

# Appalachia

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Volume 70  
Number 2 *Summer/Fall 2019: Hitting "Reset" in  
Wild Lands*

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Article 20

2019

## News and Notes

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### Recommended Citation

(2019) "News and Notes," *Appalachia*: Vol. 70 : No. 2 , Article 20.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol70/iss2/20>

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# News and Notes

## **Snow Rangers Worked During Federal Shutdown**

For 35 days last winter, almost 100 federal government staff members in the White Mountain National Forest couldn't work and received no pay during the long government shutdown. When they went back to work, the U.S. Forest Service announced, "Visitors can expect varying conditions at public sites across the forest." The agency cautioned in a press release: "Several trailhead parking lots were not plowed during the shutdown, and it is making removal of hard-packed snow difficult."

Four snow rangers, who monitor the avalanche-prone slopes of Mount Washington, worked through the shutdown. They received paychecks erratically, sometimes through a locally managed fund of fees collected for parking at national forest trails. At least fifteen other USFS employees—public safety and timber management workers—kept going to work during the shutdown.

*Sources: David Brooks of the Concord Monitor and Deirdre Fleming of the Portland Press Herald.*

## **Notes from 1965: A Teenager Climbs "Unauthorized," and a Man Conceals His Diabetes**

In summer 1965, I was 17 and worked for the Paradise Inn, located approximately 9,000 feet and 8 miles below the summit of Mount Rainier in central Washington. Over nine weeks, I climbed up and down much of the mountain and its surrounding ranges like a two-footed goat.

Massive volcanic eruptions formed Rainier at least 2 million years ago. American Indians lived in the lower reaches of Mount Rainier. The mountain had various meanings to them, including "breast of the milk-white waters" and "running like thunder through the skies." In the summer, they climbed the slopes as the snowpack receded and retreated as winter returned.

Mount Rainier supports more than 35 square miles of ice, including 26 officially named glaciers. It boasts the largest single-peak glacier system in the Lower 48. Like streamers from a maypole, six major glaciers radiate from the summit at 14,410 feet (4,392 meters). Steep walls on the north side cause avalanches regularly, creating dangerous climbing conditions. The volcanic rock (cleavers) that separate the glaciers are rotten and can give way. In 1961 a steam explosion ripped open a hole near Gibraltar Rock, high on the

mountain, showering the glacier below with volcanic rock. In the fall and winter, the heaviest snowfalls on Rainier occur between 5,000 and 10,000 feet. Paradise holds the world's record for the largest accumulated snowfall in a year. The record was set in 1971–72 when 1,122 inches (93.5 feet) of snow fell. When I arrived in late June 1965, the only access to Paradise Inn was through huge snow tunnels; the roof of the inn did not appear for two weeks.

Evergreen limbs bent down from the previous winter's snows. As our bus chugged up to a rise, Mount Rainier came into view. Although broken cloud cover obscured most of the mountain, each glimpse of the gleaming white glaciers and the coal-black ridges that separated them promised a welcome challenge for a teenager from New York.

When I'd arrived at Paradise, I had hoped I would work as some kind of a ranger. I found out that wherever people eat, dishes must be washed, and I would do it along with students at the University of Washington and other colleges.

The days off for Paradise employees were staggered. Thursday became my regular climbing day. The management's policy was we were not allowed to summit Rainier, which was a two-day trip. But we did a lot of climbing. One day on a cliff at 6,500 feet, a friend and I taught each other how to belay and rappel. We found that this exhilarating feeling of flying and bouncing down cliffs could also be safe. We glissaded with ice axes on the Nisqually Glacier, whose firm snowpack made excellent conditions for an early form of snowboarding.

One Wednesday night, Steve and Willy, two students from UW, and I camped out on a strategic ridge in the Tatoosh Range, a mile south of Paradise. By 2 P.M. on Thursday, we had climbed four rugged peaks of heights between 6,500 and 7,000 feet. As we came off the last of the four, we dropped 2,500 feet before we ran into sheer rock cliffs. So it was right back up we went. We decided to head a different way, through what looked like 4 or 5 miles of pine trees. As we committed to this route, we found that what we thought were pine trees were a combination of trees with branches reaching down to ground level and devil's club (*Oplopanax horridus*), a big leafy plant covered with thorns. We painfully walked our way through three hours of this jungle. I spent much of Friday pulling devil's club out of my arms and legs.

On another Thursday, Steve, Willy, and I made a daylong trip up a prominent Rainier cleaver, or ridge of volcanic rock. This required us to get a ride down to a trailhead on the other side of the Nisqually Glacier, which formidably separates Paradise from the western side of the mountain. We climbed

all day on the cleaver and made 12,000 feet by 5 P.M. But the rock was getting looser, and night was approaching. As we were crossing a gully on the way down, a rock came out of nowhere and missed us by about 10 feet. We cinched the straps of our helmets more tightly and kept a close eye on the rotten rock above us.

On yet another Thursday, we speed-climbed to Camp Muir, the half-way cabin for the southern approach to the summit. For two weeks, I held the speed record for the ascent to Muir from Paradise until someone broke my record wearing a 30-pound pack. Records are meant to be broken—or shattered.

With all of this climbing, I was in the best shape of my life—up until then and since. As the end of my employment approached in late August, I could not stop thinking about the arbitrary rule that Paradise employees could not summit. I was determined to climb the mountain and came up with a plan. I resigned early, forfeiting a week of pay. I walked over to the office of Mount Rainier Mountain Guide Service. I told the guides that I no longer worked at Paradise. I signed up for the next trip to the summit on August 26–27. They knew about the climbing I had been doing on my days off. I was aware that climbing with guides increased the chances of summiting and raised the level of safety for the whole climbing party.

