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THE CLIMBING SMITHS page 10

The Smiths' blitz of the Fourteeners

A father and his four sons accomplish an incredible mountain-climbing feat in 48 days

By CAL QUEAL

ON MAY 9, 1932, George Smith, younger of five children of Mr. and Mrs. F. Tupper Smith, was nearly 4 years old. One of the more active spirits in his east Denver neighborhood, he popped up here and there quite unexpectedly.

A neighbor was backing his car out of the garage and didn't see or hear the boy jump to the running board and open the front door on the passenger side.

As the car rolled backward, the gap between the open car door and the edge of the garage door narrowed quickly. George's right arm was between them when they met with a splintering crunch, tearing the garage doors apart.

There was a mad rush to the hospital as the boy's arm swelled into what he remembers as "a giant blood blister." The doctors worked frantically, but weeks later the ugly truth was clear.

The thumb and index fingers were gone; the remaining fingers barely movable. No wrist movement. The elbow was cruelly frozen in a right angle, and the arm moved from the shoulder only in a short arc.

The crippled arm forced drastic changes in the way George did things. He couldn't hold a baseball bat, ride a bicycle, jump or swim or wrestle the way other kids did. It even affected the way he walked ("I'm lopsided," he explains.)

But the more important effects of the injury went far beyond the physical. In subtle ways the arm began to shape his view of life, his ambitions,

his personal standards. Much later it would shape the lives of his four sons. And there is little question the fateful accident 42 years ago set the stage for one of the most remarkable feats in mountaineering history.

Smith and his sons set out last July 4 to climb all 67 peaks over 14,000 feet in the contiguous United States—at the average rate of a peak a day. It meant driving about 4,000 miles, climbing and walking more than 500 miles and some 215,000 feet vertically. To anyone who understands what that might require in the way of strategy, ability, stamina and plain good luck, it all seemed like an impossible dream.

But George Smith and sons have their own definition of impossible. Their strategy was brilliant in its simplicity: Climb one peak and head for the next. Their skills had been finely tuned in scores of earlier climbing trips together, and their stamina came as much from the heart as the muscles. Because they had always ignored bad weather and other obstacles, good fortune or the lack of it was never a factor.

Colorado's 53 Fourteeners took them only 33 days. Two days were spent driving to California, where they stormed 13 more peaks in 11 days, driving 500 miles between the 12th and 13th. It took a day to drive to Washington's Mt. Rainier, where they roared over the standard two-day route in a single day.

Sixty-seven major peaks in three states in 48 days. An incredible effort. And the big question, "Why?", cries for an answer. One of the people who is still asking it is Marilou Smith, wife, mother, and often sole keeper of the home fires at the Smith residence in Aurora, Colo.

George Nash Smith is a quiet man. But beneath the soft voice and the unchanging expression is something



Climb one peak and head for the next was the strategy of George Smith (above, on Mt. Antero) and sons this summer.

tenacious, intense, demanding. Hints of it come through. There is the frequent, almost compulsive moralizing: "Take the next step." "Don't be shot down." There is the quick, purposeful step, the continuing effort to express precisely his strong feelings about life and people.

The sons of Smith—Flint (22), Quade (18), Cody (17) and Tyle (15)—are more open and easy, not untypical of thousands of other sons of goal-oriented middle-class parents.

But there is no question the father's lights burn inside the boys. Heritage is one reason. Another is training, and the training has been tough.

Tyle was 6 years old when he was "invited" to climb his first Colorado Fourteener, Mt. Sherman (14,036 feet). He went about 100 yards and said he was too tired to continue.

But the persuasive talents of his father and brothers soon got him

going again. He made it to the top, and the awesome Smith seed of perseverance was once again firmly planted.

Quade was 9 when he and his father hiked 14 miles, climbed three San Juan Fourteeners—Windom, Sunlight and Eolus—in a day and a half. They ran short of time, however, and the hike back to catch the Denver and Rio Grande narrow gauge train at Needleton turned into an agonizing forced march with heavy packs. When they arrived exhausted at the track and removed their boots, their socks were stuck to their toes with blood. And they had missed the train.

