well as myself, the thought that one false step would enable us to travel with a degree of speed much greater than that yet attained, and this too in anything but an upward course. Now we heard a noise under our feet resembling distant thunder, and by cleaning away the stones and breaking the ice, we were refreshed with a hearty drink of pure mountain water. Again we toiled onward and upward, until the trail of the avalanche was behind us and the rising sun gilding the icy banks before us. Our captain, axe in hand, cut us resting places in the ice, and we stood at the foot of Red Bluff. This is a conglomerate wall of red clay and stones of various sizes, from pebbles to boulders, with occasional openings or passes through it, rising perpendicularly thirty or forty feet, forming a ridge one half mile long north and south, and connecting the two main ridges above mentioned. With no time for reflection, we were clinging to its side, depending upon the stones not wholly imbedded for support. Capt. P. was first up, then soon with silent thanks we each and all stood upon the top of the Red Bluffs beside him--our first great difficulty overcome. The scene from this point was beautiful beyond description. The sun rapidly increasing in brilliancy, dissolved the

fogs and mists from over the water courses, and the diversified country to the south and east lay revealed. How beautifully its misty covering was removed can only be appreciated by those who may witness it under similar circumstances. This conglomerate mass is some twenty feet wide on top, with one vast plain of ice extending from its eastern base far down the mountain, relieved here by the track of an avalanche, and there by large fissures in the otherwise unbroken plain, northward lay our course.

One half mile more and we had ascended a short steep hill, covered with loose red lava and slag--the latter resembling green melted glass--and had gained the second bench, as we estimated, five miles from camp. This, where free of snow, we found covered with red lava, and here were also several small lakes frozen over. This bench or plain is of an irregular shape, with several peaks rising from as many corners. Leaving our direct course, we proceeded over the snow in the most westerly corner, when carefully looking over the icy edge, we saw the trail by which the first party, headed by Capt. Pierce, had reached this bench, and of which an account appeared in your paper of the 19th of August. It is truly a fearfully dangerous route, so much so, that the Captain determined to descend by another way; and upon examination, selected the path by which we had ascended. Surely some credit is due to the men who would thus, at risk of life, first ascend the most lofty peak in California, and by their experience and guidance enable others, emulating them, to reach the summit with much less danger. I felt thankful there that I was one of the second party. We were now sensibly affected because of the rarefied condition of the atmosphere.

My pulse, naturally 70 to 75, was raised to 110. All appearance of blood had left our faces and extremities, nor could we find a distended vein. Headaches and giddiness became general, and a sense of oppression weighed upon us all. Breaking the ice, we drank from a lake, and undertook the next rise. This is a conical shaped hill, seemingly formed of loose masses of a black porous or spongy lava. This overcome the summit appeared in full view, and we stood in a triangular shaped basin with three distinct peaks rising from its angles, and differing but slightly in height. This basin is slightly depressed in the centre, comprising probably an acre of surface, about one-fourth of which surface is merely a shell or crust of sulphur, potash and soda, the sulphur predominating, and presenting when cool a beautiful light yellow crystalline appearance. Boiling water appeared at the surface through very many holes and fissures, emitting a sulphurous gas or steam, giving the whole the appearance of a boiling spring. Two hundred yards above us, the most easterly and highest peak towered in a sugar-loaf form. Addressing ourselves to the work, we accomplished our task, and clung to the rocks around the flag upon the very top. Breathing with much difficulty, we rested silently until at the suggestion of Capt. McDermit, we united in three cheers for the stars and stripes, and for the party that planted them there five weeks before. It was now 9 o'clock. In five hours we had made the summit--the whole world lay below us, and we feasted with delight upon the varied and extensive scenes presented to view from all points.

Our exceeding gladness warned us that but little time was at our command. Extending the arms and opening the lungs, we endeavored with an effort to inhale the air more rapidly

and thus relieve our short breathings. But while we knew we were breathing, we could neither hear nor feel the air, as it passed to the lungs.

After carving our names upon a flinty rock, and gathering a few pieces of the different formations of lime, among which are some resembling felspar, some calcareous spar, and others common quartz, we descended to the basin to examine more particularly the crater or hot spring. We found that the sulphurous crust was soft, spongy, and very hot. Forcing our staffs through it, boiling water followed their withdrawal to the surface.

We ventured to walk upon it, notwithstanding it would yield to the foot, and passed directly over the crater of this at one time active volcano or spring. Opening one of its fissures, we carefully broke off large pieces of the crust in nearly a melting state, and laid them on the snow to cool and harden. The inhalation of the gas arising from the spring nauseated two or three of our party so much so as to cause vomiting. We had as yet suffered no inconvenience from the cold, the labor of climbing kept us comfortable, while the earth and stones around the crater were warm.

Nothing of animal or vegetable life was visible, yet a dead though perfect wasp was picked up upon the summit. At 10 o'clock we commenced slowly and carefully retracing our steps. This was in the then condition of our systems very toilsome, until reaching a more natural atmosphere. We were partially relieved from our extreme depression, and pursued our downward course over the now slightly yielding snow with great rapidity. The holes broken in the ice of the lakes as we ascended, were again frozen tight as we returned.

At 1 o'clock we were again at camp, after an absence of nine hours, when a little brandy, followed by a strong cup of coffee, braced at least the writer for our ride to the saw mill. We estimated the distance to the summit to be seven miles, and satisfied ourselves we had been led up and down the only practicable route. Without a single instrument of any kind, we were unable to ascertain the temperature of the atmosphere or determine the altitude. No one can regret this more than we did. Arrangements were made for our party being supplied with them, but a probable misunderstanding as to time, prevented their reaching us, and we feared to delay lest a storm should arise.

The height of the Butte is previously estimated at from twelve to sixteen thousand feet above the sea. There is now much less snow on its sides than at any time since the whites were familiar with it, and the present is a very favorable time for its ascent.

But I have already claimed too much space in your columns. Do me the favor to publish this, for I really feel quite proud of our accomplishment, and wish to give our readers in my own way, something more than a mere statement of fact.

Very respectfully your friend

Yreka, Sept. 21, 1854 - JOHN MCKEE