As it turned out, many of the climbers in my group were teenagers, including a 17-year-old employee of the guide service. Our team also included two adults and the guides, Bob and Gary. We hiked in clouds for much of the climb to Camp Muir on August 26 but looked forward to good weather farther up on the mountain.

After an early dinner and some storytelling from Bob, we tried to get some shut-eye before waking at 2 A.M. for an alpine start. We learned it was important to make the climb to the summit before the intense sun began to melt the snow on the glaciers. I put on my first set of crampons, a headlamp, and a harness. I carried an ice ax and was roped with three other climbers, led by Bob. I felt like a miner who had been dropped on a hulking black mountain.

In the dark, we crossed Paradise Glacier, watching for the wands that marked crevasses, some as deep as 100 feet. We climbed through the dark to Cathedral Rocks, which are volcanic rock below the iconic Gibraltar Rock. Crossing the rock formation at Cadaver Gap required frequent climbing on loose rocks. We emerged from Cathedral Rocks and started traversing Ingraham Glacier, which would take us to the summit. We looked down on a

sea of clouds. At 7 A.M., an orange sunrise broke over these clouds. We could now see Mount Adams, the second highest volcanic peak in the Northwest.

As we neared the top of Gibraltar Rock, the middle-aged man on my rope stumbled on a rock and fell but made no attempt to arrest himself with his ice ax. Mr. Hyde (as I knew him) had been climbing very slowly until then. We plodded on at an uneven pace, for Hyde could not take more than five or six steps without a rest. He would stop and stare ahead or at his feet, glassy eyed. He wouldn't explain what was going on.

When we reached around 13,000 feet, Hyde's movements became more and more mechanical, and his whole body would waver from time to time. Finally he crumbled into the snow and wouldn't budge. I asked Alan, his 16-year-old son, what his father's trouble was. Alan nonchalantly replied, "Dad always gets pooped out."

Gary told the rest of the party that they could climb to the summit but must come back down quickly, because clouds were closing in, and Hyde's condition was serious. At 9 A.M., three of us, including the 17-year-old who worked for the guide service, made it to the summit. We could see Mount Baker in northern Washington. The other climbers turned back due to high winds and fatigue.

When we rejoined the group, Gary told me that Hyde's condition was deteriorating. As we started down, Hyde's knees would buckle, straighten, and buckle again. He lost his feel for the slope; he stepped out instead of down. He fell with increasing regularity. Then he sat and pushed his way down, kicking rocks down on the rope team below.

Bob's initial diagnosis was that Hyde was suffering from acute mountain sickness, which can sharply reduce the amount of oxygen in the bloodstream on the higher reaches of Rainier. Gary gave Hyde a shot of the steroid dexamethasone, which had no effect on him. Alan told the guides that his father had made him promise not to tell them if he encountered a problem on the climb.

When we reached the glacial field between Gibraltar Rock and Disappointment Cleaver at about 12,400 feet, Bob and Gary decided this was a life-threatening situation and radioed for help. Bob and I went down to Camp Muir to get a rescue sled and climb back up with it. This trip took two hours. Meanwhile the rest of the climbing team stayed with Hyde.

As his father appeared to slip into unconsciousness, Alan finally revealed that Hyde was a Type 1 diabetic. Hyde could have been on his way into a

diabetic coma. He needed to take insulin injections at least once a day but had stopped taking them because, Alan said, that would have revealed his medical condition to the guides.

As we made our way down together, we positioned Bob on the top end of a long rope, while Gary guided the sled down. When we reached Muir, a medical helicopter was waiting, prepared to administer emergency insulin. I never heard what happened later, but I assume Hyde survived. I believe Alan must have grown up quickly on the mountain, when he realized his wish to protect his father's secret had jeopardized his health and potentially his life.

Late that afternoon, I climbed 5,000 feet down to Paradise. As I was unpacking in my bunk and telling my friends about my two-day adventure on the mountain, the manager of the Paradise Inn walked in. He told me I had violated the inn employee rules and regulations by climbing Rainier and that I was fired.

I had prepared my response: "You can't fire me; I already quit. And I'm a damn good climber. Just ask Bob and Gary." This was not the end of my correspondence with the Rainier National Park Company, which told me in a letter later that they were legally responsible for us because we were younger than 21. Many of the inn workers were old enough to vote, but even with our physical conditioning and skills, the management held that we were not old enough to climb.

Yet, the main unresolved issue in my mind after my 1965 Rainier climb has nothing to do with me and my employment. It was Hyde's medical problems. He hid his diabetes from the guides before the climb, got into trouble on the mountain, and collapsed at 13,000 feet. He put his own life and the climbers' safety in jeopardy.

Today, the climbing services on Rainier offer four- or five-day climbing programs, so novices of all ages can acclimatize at 10,000 feet and take practice climbs at lower elevations to test their physical conditioning. This requires truthfulness, however, and an understanding of the need to be physically prepared for a demanding summit climb. This raises the thorny question of whether prospective summit climbers on a mountain like Rainier should undergo some form of screening to identify disqualifying medical conditions.

—*David Pugh*

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DAVID PUGH was an urban park ranger in Central Park in the 1980s and is currently teaching GED in New York City. He has no plans to retire.