There were similar tough times climbing for the other boys and for Smith as well. Being sick, sore, weary, cold, wet and hungry was often part of the game, but the Smith ethic prevailed. Don't give up. Keep moving. You can do it.

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Photography by George and Quade Smith



It was rainy and foggy when the Smiths topped Redcloud Peak and headed for Sunshine Peak (far in background).



Looming faraway through the cloud cover is Mt. Adams, as seen from the top of Mt. Rainier in Washington, one of the 67 peaks climbed.



Three of the sons (from left, Flint, Cody and Tyle) take a rest halfway up No. Maroon Peak. That's Maroon Lake below.

'How do you know you can't do something you've never tried?'

SMITHS *continued*

By July of 1968, when Tyle was 8 years old, the Smiths had climbed all of Colorado's 53 peaks over 14,000 feet. A year later, they became five of only 16 climbers to have scaled all 67 Fourteeners in the contiguous United States. Last summer's blitz of the same 67 peaks put the Smiths in a class by themselves.

There was no previous record for the 67 peaks. A measure of the Smith accomplishment, however, can be made by comparing it with Colorado records. Cleveland McCarty of Boulder and Rich Reifenberg of Idledale each have climbed 54 Colorado high peaks in 54 days. (The "extra" 54th peak is Ellingwood, in the Sangre de Cristo range. Its elevation is 14,042 feet, but the Colorado Mountain Club now lists it as a spur of Mt. Blanca, not as a separate Fourteener.)

To compare: The Smiths climbed the same 54 peaks, drove about 4,500 miles by automobile, climbed 13 more high peaks on the West Coast in only 48 days. In the process, they shaved an unbelievable 21 days off the Colorado record!

Is it all pointless grandstanding? Why don't the Smiths climb at an easy pace and enjoy themselves? Does Smith bully his sons to satisfy some strange twist of his own character?

Anyone asking those questions must consider several facts. First, there is a warm relationship between father and sons. They take pride in doing what they consider important things, together. They find pleasure in sharing moments of trial, danger, and of course, winning. And they usually climb just for the fun of it, with no thought of records.

If there is a scarred psyche in the lot, it doesn't show.

Smith realizes he demands a lot of his boys, but says he gives them all of his own time he can spare, is fair and consistent. He points out that although he started them climbing, they elected to stick with it.

Smith's attitude bears directly on the 1932 accident and its aftermath. His rehabilitation was really a family project.

His parents saw that he got regular physical therapy, and bought toys that encouraged George to use the bad arm. Even though he was the baby of the family, he got precious little sympathy. His two sisters provided constant encouragement, however. And his two brothers took over their end of the job with genuine relish.

"The three of us would scuffle a

lot, and when I'd complain about my arm hurting they wouldn't pay any attention," says Smith. "They'd just give me more knocks. It wasn't long before I forgot about feeling sorry for myself."

His brothers excelled in sports and George was determined to do the same. He lettered in baseball and football at Denver's East High School. He played basketball, he boxed and wrestled. At Colorado State University in Fort Collins he was active in intramural sports.

George ignored his handicap, and tried to get others to do so. Most did, after they got over their initial wonder at the kid with one good arm and all that moxie.

"I'd try anything, and I tried hard," says Smith. "How do you know you can't do something you've never tried?"

In his junior year at CSU, George met Marilou Milano, also of Denver. The initial attraction was to "a cute little redhead," but George quickly found out Marilou had some moxie of her own. She was an A student, and later earned a four-year degree in nutrition in only three years.

George and Marilou married after her graduation in 1951. George got an animal production degree the previous year. They live in a two-story, four-bedroom home. On the five-acre site is also a large square dance barn, where Smith follows his avocation of teacher, caller and guitar player (try that sometime with one good arm) for several square dance clubs. In the same building is the office for his Out West Real Estate Co.

Smith started getting serious about mountain climbing in 1948, after he and a friend, Warren Pulis, climbed Longs Peak. As Smith progressed in the sport, it never occurred to him to get some instruction, or at least read some mountaineering books.

"I didn't want someone to lead me up those mountains," he says. "I didn't want to be told how or shown how. I had to do it my way."

That statement tells a lot about George Smith. He is a passionate advocate of learning by doing, and doing without the help of others. He picked up the basics of climbing by climbing, and gradually added technical skills as the need arose.

