



A Century of American alpinism, 2002

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<https://americanalpineclub.myshopify.com/products/a-century-of-american-alpinism> 

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The Great Glacier and its house : the story of the first center of alpinism in North America, 1885-1925

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Author: Putnam, William Lowell
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Abstract: he hotel is gone and the passenger trains, now rarely on time, go by only once daily. The Great Glacier has all but vanished. The motor traffic on the fast, modern highway sweeps past in ignorance that this deep, half-forgotten, Illecillewaet valley of the Selkirk Mountains, with its dark forests and glittering summits, was the cradle of professional North American mountaineering and, for several decades, the principal Canadian attraction for climbers from three continents. Surely the time has long since passed for someone to tell the story of the early days when geologists, scientists, alpinists, guides, tourists and more than a few of our continent's empire builders stopped in Glacier, British Columbia to explore, study, climb, earn a modest living, admire the scenery or just rest from their labors.

It is most appropriate that William L. Putnam, one of America's outstanding experts on the Selkirks, should have undertaken the task of

writing a history of the area. It is even more appropriate that this history should have been published by The American Alpine Club, whose first president, Professor Charles E. Fay, spent many sunny days over several seasons scaling the region's unclimbed summits and, as we learn from the text, many rainy weeks in the Old Glacier House where at idle moments he amused himself by analyzing the comments in the hotel's guest register.

The author has labored hard and gone to great lengths to obtain original source material and to check facts. As might be expected, his story begins with the construction of the Canadian Pacific track through Roger's Pass; without it, the central Selkirks and the outstanding Matterhorn-like crest of Mount Sir Donald would no doubt still be little known and less visited. The absence of dining cars on the early transcontinental express trains, plus the superb view of what was then the awesome Illecillewaet Glacier, led to the building of a small restaurant-hotel by the track some five miles west of the pass. In time that hotel grew to become the Canadian Pacific's western show-piece. Tourists, scientists, mountaineers and guides arrived in growing numbers. The peaks were measured and climbed, trails were built, caves explored and an electric generator was constructed to light the premises. A pet bear was even provided on the grounds for the entertainment of guests. Then, slowly, the Great Glacier retreated, the railroad was modernized and rerouted through a five-mile tunnel some distance from the hotel, tourists and climbers alike went off to war on the battlefields of France, and the Canadian Pacific shifted its emphasis to its latter-day attraction at Lake Louise in the nearby Rockies. The old hotel was closed, then torn down, and the valley and its glacier almost forgotten. Such is the skeleton of Putnam's story.


But it is far more. Putnam has labored industriously. He has unearthed, and quoted at length, the original on-the-spot observations of the early visitors in the decades between 1890 and 1920. He has recovered ancient photographs, many excellent, to illustrate the stories and anecdotes he recounts. Thanks to his labor of love, those of us who are familiar only with modern mountaineering now have the opportunity to learn what climbing was like in the good old days around the turn of the century. Despite its deceptive scrapbook style, the work is scholarly. It is also highly nostalgic.

The author is at his best with the history of the early climbing. One wishes he had personally said more and quoted less—but, then, many of the quotations are memorable. He might also have omitted, or at least modified, the chapter on distant Mount Sir Sandford, for its story, while essential in any broad account of Selkirk climbing, belongs elsewhere and shifts the focus away from the House and the Glacier at the very moment when the reader has become engrossed in both. But these, however, are minor flaws, overshadowed by good research, an entertaining style, excellent history and magnificent illustrations.

Samuel H. Goodhue (from American Alpine Club)

Contents:	<p>Introduction</p> <p>The Railroad Track</p> <p>The House</p> <p>The Tourists</p> <p>First Climbers</p> <p>Men of Science</p> <p>Alpina Americana</p> <p>Britannic Majesty</p> <p>Canadians at Last</p> <p>Some of the Best</p> <p>The Last Big Mountain</p> <p>The Rest is Silence</p> <p>Appendices</p> <p>A: The Guides</p> <p>B: Place Names in the Central Selkirks</p> <p>Bibliography</p> <p>Index</p>
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