In 1955, after he had notched about a dozen Fourteeners, Smith began to tie mountaineering into his philosophy of life. One of the milestones was La Plata Peak (14,336 feet) in the Sawatch Range.



They made it to the top of Wilson Peak, the final climb in Colorado, on 33rd day. From left Tyle, Flint, George, Quade, Cody.

"When we started out, the peak looked impossibly high," says Smith. "Still we went ahead, and it just seemed to flatten out. We were on top almost before we knew it."

"Life's like that. When something looks tough, take a step, then another. It won't be long before the last step to the top."

By 1956 Smith had climbed 29 Fourteeners and was thinking of getting all 53, but his fast-growing family forced a postponement. Flint was 3 that year, and Quade was born. A year later came Cody, and less than three years after that, Tyle.

Marilou went on most of the early trips, and has climbed several Colorado Fourteeners. But she didn't really enjoy fast climbing, and elected not to try to keep up with the menfolk.

By 1968 George and the boys had climbed all of Colorado's Fourteeners, and next year they got those in California and Washington. In 1971 the Smiths opened "The Climbing Smiths School of Mountaineering," for boys aged 12 to 18. Predictably, the curriculum is programmed to instill Smith-style perseverance.

The "campus" is the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness near Aspen, an area notorious for steep pitches, loose rock and other climbing hazards. A typical first day for new students is a "hike" into base camp. The hike turns out to be a demanding nine-mile trek with full packs.

The schedule is never announced in advance, and seldom modified to adjust to the weather. Special problems are solved as they arise.

"We don't want the kids to know what's coming up next," says Smith.

"Suddenly there's a problem, an unexpected demand, and they have to meet it. That's the way life is. You can't foresee all the problems, you just have to be ready and do your best to handle them."

The Smith school takes students as young as 12 years.

"It's really a pleasure to get the younger kids," says Flint. "They haven't had as many years of easy going behind them, and they're more willing to try hard. Some of the older ones have already had too much experience at giving up."

Basic mountaineering is the school's advertised stock in trade, but Smith says that's just a facade.

"We look at the school as a way of getting a boy's attention, opening his door," he says. "Sure, they learn about mountaineering, but they also learn about themselves. They learn to do more than they thought they could. They learn to give it all they've got."

The school gets about 50 students a season. However, it isn't a money-maker.

"Something doesn't have to make money to be a good idea," says Smith.

Watching the students meet challenges and gain confidence is the reward for Smith, who deplores what he sees as a trend toward easy living. He's writing a book titled *Not If, But How*, which contains the following observation:

"Each generation is softer than the previous one. Americans are turning into restless under-achievers, with damaged egos and emotional problems. Then we turn right around and fix it all up by lowering the standards so more people fit. We're too concerned with the quality of life



A careful but sure walk along Knife Ridge takes them to Capitol Peak in the Elk Range near Aspen.

and not enough about the quality of people."

Most mountain climbers make frequent use of ropes, usually where there is "exposure" — when a slip could mean a bad fall. In last summer's 48-day effort, the Smiths used ropes only once. That was for insurance, not as a climbing aid, on snow- and ice-covered Mt. Rainier in Washington, where crevasses of more than 100 feet are common.

"We have a notch we can use before the rope," says Smith. "If the rock is good and the holds secure, exposure doesn't bother us. On the other hand, if there's a chance of a fall of even a few feet, we rope up."

"Our school teaches students to climb first without a rope. After they get used to placing their feet, finding handholds — after they learn how to climb, really — then we teach them rope technique."

The Smiths were using a rope on two occasions when it really counted. Coming off Capitol Peak in 1968, George and Flint were anchoring the ends of a rope Tyle held while crossing a steep, icy slope. He slipped, falling about 10 feet before the rope stopped him. But there he was, holding on by his hands and unable to pull himself up to get a better grip. Below him was a 500-foot slide ending in a pile of jagged rocks. Quade inched out on the rope, helped Tyle get his arms over it, and the crisis ended.

Flint fell when a piton pulled out as he was demonstrating for one of the Smiths' climbing classes. Tyle was on belay (holding the rope from a secure position), however, and caught Flint after a fall of 30 feet. Both boys recall the incident with an "all in a day's work" attitude.

"It's not a crime to fall," says Flint. "When I fell, we were ready for it. That's the idea — be ready. Don't let anything take you by surprise."

That they are all still as sound and whole as when they started climbing is evidence that the Smiths have learned their mountaineering lessons well.

When people hear of some especially notable Smith feat, such as climbing three or four Fourteeners in a single day, some comment that "The weather must have been good."

Not necessarily. The Smiths keep going despite rain, snow, cold and other problems. Only lightning makes them stop and seek shelter.

While their self-imposed climbing standards are high, and the resulting feats impressive, the Smiths try to stay modest about the whole thing.

"We don't want to put anyone down," says George. But then he pauses and you can almost see the pride working inside him. He must say what he feels about last summer's expedition.

"Nobody," he says softly, "could do what we did."

In spite of the strong paternal influence at the top, there is a notable streak of democracy running through the Smiths' climbing associations.

When opinions differ on routes, techniques, strategy, or even whether to climb at all, Smith calls for a vote. The majority rules in most cases, but the big decisions require unanimous approval. A major conflict threatened when Flint voted "no" on the 67-peak expedition. He didn't want to cover all the old ground again without a good reason. Perhaps, he suggested, they could

plan it in a way to benefit charity.

Father and sons then contacted various charities, and three agreed to support a "dollars for peaks" fund drive. The charity groups couldn't get the project organized, however. Smith wanted to go ahead anyway, seeing it as possibly the last time he could get his sons together for a major climbing expedition.

Even though the charity plan didn't work out, Flint changed his vote.

"I've had some great experiences in the mountains, and it was my Dad who got me started climbing," says Flint. "I knew he wanted us all to go, and I felt I owed it to him."

Marilou was against it. She had started a year earlier to get a masters degree at CSU. Now she faced most of a summer alone—a summer of study, commuting to Fort Collins, and taking care of the Smith "spread," which included four dogs, four cats, a horse, a burro and a goat.

"They'd been up all those mountains before, and I didn't see why they should do it all again," she says. "Then there was the problem of finances. George was writing a book that was supposed to help pay for the trip, but it still isn't finished."

The detail of funding never bothered George.

"Marilou likes to have the money in hand for something," he says. "But we've climbed before on credit. I borrowed the money for this trip because I felt it was important."

The Smiths launched their grand gamble against time and the mountains July 4 on Longs Peak.

Longs is a demanding 18-mile round trip with an elevation gain of 4,865 feet. The Smiths started climb-

ing at 7 a.m. and didn't get back to their car until 8:15 p.m.

They had one mountain for one day. The pace would have to pick up if they were to succeed in reaching the big goal.

The pace picked up quickly July 5 and 6, when they got four more Front Range peaks (Bierstadt, Evans, Grays, Torreys) plus Quandary, in the Tenmile Range.

On July 7 they climbed Sherman, Democrat, Lincoln and Bross, all in the Mosquito Range. Back to the Front Range, they added Pikes Peak on July 8, and stayed that night in Colorado Springs. July 9 was spent driving and hiking to the jumping-off camp for the Sangre de Cristos.

They made it up eight peaks (Crestone, Crestone Needle, Kit Carson, Humboldt, Lindsey, Culebra, Little Bear, Blanca) in four days. The stint included an unexpected high-altitude bivouac after a sleet storm slowed them down on the ridge from Little Bear to Blanca.

They finally reached Blanca summit at 9:30 p.m. and crawled under a sheet of plastic for the night. Next day, July 14, they climbed nearby Ellingwood, just for good measure, drove to Gunnison and spent the night in the luxury of a motel before zapping six San Juan Fourteeners (Wetterhorn, Uncompahgre, Redcloud, Sunshine, Handies, San Luis) in three days.

The 15 Sawatch Fourteeners (Tabeguache, Shavano, Antero, Princeton, Yale, Holy Cross, Elbert, Massive, Harvard, Columbia, Missouri, Belford, Oxford, Huron, La Plata) took nine days. The pace was hard.

"The boys were moving a lot better than I was, and they'd sometimes have to wait for me to catch up," says Smith. "The day we went 28 miles and gained 10,000 feet to get Holy Cross and Elbert, was one of my toughest days, ever."

The Smiths took July 27 off in Aspen, just before doing the higher peaks of the Elk Range (Maroon, North Maroon, Castle, Pyramid, Snowmass, Capitol) in five days. The action then switched to Durango, where the group boarded the Denver and Rio Grande narrow gauge Aug. 2 for Needleton.

It was the same trip that had proven so tough for George and Quade nine years earlier (seven miles in, climb Windom and Sunlight, camp, climb Eolus and hike back to Needleton), but this time there were no problems. And they made it in plenty of time to catch the train back to Durango.

On Aug. 4 they got Sneffels, last of the San Juan Fourteeners. On Aug. 5 they climbed all three of the San Miguel Fourteeners—Mt. Wilson, Wilson Peak and El Diente. It was 5:50 p.m. when they loaded up and began the 800-mile trip to California. By sharing the driving and napping on the move they were somewhat rested when they arrived two days later at Bishop, Calif.



It was a slick climb up Washington's Mt. Rainier. At this point they were a half-hour from the top, which they reached at 4 in afternoon.

SMITHS *continued*

On Aug. 8 they blitzed Mt. Whitney (at 14,495 feet, the highest peak in the "Old 48" states), Mt. Muir and Mt. Russell.

It took a day each for Tyndall, Williamson, White and Langley, and another day to hike into base camp for the five-peak Palisade group (Middle Palisade, Split, North Palisade, Sill, Thunderbolt). These took five days. North Palisade and Thunderbolt are widely considered as two of the toughest peaks in the U.S. The Smiths got both of them and Mt. Sill in one day.

Well ahead of their schedule and fairly steaming with momentum, the Smiths came out of the Palisade group late on Aug. 17 and began the 500-mile drive north to Mt. Shasta, near the California-Oregon border. At 14,161 feet, with an elevation gain of 7,461 feet, Shasta is a two-day job for most climbers. The Smiths did it in one day, Aug. 18, then spent a day driving to Paradise, Wash., jumping off point for the last peak, Mt. Rainier.

Two days is considered a prudent minimum for climbing Mt. Rainier. The Smiths started out at 5 a.m. on Aug. 20, reached Camp Muir (where most climbers spend the night) at noon, pushed on without rest and were on top by 4 p.m.—9,100 feet of elevation gained in 11 hours.

What did they feel on the last summit—the culmination of 48 days of unrelenting, almost superhuman effort?

"Relief, joy, sorrow," says Flint. And that seemed to sum it up for all of them at that stage. It didn't seem like a time for handsprings and cheering. They set up a self-timer camera to take a picture of the group. They gazed a few moments at the sea of clouds below them, and headed down. By 11:30 p.m. they were back in camp and it was all over.

Meanwhile, back in Aurora, Marilou had been having her own problems. Mocha, best-loved of the four

Smith canines, had to be put to rest. Marilou was worn down from the commuting pace and taking care of things around home. When the climbers returned, it wasn't to the red-carpet treatment.

"It was a real accomplishment for George and the boys, and it would be better if I could consider that fact separately from the problems the trip created," she says.

"For me it was a horrendous summer."

She did, however, get her masters degree, on the same day the climbers were on Split Mountain in the Sierra Nevada. An interview gave her the chance to make a few observations about life, her family and mountaineering:

"George is a pressure person. He likes to get things done in a hurry, at the last moment. I'm just the opposite. I like to have things planned, organized.

"George loves to move fast in the mountains. I like to go to the mountains and relax, read, enjoy the scenery."

In at least one respect, she and her husband are very much alike.

"We both say what's on our minds," she says. "It doesn't matter what other people think."

Quade called the trip "tremendously satisfying," and seemed to speak for his brothers when he said:

"There were some really tough times for all of us on that trip, but there were a lot of happy ones, too.

"The real pleasure was doing it all with the people I know and love best, the people who have helped me the most to grow."

For George Smith, the expedition was one more proof of the pudding. He tried something very difficult, took it one step at a time, and surpassed his own "accomplishment barrier."

"Everyone gets satisfaction out of excelling, in whatever way," says Smith. "It just happens that we climb mountains." ■